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# Recent Trends in the Study of Folk Hinduism and India's Folklore<sup>1</sup>

**Suzanne Hanchett**

## **Introduction**

ALTHOUGH FRANZ BOAS was editor of the *Journal of American Folklore* for many years, anthropologists' interest in folklore studies declined in the 1950's and 1960's. This was a period of refinement in our sociological concepts and techniques. And sociologically oriented anthropologists were impatient with the largely historical, descriptive and literary approaches of folklorists, though most of them collected folkloric data in their field studies. While many anthropologists' notes on myth, ritual, songs, proverbs, and so on, remain largely unpublished even now, the gap in folkloric publishing is especially large among "Indianist" anthropologists. For it was in the 1950's and 1960's that field research on a large scale really began in South Asia.

Meanwhile, however, folklore studies continued in India as elsewhere, since folklore proper never has depended entirely on anthropologists. These studies are published in indigenous languages and in English. Much of the indigenous language work is listed in Handoo's recent *Bibliography* (1977). I am not in a position to comment on it, except to suggest that for the Kannada language work, at least, indigenous language reporting seems to be of a higher standard than most English language work in India

It is fortunate for the international community of scholars that much folklore research is published in English [cf. the bibliographies by Sen Gupta (1967) and Hanchett, Casale, Wadley *et al.* (n.d.)]. Until recently, however, English-language publishing was dominated by the Calcutta group of folklorists, whose journal *Folklore* (Calcutta) and other publications have not maintained a high level of scholarship or thoroughness in research. With the increasing interest of the Japanese journal, *Asian Folklore Studies*, in South Asian articles, the quality of writing in this field has improved. But except for Vatuk and a few other scholars, few of those who write in English even approximate the excellent quality of the studies of early folklorists such as Abbott (1974), Crooke (1896), or Thurston (1909).

There are many practical problems confronting this generation of scholars. There is a need for more bibliographic work, since most folklore publishing is in out-of-the-way journals and in books which seem to go out of print even before most libraries acquire them. There is also a need to organize the data which have already been collected: some of the early gazetteers and ethnographic surveys-veritable gold mines of folkloric material-ought to be indexed.

Two new groups have been formed in this past year to solve problems of communication among colleagues. One of these is based in India, at the Central Institute of Indian Languages (Mysore City), and calls itself the Folklore Fellows of India. The other is based in America, and consists of a cluster of two or three hundred scholars who have expressed interest in the new *South Asian Folklore-Folkarts Newsletter*. The Folklore Fellows of India are also communicating through a *News Bulletin* at this time.

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<sup>1</sup>This paper was presented at the 1977 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Houston, Texas, as part of a symposium, "New Directions in South Asian Anthropology."

But since the value of all this effort is still not apparent to many anthropologists, I shall devote the remainder of this paper to discussing some of the theoretical issues which are involved in folklore studies in South Asia, mainly India. By doing this I hope, first, to contribute to the revival of interest in research on symbolic systems by indicating the opportunities which South Asian studies offer in this field. And, secondly, I feel that this discussion may be of interest to folklorists as well, since they often take leads from other disciplines in analyzing and interpreting their data, the folklore and anthropology collaboration having been especially important in the histories of both disciplines.

Most anthropological work on India's folklore has been done as part of our studies of folk religion in communities (mostly rural villages). I shall review the three major approaches which have characterized most of this work to date. These are (1) the sociological focus; (2) the concept oriented approach; and (3) the structuralist approach. These are not the only three logical possibilities. But they are the predominant modes of research and writing. And I shall evaluate some of their relative virtues and problems below.

### *The Sociological Focus*

The vast majority of anthropological studies on folk Hinduism are sociological. That is, they are focussed on folk customs as social' action, or as they play a role in the social and personal dynamics of Hindu communities. These studies are too numerous to discuss here in their full variety. But the best of them have been done by Srinivas (1952, 1965); Mayer (1960); Dumont (1957); Lewis (1956, 1958); and Harper (1964) and others. These studies have clarified the roles of religious action in defining social boundaries, enhancing identities, and managing personal tensions (see Opler 1959, on the last). A related group of shorter studies has focussed on the macro-level "networks" in which Hindu traditions (folk or other) develop and spread [cf. Vidyarthi (1961), Cohn and Marriott (1958), and Bharati (1963)]. Considering that Hindu community structure is ritualized, mythologized, and otherwise symbolically experienced to the extent that it is, it seems natural that so many have focussed on religion in discussing it.<sup>1</sup>

