

A Festive Paroxysm in India

On McKim Marriott and the ‘Feast of Love’ (HOLI)

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[Translated from the French by Sunthar Visuvalingam]

[[Corps au paroxysme](#). *Sensibilités : Histoire, critique & sciences sociales*.

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Translator’s Note

The thematic of the journal issue in which this critical evaluation of McKim Marriott’s seminal paper on the Holī festival at Braj appears—significantly under the rubric of “Dispute”—and which explains the wording of the main title (as opposed to the subtitle) of the article, is best described by the editors of the French journal in their own words:

“Body in paroxysm: number 3 of Sensibilities. History, criticism & social sciences, the journal of the human sciences, the heart of which is the exploration of the fields of the sensible.

For its third issue, the journal *Sensibilities* explores the dark, underground, if not accursed, part of social life. It sets out in search of extreme situations and boundary experiences that sketch the edges of the human condition. Through the faces of drunkenness, ecstasy, obscenity, fury or fright-panic, in the pangs of childbirth or the spasms of agony, in the cruelties of massacre, in the vertigo of trance or jubilation, in the secret voluptuousness of lust as in the transgressive powers of delirium, *Sensibilities* dares to track bodies in paroxysm...

Nothing common here, one would like to believe. If not perhaps this: to designate each time the most acute sequence of a disorder. And, by that, the peak of living. Or this point beyond which something seems to stop. Or what in lived experience always struggles to speak of itself. It is perhaps at first through this that paroxysm is recognized: its under-verbalization. Because, from the start, the latter projects us onto the unnerving summits of language, at the very limits of representation. Hence, for the researcher, the sovereign virtues of such an inquiry that shake up even to the last certainties, that disquiet all knowledge.”

The page numbers inserted within [\[square brackets\]](#) indicate the corresponding page numbers of the French article and of Marriott’s essay in its original 1966 publication. The authors’ recent French translation [\[pp.116–128\]](#) has been replaced with the text of Marriott’s original English essay to which I have added their translators’ notes, where relevant, as indicated by the label TN. Though the endnotes of the 1966 essay have been converted to footnotes, their numbering has been retained intact and supernumerary translator-added notes are referenced by a custom footnote mark (§). The diacritical signs, omitted by the French translators, have been restored to Marriott’s original essay.

Sunthar Visuvalingam – Chicago, 31 March 2018

The Constitution of a Classic

[p.114>] The American anthropologist McKim Marriott published his article on the festival of Holī in 1966 in a collective book on the myth and worship of Krishna, edited by Milton Singer,¹ anthropologist who likewise worked in India, and prefaced by the Sanskritist Daniel HH Ingalls. This volume brings together contributions from historians, philologists and anthropologists, both American and Indian, in which each author apprehends, following one's own disciplinary methods, different aspects of Krishna worship. This innovative interdisciplinary approach caught the attention of Louis Dumont,² who wrote a brief review of this book in the journal *Annales E. S. C.*, emphasizing the heuristic value of these disciplinary crossovers.

Marriott's article was reproduced first in 2002 in another collective work edited by two American anthropologists, Diane P. Mines³ and Sarah Lamb, a book that was reprinted in 2010, but not without having been republished in the meantime in 2006, again in the United States, in a book co-edited by John Stratton Hawley,⁴ specialist in Krishnaite devotional cults, and Vasudha Narayanan, anthropologist of religions. In the North American university market, where the production of such compendiums for students is more common than in France, the article by McKim Marriott has thus acquired the status of a classic of Indian anthropology.

To evoke the context in which this study was published is to underline the double mental displacement, in space and in time, that the reader must operate to approach this text. First, it is a question of immersing oneself in a non-Western culture, that of popular Hinduism,⁵ the practices of which are observed here in the rural milieu of the early 1950s, hence immediately following Indian independence. Seventy years later, Indian society is no longer the same, but the Holī festival, known for its orgy of colors, its pantomimes, its games of sprinkling as much as for its excesses, remains one of the most popular, mainly in North India, along with the Divali festival, associated with the deed of Rāma, festival of light marking the new year of the Hindu calendar.⁶

But it is also a question of replacing this text within the methodological debates that animate the anthropology or sociology of India, the histories and disciplinary identities of which are blurred in the case of Indian studies, such as these two disciplines are practiced in Western universities, both in the United States in this case but also in France, as evidenced by Louis Dumont's book review, and in India, at the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century. These debates result from the disciplinary

¹ Milton Singer (ed.), *Krishna: Myths, Rites, and Attitudes*, preface by Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Chicago / London, The University of Chicago Press, 1966, p. 200-212.

² Report of Louis Dumont in *Annales. Economies, Societies, Civilizations*, 1968, No. 4, p. 922.

³ Diane P. Mines and Sarah Lamb, *Everyday Life in South Asia*, Bloomington, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2002 (2nd ed., 2010), p. 249-260.

⁴ John Stratton Hawley and Vasudha Narayanan (eds.), *The Life of Hinduism*, Berkeley / London, University of California Press, 2006, p. 99-112.

⁵ "Popular Hinduism can be distinguished of "textual Hinduism", the "philosophical" religion exposed and elaborated in the sacred texts that are the main subject of Indologists, Sanskritists, historians of religion and other researchers dealing with texts. Christopher Fuller, *The Camphor Flame. Popular Hinduism and Society in India*, Delhi, Viking, 1992, p. 5.

⁶ Divali marks the beginning of the fiscal year for Hindus, so it plays a central role, especially in urban areas, in the calendar of merchants, bankers who, that day, start a new book of accounts; Holi, Spring Festival, Rural Holiday, marks the end of the annual agricultural cycle.

encounter between, on the one hand, the social scientists involved in fieldwork and, on the other, the historians of literature and philologists who have accumulated a considerable body of textual knowledge bearing on the written corpora, whether in ancient scholarly languages, notably Sanskrit, or in the so-called vernacular languages but which also vehicle a written culture, such as Hindi, and especially, until the beginning of the twentieth century its Western literary dialect, Braj, vehicle of the Krishnaite cults of the Gangetic plain. Fieldnotes gathered by anthropologists, especially on religious practices, lead the latter to question the specialists of [<114-115>] texts. Indeed, as Milton Singer immediately notes in his introduction, and the remark remains still valid: "During their first stay in India, many students are astonished and delighted, as I was, to discover that contemporary oral traditions keep Puranic mythology, epics and legends alive."⁷

McKim Marriott's article, which discusses the Holī festival and its related cults in a village setting, is a good example of these disciplinary crossovers. Although not containing subheadings, it is clearly organized into four parts. After a short introduction locating the village under study, Kishan Garhi, in the legendary geography of Krishna, in North India, the author gives a long account of the two days that make up the heart of the Holī festival. Then, in a second movement, he replaces this holiday in the annual cycle of family and collective rituals that structure village life. In a third part, the author questions the genesis of the Krishna cult in this region of the Gangetic plain where the village culture was remodeled upon contact with Krishnaite devotional cults coming from outside. Finally, in a closing, shorter, part, Marriott offers his interpretation of the Holī festival in which he participated a second time at the end of his stay, a year later, then better informed on the social structure of Kishan Garhi village. Three inseparable elements guide our reading of this article: first, the Krishna cult and its inscription at the regional level; secondly, the Holī festival, a central moment of exalted expression for this cult; third and finally, the village setting in which this festival is observed and analyzed.

McKim Marriott and the Ethnosociology of India

When he comes to India in 1950 to carry out fieldwork for 18 months, in preparation for his doctoral dissertation (PhD), McKim Marriott (born 1924) projects to study, at the village level, the effects of agrarian policy that the government of the young Indian Republic is then putting in place: he receives for this purpose a grant from the Social Science Research Council and the Ford Foundation, which promotes sociological research programs on the modernization of India. McKim Marriott⁸ began his anthropology studies in 1941 with Clyde Kluckhohn in the Department of Social Relations at Harvard University, renowned for its courses in Orientalism; he is initiated moreover into Asian ethnography and obtains a certificate in Japanese. Mobilized in 1943, he is sent to India in 1945, in Delhi, where he is employed by the American Office of Strategic Services to decode Japanese radio messages. Demobilized, he resumes his studies of anthropology, this time at the University of Chicago, where the social sciences are under the responsibility of Robert Redfield. In the mid-1950s, the latter develops an understanding of non-European cultures in terms of civilization, ignoring however the reflections developed in France,

⁷ Milton Singer (eds.), *Krishna*, op. cit., p. XIII. The puranas, or ancient, primary source of the Hindu mythology, form a vast corpus that we distinguish of the two major epics what are the Mahabharata and the Ramayana.