Several sociological studies relate religious activity to social and political conflict, factionalism, or rebellion. These studies deserve our attention, for they emphasize the symbolic aspects of conflict processes. And they also demonstrate that studies of folk religion need not be conservatively functionalist in orientation [cf. Vatuk (1969), Hanchett (1972, 1975) and Barnett (1975) on this point]. Both Kolenda (1968) and Mencher (1970) with Southworth (1972), have analyzed some religious practices of Harijans as thinly disguised social rebellion, for example. Omvedt (1976) has discussed some defiant sentiments which are expressed in the non-religious folk songs of Adivasi workers in Maharashtra. Fuch's (1965) study of revitalization movements is relevant in this connection, though it deals with political factors only in general terms. (See also Claus, 1973).

Sociological studies have a few distinct advantages over folkloric and literary approaches which previously characterized scholarly studies of Hinduism. First, sociological studies focus on folk religion as it is lived, that is, in a social context. Secondly, they are oriented towards theoretical questions and hypotheses, bringing Hindu folk ways into social science frameworks in several interesting ways. And third, they have told us much about the social consequences of ritual actions for Hindu community structure.

But this group of studies neglects questions of symbolic meaning by and large.<sup>2</sup> In general, they deal superficially with the content of folk beliefs or symbolic practices, as valuable as they are in dealing with contexts of these beliefs. Since sociological observers provide only outline information on the conceptual background of folk rituals, we are still left wondering about the very phenomena which seem to provide most of the fascination and emotional power which these experiences hold for their Hindu practitioners.

### *Concept-Oriented Studies*

The second dominant approach represents one type of effort which has been made to deal with questions of meaning in popular religious practices. This group of studies has a common goal, namely, to define a Hindu world view or folk philosophy which is implied by a variety of folk customs. Although Ghurye (1962), Dumont (1970), Marriott and Inden (1974), Mandelbaum (1964, 1966), Harper (1959), and others have laid the ground work for this approach, I shall focus on two of the most recently written books on the anthropology of folk Hinduism in the subsequent discussion. These are Susan Wadley's *Shakti* (1975b) and Lawrence A. Babb's *The Divine Hierarchy* (1975.)

Both of these books take indigenous terms and concepts as their starting points: terms such as "power," "ritual offering," "purity/pollution," and so on. On the basis of such terms they attempt to explicate folk theory (or theories) of the supernatural world and of the efficacy of religious action. Thus Wadley emphasizes the basic importance of concepts of spiritual "power" (*sakti*), going so far as to suggest that this idea can organize

most of her data on religious concepts and actions in Karimpur, a village in Uttar Pradesh. She distinguishes the goals of vow-related (*vrat*) rituals in terms of the various problems that people have, and in terms of their beliefs about the sorts of help ("rescue," "shelter," and others) that supernatural beings can hopefully provide.

In *Shakti* and in her other writings Wadley has done much to reintroduce anthropologists to the value of narrative lore and folk songs (cf. Wadley 1975a, 1977). In *Shakti* she outlines her view that the narratives (*katha*) which are associated with vow-related rituals are the closest thing we have to folk exegesis of religious concepts. Discussing common patterns of plot development in these myths, she claims that beliefs about "power," "rescue," and other spiritual phenomena are evident in these patterns.

Though I agree with her that myths and song texts are important sources of symbolic information, I feel that she does not go far enough with them. Like the ritual actions with which they are associated, myths and songs display much aesthetic material that cannot be re-written in the form of syllogistic reasoning or *conscious* types of folk theories about supernatural forces. These materials also reveal *non-conscious* orientations and cultural attitudes which pertain to both the human and non-human worlds, and which do not seem to be capable of this type of reduction. In brief, I agree with Sperber (1975) when he states that most native exegesis—even the more explicit type—is best studied as an extension of the non-verbal symbolic processes with which it is associated, rather than as theory of the same sort which scholars formulate.