⁸ Source: Roland Lardinois' interview of McKim Marriott, Paris, 16 May 1995; for more details, see Roland Lardinois, *The Invention of India. Between esotericism and science*, Paris, CNRS Publishing, 2007, especially pp. 314-320.

notably by Sylvain Levi, Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss. McKim Marriott abandons Japanese studies, which he finds too imprinted by the ideology of the Second World War years and is formed in social stratification studies under W. Lloyd Warner, but, on the recommendation of Robert Redfield, he orients himself towards the study of the socio-economic problems of contemporary India, a field of research supported by American foundations.

Nevertheless, it is in a completely different direction than McKim Marriott directs his research after being named in 1957 to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago. Buoyed by a particularly fertile intellectual milieu, rubbing shoulders with many South Asian researchers invited to teach in Chicago, Marriott develops an ample and ambitious theoretical project of ethnosociology: build a unified model of Indian civilization based on the vast literary corpus of classical (Hindu) India, borne by the brahmin class. This project took the form of a book published in 1990, *India through Hindu Categories*,⁹ in which McKim Marriott proposes a three-dimensional matrix that he calls the "Hindu anthropological cube": this is a learned paradigm of the Hindu scholarly vision of the world, which, however, aims to account for the social world. Subject of lively debates among anthropologists and sociologists of India in its time, this project, which hardly seems to generate any more research today, amounts to the application of methods from the social sciences to a vast textual corpus, but in opposition to the empirical and pragmatic sociology that Marriott had been fed, however, at the University of Chicago. [[p.115](#)]

⁹ McKim Marriot (eds.), *India through Hindu Categories*, New Delhi, Sage, 1990

The Feast of Love

McKim Marriott

[p.200>] I shall try here to interpret Krishna and his cult as I met them in a rural village of northern India while I was conducting my first field venture as a social anthropologist. The village was Kishan Garhi;¹ located across the Jumnā from Mathurā and Vrindaban, a day's walk from the youthful Krishna's fabled land of Vraja.

As it happened, I had entered Kishan Garhi for the first time in early March, not long before what most villagers said was going to be their greatest religious celebration of the year, the festival of Holī. Preparations were already under way. I learned that the festival was to begin with a bonfire celebrating the cremation of the demoness Holikā. Holikā, supposedly fireproofed by devotion to her demon father, King Harnākas, had been burned alive in the fiery destruction plotted by her to punish her brother Prahāda for his stubborn devotion to the true god, Rāma.² I observed two priests and a large crowd of women reconstructing Holikā's pyre with ritual and song: the Brahman master of the village site with a domestic chaplain consecrated the ground of the demoness's reserved plot; the women added wafers and trinkets of dried cow-dung fuel,³ stood tall straws in a circle around the pile, and finally circumambulated the whole, winding about it protective threads of homespun cotton. Gangs of

¹ [p.229>] "Kishan Garhi" [TN: 'small fort of Krishna'—the village studied by the author was in fact still fortified at the beginning of the 1950s], a pseudonymous village in Aligarh district, Uttar Pradesh, was studied by me from March 1951 to April 1952, with the assistance of an Area Research Training Fellowship grant from the Social Science Research Council. For his comments on this paper, I am indebted to David E. Orlinsky.