Babb's book, *The Divine Hierarchy*, is more complicated than Wadley's in that he deals with a wider variety of folk concepts—such as "purity / pollution," "hot/cold," and "power." He emphasizes the basic framework of *puja* as ritual offering and *prasad* as sanctified return. But his goal is basically similar to Wadley's, namely, to explicate folk theories by starting with such basic concepts or terms. And like Wadley he presents religious action as a sort of conscious manipulation of powers or forces (such as "purity") by persons who have certain spiritual goals in mind. (Also like Wadley he introduces mythic materials into his interpretative discussions). For example, he states that the giving of *puja* offerings plus the taking of *prasad* returns is a ritual formula which expresses (or implies) a belief that human-supernatural relations are uniquely hierarchical-plus-equal. In addition, he discusses some social implications of the distribution of *prasad*. He points out that this distribution often generates an unusual commensal pattern by resulting in persons eating together (or at least accepting foodstuffs together) who would ordinarily not do so, since *prasad* cannot be refused (cf. Babb 1975: 53-61). In general, however, neither *The Divine Hierarchy* nor *Shakti* is much concerned with sociological issues.

In their efforts to identify quasi-philosophical themes in folk religion, both Wadley (1975b) and Babb (1975) neglect the questions of how religion relates to social structure by and large.<sup>3</sup> That is, both of these books are weak in ways that the purely "sociological" studies are strong. Their joint indifference to the "auspicious/inauspicious" distinction is probably a sign of this weakness. For, as Srinivas (1965), Khare (1976), and Das (1977) have demonstrated, this distinction—dividing life-perpetuation rituals from death-related ones—is a crucial link between religious actions and social life, and is accordingly given much conceptual weight by Hindus themselves. Since both Babb and Wadley wrote from a detailed knowledge of folk beliefs, one can only assume that the omission of "auspicious/inauspicious" reflects on their theoretical goals in writing their books.

### *Structuralism*

The third major approach which is utilized in anthropological studies of South Asian folklore and folk Hinduism is structuralism. As I have said elsewhere (Hanchett, 1974), I feel that the potential value of structuralist technique is not, fully appreciated by most anthropologists who work in this field. There are several reasons for this, some of which I have discussed elsewhere. One reason is a common misunderstanding of structuralist assumptions, goals, and techniques among anthropologists. For instance, structuralism is sometimes described as consisting mainly of identifying binary oppositions—a supposedly mechanistic exercise which is far less successful in approaching symbolic material than the more traditional literary methods (or some non-traditional philosophical or 'other approaches').<sup>4</sup>

It is important to point out, however, that structuralism as an epistemological method is far more than the collection of lists of culturally defined binary oppositions. Though such lists have been sought as goals in the

work of Needham and others, their value has been challenged by structuralists and by other symbolic anthropologists as well (cf. Turner 1969 on this point).

Structuralist models properly speaking utilize several sorts of relationships, binary opposition being but one of them (cf. Rossi 1974; Sperber 1975; Kongas-Maranda 1971). The keys to structuralist method are in the very concepts of "relationship," "transformation," and so on, rather than in simplistic binary classifications. Leach has summarized the 'relational' approach of structuralism on the analogy of musical composition: "The component elements of a ritual", he states, "are like the notes of a piece of music. . . (It) is the pattern of the whole which conveys meaning, not the sounds of the individual notes" (Leach 1970:820). Another way of saying the same thing might be to say that symbolism is more often in relationships than in individual symbols.

The foremost structuralist anthropologist in Hindu studies is, of course, Louis Dumont. His work on religious practices (presented mainly in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, No. III, together with D. Pocock) is valuable in several ways, and can serve as a starting point for others. His study of vegetarian and non-vegetarian gods in relation to the structured community of their worshippers is especially notable (Dumont 1959). And his and Pocock's discussions of priesthood and other religious issues have demonstrated the comparative power of structuralist method in tying together our knowledge of the subcontinent (*C/S*, No. III). Some of the works of Yalman (1966) and Leach (1962) on Ceylon/Sri Lanka is a close parallel to Dumont's work in south India, though Yalman's and Leach's symbolic studies in South Asian culture have a more limited scope than Dumont's. Other such studies have dealt mostly with food as a vehicle of expression paralleling other cultural structures, excepting those of Beck (1969) who has correlated "hot/cold" concepts with some colour distinctions and Das (1977), who has discussed the ritual symbolism of laterality. Among these other studies, one finds Khare (1976 a) taking a phenomenological approach which utilizes several structuralist methods, as he focusses on the centrality of food as a metaphor of a Hindu world view. Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (1977) also discusses food symbolism, presenting more detailed data than Khare does, and working for more abstract and non-conscious interpretations by utilizing techniques adapted from linguistics. Except for Leach's brief article criticizing Yalman's study of female puberty rituals, there are no other published structuralist studies of ritual which are so detailed as Eichinger Ferro Luzzi's. [For other work relating to food and eating, cf. the unpublished studies of Regelson (1972) and of Apte and Katone-Apte (1975). See also Khare (1976b)].

Although structuralism has opened up many new possibilities in the study of myth, South Asian scholars are only beginning to study narrative lore from this perspective. The most successful published analyses by anthropologists are those of Marguerite Robinson (1968)-a model of structuralist technique-and Edmund Leach (1962), both working with Sinhalese materials. It is possible that in time anthropologists or folklorists will analyze orally transmitted myths with an expertise parallel to that of O'Flaherty's (1973) handling of ancient Saiva mythology. I shall limit my comments below to the possibilities structuralism offers in ritual studies, however, since this is the area in which anthropologists have been most active to date.

Structuralism can improve our understanding of Hindu folklore and folk religion in at least two major respects: first, by offering the best available techniques of interpreting non-verbal symbolic phenomena; and second, by integrating our knowledge of the various aspects of Hindu life.

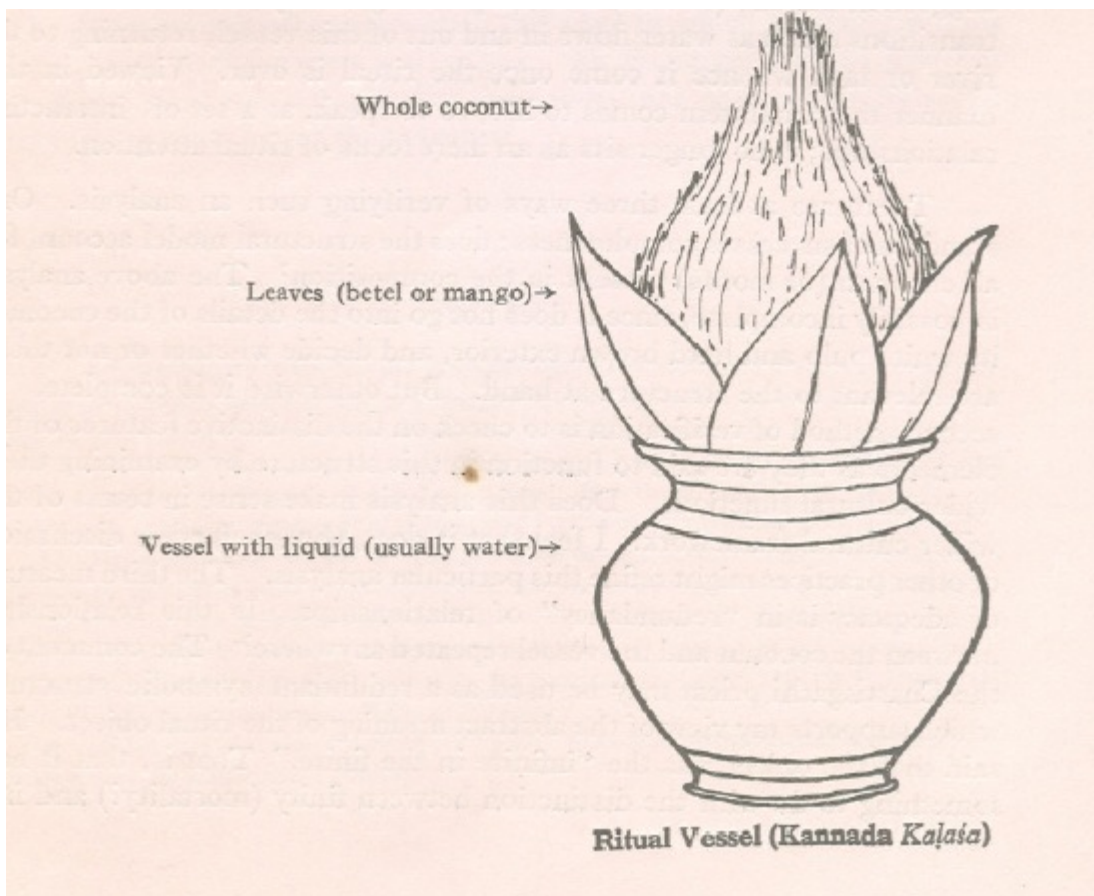
Regarding the first contribution, structuralism is the only analytic method developed thus far which can enable us to face the concrete details of Hindu symbolism without getting bogged down in them. Hindu ritual, for example, is among the most aesthetically varied of all the folk arts of this world. Indeed, there is an explicitly 'auspicious' connotation in variety of colors, foods and other ritual details among Hindus. It is probably safe to say that because of this value, there is no such thing as a "typical" Hindu ritual-that is, if we remain at the level of surface appearances. Furthermore, this playful variety is largely non-verbal in its imagery, consisting as it does of powders, plants, pots, foods, agricultural implements, and so on, in a seemingly endless kaleidoscope of ritual combinations.