² In this local version of the Prahāda story, King Harnākas will readily be recognized as Hiraṇya Kaśipu of the Purāṇas, e.g., *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 1.17 (p.108 in the translation by Horace Hayman Wilson [Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1961]). Holī or Holikā, in the oldest texts a name for the bonfire or festival and unconnected with the story of Prahāda or other scriptural gods (see the sources cited by Pandurang Vaman Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra* [p.229–230>] [Poona, 1958], Vol. V. pp. 237–239), appears only in recent popular stories as a female, and as a relative of Prahāda. For Holī stories of the Hindi region generally, see William Crooke, *The Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India* (London: Archibald Constable & Co., 1896), Vol. II, p. 313 [TN: the author could have also cited by the same William Crooke "The Holi: A Vernal Festival of the Hindus," *Folklore*, vol. 25, 1 (31 mars 1914), p. 55–83]; for similar tales from Delhi State, see Oscar Lewis, with the assistance of Victor Barnouw, *Village Life in Northern India* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1958), p. 232; and from the Alwar district of Rajasthan, see Hilda Wernher, *The Land and the Well* (New York: John Day Co., 1946), pp. 199–200.

³ Some of the cow-dung objects for the Holī fire are prepared after the Gobardhan Divālī festival in autumn, with the materials of Gobardhan Bābā's (= Krishna's?) body. See McKim Marriott, "Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilization," in McKim Marriott, ed., *Village India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), pp. 199–200. Other objects are prepared on the second or fifth days of the bright fortnight of the month of Phāgun, whose last day is the day of the Holī fire. [TN: the Hindu luni-solar calendar of the concerned region integrates two computations of time, one based on the cycle of the moon, the other on that of the sun. The lunar month is divided into two weeks, the first being the dark ending on the new moon; the second being the clear that ends at the full moon. The Divālī Festival of Light takes place at the new moon of Kārttika, in the middle of the month therefore; that of Holi, at the full moon of the month of Phalguna (Phāgun in the local dialect), four and a half months later. Kārttika is the eighth month of the lunar year, corresponding to the month of October-November according to the Gregorian calendar, Phalguna is the 12th month, corresponding to February-March.]

young boys were collecting other combustibles—if possible in the form of donations, otherwise by stealth—quoting what they said were village rules, that everyone must contribute something and that anything once placed on the Holī pyre could not afterward be removed. I barely forestalled the contribution of one of my new cots; other householders in my lane complained of having lost brooms, parts of doors and carts, bundles of straw thatch, and an undetermined number of fuel cakes from their drying places in the sun.

The adobe houses of the village were being repaired or whitewashed for the great day. As I was mapping the streets and houses for a preliminary survey, ladies of the village everywhere pressed invitations upon me to attend the festival. The form of their invitations was [~~200-201~~] usually the oscillation of a fistful of wet cow-dung plaster in my direction, and the words, "Saheb will play Holī with us?" I asked how it was to be played, but could get no coherent answer. "You must be here to see and to play!" the men insisted.

I felt somewhat apprehensive as the day approached. An educated landlord told me that Holī is the festival most favored by the castes of the fourth estate, the Śūdras.⁵ Europeans at the district town advised me to stay indoors, and certainly to keep out of all villages on the festival day. But my village friends said, "Don't worry. Probably no one will hurt you. In any case, no one is to get angry, no matter what happens. All quarrels come to an end. It is a *līlā*—a divine sport of Lord Krishna!" I had read the sacred *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*'s story about Prahlāda and had heard many of its legends of Krishna's miraculous and amorous boyhood.⁴ These books seemed harmless enough. Then, too, Radcliffe-Brown had written in an authoritative anthropological text that one must observe the action of rituals in order to understand the meaning of any myth.⁵ I had been instructed by my reading of B. Malinowski, as well as by all my anthropological preceptors and elders that one best observes another culture by participating in it as directly as possible.⁶ My duty clearly was to join in the festival as far as I might be permitted.