In short, we are in a folklorist's paradise. But South Asian folk symbolism is also an interpreter's enigma. And there is little help coming from the "folk" themselves, who, as many observers have noted, are generally reluctant to discuss the meanings of their ritual actions, even if they do have a few ideas about these. The sum of our problem, then, is that we have a largely non-verbal corpus which is composed of seemingly wild variety, and which is very little discussed by those who are most involved in it, the Hindus themselves. "Untrammelled variety and contradiction are ethically and metaphysically necessary; this constitutes the peculiar charm and strength of the Hindu world-view" (O'Flaherty 1973: 318).

The value of structuralist method in approaching symbolism of this sort is that it enables a student to develop models of meaning on the basis of studying the very things of which it is composed; in the case of folk rituals, the flowers, foods, agricultural implements, and so on, in their various combinations. The procedure is, first, to consider the things in their own terms', as the objects which they are in the way of life (or cognitive system) in which they play a part;. For example, a winnowing basket is just that---'a tool for sorting grain from chaff.. ,Or a piece of vegetal material is a member of a certain cognitive category, with certain color, smell, and/or medicinal properties. The second, crucial step is to study these objects in relation to each other. For the Hindu ritual offering, this means to study an assemblage of items used as offerings. It is this step, the analysis of relationships, which puts a student in a position to define possible abstract "meanings" of an assemblage of offerings. From that point one can build outward into a discussion of related symbolic phenomena and the degree to which non-verbal symbolism does or does not echo explicit folk "theories." As Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi has pointed out, these are questions of the "style" of ritual activity, and the meanings of variations in the styles of different ritual contexts.

I shall illustrate this technique with a brief example: the filled vessel which is often the center of a Hindu ritual. This object is thought to be capable of embodying a deity or other spirit; it is called *kalasa* in Kannada, and by cognate terms in most other Indian languages. In *The Divine Hierarchy* Babb discusses the significance of this item. He presents the vessel as a single item, a symbol of a deity or other venerated spirit. He points out that its physical nature gives expression to the abstract spirit concept, and quotes a Chattisgarhi priest who refers to the vessel as "the infinite in the finite" (Babb, 1975: 42-44). But Babb's method of studying folk Hinduism prevents him from going beyond the more obvious folk "concepts" to deeper levels of significance which are available to a structuralist.

A structuralist view of the ritual vessel would proceed more or less as follows. First, one must describe the object not as a single item but as a distinctive composition made up of several common items. These items include the vessel itself, the liquid within it (usually water), some leaves set around the mouth of the vessel (generally either mango or betel leaves), and a whole coconut set into the circle of leaves and closing the mouth of the vessel. This coconut, one would continue, is a brown shell with white pulp and liquid (called "coconut water") inside of it. These are the elements of the composition.



Secondly, to move to describing relationships, we can discern that an open-mouthed container (the vessel) with water in it is 'opposed' to a sealed container (the coconut) with water in it. And the latter container (the coconut) is temporarily closing the former, with some leaves in between them. Since the leaves which are commonly used for this composition are universally associated with ritual transitions and with social reciprocity, I assume that their function in this composition is to serve as a mediating or joining element between the sealed and open-mouthed containers of water. (A string of mango leaves is the marker of auspicious transitions when hung across the doorway of a Hindu home. And the exchange of betel leaves is a common method of confirming agreements, such as marriage arrangements). The structure of the ritual object thus involves a "transformation" relationship between a sealed vessel and an open one.