The celebration began auspiciously, I thought, in the middle of the night as the full moon rose.⁵ The great pile of blessed and pilfered fuel at once took flame, ignited by the village fool, for the master of the village site had failed to rouse with sufficient speed from his slumbers. "Victory to Mother Holikā!" the shout went up, wishing her the achievement of final spiritual liberation rather than any earthly conquest, it seemed. A hundred men of all twenty-four castes in the village, both Muslim and Hindu, now crowded about the fire, roasting ears of the new, still green barley crop in her embers. They marched around the fire in opposite directions and exchanged roasted grains with each other as they

⁵ [TN: in Hindu texts, society is divided into four hereditary classes which, from the superior to the inferior, are brahmins, *kṣatriyas* or princes or warriors, *vaiśyas* or farmers, traders or craftsmen and *śūdras* or menials. The castes of the real society, which are very numerous, are organized more or less according to this hierarchical order.]

⁴ Books VI1 and X, as in *The Śrīmad-Bhagbātām of Krishna-Dwaipāyana-Vyāsa*, J. M. Sanyal. Trans. (Calcutta, n.d.), Vols. IV and V. [The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, written in elaborate Sanskrit verse, in the tenth century at the latest, is the most famous of the eighteen great Purāṇas ("ancient"). Dealing mostly with legends of Vishnu and his avatars—exalting Krishna in its tenth book—it promotes a form of extremely emotional devotion irrespective of social conventions. Some Vaiṣṇavas put it on the same level as the Veda].

⁵ Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, "Religion and Society," in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (London: Cohen & West, 1952), pp. 155, 177.

⁶ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London, 1932), pp.6–8.

⁵ [TN: see note 3 above.]

passed, embracing or greeting one another with "Rām Rām!"—blind in many cases to distinctions of caste. Household fires throughout the village had been extinguished, and as the assembled men returned to their homes, they carried coals from the collective fire to rekindle their domestic hearths. Many household courtyards stood open with decorated firepits awaiting the new year's blaze.⁵ Joyful [<201-202>] celebrants ran from door to door handing bits of the new crop to waking residents of all quarters or tossing a few grains over walls when doors were closed. As I entered a shadowy lane, I was struck twice from behind by what I thought might be barley, but found in fact to be ashes and sand. Apart from this perhaps deviant note, the villagers seemed to me to have expressed through their unified celebration of Holikā's demise their total dependence on each other as a moral community. Impressed with the vigor of these communal rites and inwardly warmed, I returned to my house and to bed in the courtyard.

It was a disturbing night, however. As the moon rose high, I became aware of the sound of racing feet: gangs of young people were howling "Holī!" and pursuing each other down the lanes. At intervals I felt the thud of large mud bricks thrown over my courtyard wall. Hoping still to salvage a few hours of sleep, I retreated with cot to the security of my storeroom. I was awakened for the last time just before dawn by the crash of the old year's pots breaking against my outer door. Furious fusillades of sand poured from the sky. Pandemonium now reigned: a shouting mob of boys called on me by name from the street and demanded that I come out. I perceived through a crack, however, that anyone who emerged was being pelted with bucketfuls of mud and cow-dung water. Boys of all ages were heaving dust into the air, hurling old shoes at each other, laughing and cavorting "like Krishna's cowherd companions"—and of course, cowherds they were. They had captured one older victim and were making him ride a donkey, seated backward, head to stern. Household walls were being scaled, loose doors broken open, and the inhabitants routed out to join these, ceremonial proceedings. Relatively safe in a new building with strong doors and high walls, I escaped an immediate lynching.

I was not sure just what I could find in anthropological theory to assist my understanding of these events. I felt at least that I was sharing E. Durkheim's sense (when he studied Australian tribal rites) of confronting some of the more elementary forms of the religious life. I reflected briefly on the classic functional dictum of Radcliffe-Brown, who had written that the "rites of savages persist because they are part of the mechanism by which an orderly society maintains itself in existence, serving as they do to establish certain fundamental social values."⁷ I pondered the Dionysian values that seemed here to have been [<202-203>] expressed, and wondered what equalitarian social order, if any, might maintain itself by such values.

But I had not long to reflect, for no sooner had the mob passed by my house than I was summoned by a messenger from a family at the other end of the village to give first aid to an injured woman. A thrown water pot had broken over her head as she opened her door that morning. Protected by an improvised helmet, I ventured forth. As I stepped into the lane, the wife of the barber in the house opposite, a lady who had hitherto been most quiet and deferential, also stepped forth, grinning under

⁵ [TN: Holī is the last festival of the Hindu year.]

⁷ "Taboo," in Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function*, p.152. [TN: Here is the original quote from Radcliffe-Brown that McKim Marriott has slightly modified: "The negative and positive rites of savages persist because they are part of the mechanism by which an orderly society maintains itself in existence, serving as they do to establish certain fundamental social gains."]

her veil. and doused me with a pail of urine from her buffalo. Hurrying through the streets, I glimpsed dances by parties of men and boys impersonating Krishna and company as musicians, fiddling and blowing in pantomime on wooden sticks, leaping about wearing garlands of dried cow-dung and necklaces of bullock bells. Again, as I returned from attending to the lacerated scalp, there was an intermittent hail of trash and dust on my shoulders, this time evidently thrown from the rooftops by women and children in hiding behind the eaves.

At noontime, a state of truce descended. Now was the time to bathe, the neighbors shouted, and to put on fine, fresh clothes. The dirt was finished. Now there would be solemn oblations to the god Fire. "Every cult," Durkheim had written, "presents a double aspect, one negative, the other positive."⁸ Had we then been preparing ourselves all morning by torture and purgation for other rites of purer intent? "What is it all going to be about this afternoon?" I asked my neighbor, the barber. "Holī," he said with a beatific sigh. "is the Festival of Love!"

Trusting that there would soon begin performances more in the spirit of the *Gītagovinda*⁵ or of Krishna's *rāsa* dances⁵ in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, I happily bathed and changed, for my eyes were smarting with the morning's dust and the day was growing hot. My constant benefactor, the village landlord, now sent his son to present me with a tall glass of a cool, thick green liquid. This was the festival drink, he said; he wanted me to have it at its best, as it came from his own parlour. I tasted it, and found it sweet and mild. "You must drink it all!" my host declared. I inquired about the ingredients—almonds, sugar, curds of milk, anise, and "only half a cup" of another item whose name I did not recognize. I finished off the whole delicious glass, and, in [~~203-204~~] discussion with my cook, soon inferred that the unknown ingredient—*bhāṅg*—had been four ounces of juice from the hemp leaf known in the West as hashish or marijuana.

Because of this indiscretion, I am now unable to report with much accuracy exactly what other religious ceremonies were observed in the four villages through which I floated that afternoon, towed by my careening hosts. They told me that we were going on a journey of condolence to each house whose members had been bereaved during the past year. My many photographs corroborate the visual impressions that I had of this journey: the world was a brilliant smear. The stained and crumpled pages of my notebooks are blank, save for a few declining diagonals and undulating scrawls. Certain steaming scenes remain in memory, nevertheless. There was one great throng of villagers watching an uplifted male dancer with padded crotch writhe in solitary states of fevered passion and then onanism; then join in a remote *pas de deux* with a veiled female impersonator in a parody of pederasty, and finally in telepathic copulation—all this to a frenzied accompaniment of many drums. I know that I witnessed several hysterical battles. women rushing out of their houses in squads to attack me and other men with

⁸ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Joseph Ward Swain, trans. (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1947), p.299.

⁵ [TN: Written in Sanskrit in the twelfth century by Jayadeva, the *Gītagovinda* sings in sublime verses the loves of Rādhā and Krishna. Its influence has been considerable.]

⁵ [TN: The notion of *rasa*, literally nectar, belongs to classical aesthetic theory. From the seventeenth century, Krishnaite theologians of the Chaitanya sect drew inspiration therefrom to develop a complex theory of religious feeling that accorded first place to emotional experience. Allegory for the intimate relationship between the soul and God, the *rāsa* dance (*rāsa līlā*) that the cowherdesses (*gopī*) dance with Krishna arouses the highest and purest devotion. It was depicted in many miniature paintings and theatrical troupes, which stage scenes of the Krishnaite deed, have specialized in its performance.]

stout canes, while each man defended himself only by pivoting about his own staff, planted on the ground, or, like me, by running for cover. The rest was all hymn singing, every street resounding with choral song in an archaic Śākta style.⁵ The state of the clothes in which I ultimately fell asleep told me the next morning that I had been sprayed and soaked repeatedly with libations of liquid dye, red and yellow. My face in the morning was still a brilliant vermilion, and my hair was orange from repeated embraces and scourings with colored powders by the bereaved and probably by many others. I learned on inquiry what I thought I had heard before, that in Kishan Garhi a kitchen had been profaned with dog's dung by masked raiders, that two housewives had been detected in adultery with neighboring men. As an effect of the festivities in one nearby village, there had occurred an armed fight between factional groups. In a third, an adjacent village, where there had previously been protracted litigation between castes, the festival had not been observed at all.