The third step is to begin to guess at possible abstract (sometimes philosophical) connotations of such relationships. This process is not unlike solving a riddle; and like a riddle, it may be capable of more than one solution (cf. Kongas-Maranda, 1971). The riddle would go, what is contained at times, lost at times, and eternal in some beings? The ritual element referred to here is the liquid, and the transformations are expressed in the sealed closure of the whole coconut, the temporary closure of the vessel, and the filling and emptying of the vessel. In solving the riddle, we come up with something like "life," frequently symbolized by water in ritual contexts. And the ritual object becomes a veritable conversation in itself on the subject of mortality and immortality, with a strong suggestion that life (or soul) is flowing through many vessels in its various transitions much as water flows in and out of this vessel, returning to the river or tank whence it came once the ritual is over. Viewed in this manner the ritual item comes to life, so to speak, as a set of interacting relationships; it no longer sits as an inert focus of ritual attention.

There are at least three ways of verifying such an analysis. One standard of success is completeness: does the structural model account for all elements (or motifs) present in the composition? The above analysis is possibly incomplete, since it does not go into the details of the coconut, its white pulp and hard brown exterior, and decide whether or not these are relevant to the structure at hand. But otherwise it is complete. A second method of verification is to check on the distinctive features of the elements as they are said to function in this structure by examining their wider cultural functions. Does this analysis make sense in terms of the wider cultural framework? I feel that it does, though further discussion of other practices might refine this particular analysis. The third measure of adequacy is in "redundancy" of relationships. Is this relationship between the coconut and the vessel repeated anywhere? The comment of the Chattisgarhi priest may be used as a redundant symbolic structure which supports my view of the abstract meaning of the ritual object. He said that the object was the "infinite in the finite." That is, that it has something to do with the distinction between finity (mortality?) and infinity (immortality?). Though his statement is more terse than Babb's, it is also more profound. A structuralist observer uses such statements as symbolic phenomena in themselves, rather than as models which are somehow the same as those which we wish to construct (cf. Sperber 1975; Rosenbaum, n.d.).

This concludes my statement on the usefulness of structuralism in interpreting non-verbal symbolism. I will now present a few comments on the integrative value of structuralism, i.e., the capacity of this perspective to organize our knowledge of diverse spheres of social and cultural life.

As I have discussed elsewhere, anthropological structuralism is oriented to sociological questions (Hanchett, 1974; Levi-Strauss, 1963). In view of the fact that Levi-Strauss, Leach, Dumont and other prominent structuralists all are established firmly as students of kinship, political organization, and so on, this point hardly needs emphasis. However, for South Asian studies it is relevant in so far as the structuralist approach offers a strongly sociological alternative to those studies which are labelled "concept-oriented" above. The several structuralist (and phenomenological) works cited above speak for themselves on this point. They underscore the point that beliefs about religious phenomena are also beliefs about human society, or rather, that the merged cultural concepts of both are mutually illuminating both for actors and for observers. They demonstrate amply that we can learn about social structure from studies of religious notions and ritual actions. In short, by considering various domains of cultural life in conjunction with each other, structuralist studies by Dumont and others elucidate the ways in which symbolic actions interact with social norms and values. As Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi has stated, the symbolic actions of a community not only reflect its social structure; to some extent they create it.

## NOTES

1. A few substantive studies are available only as unpublished Ph.D. dissertations.

Among them Luschinsky's (1962) and Planalp's (1956) dissertations are outstanding and ought to be used by scholars even though they are difficult to obtain.

2. This is not true of psychoanalytically oriented studies such as those of Harper (1969), Claus (1975); Freed (1964b) and others. But these studies are so few, and involve such special methodological issues, that I will not deal with them in this paper.

3. The concluding chapter of Wadley's book presents many incisive comments on this subject, though in brief form. She notes that many parallels exist between views of the supernatural-human transaction and the human-to-human transaction. A sort of patron-client model pervades all of the hierarchical relationships of both worlds. And a concept of "power" is at least as basic, she says, as the more commonly recognized "purity" differentiation among those in interaction.

4. cf. Long (1976) and Marriott (1977) for comments on the limitations of structuralist theory in South Asian studies.

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