"A festival of *love*?" I asked my neighbors again in the morning.

"Yes! All greet each other with affection and feeling. Lord [[204-205](#)] Krishna taught us the way of love, and so we celebrate Holī in this manner."

"What about my aching shins—and your bruises? Why were the women beating us men?"

"Just as the milkmaids loved Lord Krishna, so our wives show their love for us, and for you, too, Saheb!"

Unable at once to stretch my mind so far as to include both "love" and these performances in one conception. I returned to the methodological maxim of Radcliffe-Brown: the meaning of a ritual element is to be found by observing what it shares with all the contexts of its occurrence.⁹ Clearly, I would need to know much more about village religion and about the place of each feature of Holī in its other social contexts throughout the year. Then perhaps I could begin to grasp the meanings of Krishna and his festival, and to determine the nature of the values they might serve to maintain.

There were, I learned by observing throughout the following twelve months in the village, three main kinds of ritual performances—festivals, individual sacraments, and optional devotions. Among sacraments,⁵ the family-controlled rites of marriage were a major preoccupation of all villagers. In marriage, young girls were uprooted from their privileged situations in the patrilineally extended families of their birth and childhood. They were wedded always out of the village, often many miles away, to child husbands in families that were complete strangers. A tight-lipped young groom would be brought by his uncles in military procession, and after three days of receiving tribute ceremoniously, he would be carried off with his screaming, wailing little bride to a home where she would occupy the lowest status of all. Hard work for the mother-in-law, strict obedience to the husband, and a veiled, silent face to all males senior to herself in the entire village—these were the lot of the young married

⁵ [TN: this passage is not very clear. *Śākta* refers to a school of theological thought for which the Supreme Being is the Goddess or the divine energy (*śakti*). Some Krishnaite theologians have relied on this conception to deify Rādhā, Krishna's favorite *gopī*. *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* echoes this representation. No doubt the author is here referring to songs in praise of Rādhā that place her on the same ontological plane as Krishna.]

⁹ *The Andaman Islanders* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1948), p.235.

⁵ [TN: The author here has in mind the *samskāra* or rites of consecration that mark the individual life of Hindus from birth to death. In addition to founding domestic life—a cornerstone of society—the marriage ceremony plays a determining religious role because only married men can celebrate rites.]

woman. Members of the husband's family, having the upper hand over the captive wife, could demand and receive service, gifts, hospitality, and deference from their "low" affines on all future occasions of ceremony. Briefly, sometimes, there would be little outbreaks of "Holī playing" at weddings, especially between the invading groom's men and the women of the bride's village: in these games, the men would be dared to enter the women's courtyards in the bride's village and would then be beaten with rolling [<205-206>] pins or soaked with colored water for their boldness. Otherwise, all ceremonies of marriage stressed the strict formal dominance of men over women, of groom's people over bride's. When married women returned to their original homes each rainy season for a relaxed month of reunion with their "village sisters" and "village brothers," the whole village sang sentimental songs of the *gopīs*' never-fulfilled longing for their idyllic childhood companionship with Krishna and with each other. Sexual relations between adults of humankind were conventionally verbalized in metaphors of "war," "theft," and rape,[§] while the marital connection between any particular husband and his wife could be mentioned without insult only by employing generalized circumlocutions such as "house" and "children" and so on. The idiom of Holī thus differed from that of ordinary life both in giving explicit dramatization to specific sexual relationships that otherwise would not be expressed at all and in reversing the differences of power conventionally prevailing between husbands and wives.

Aside from the Holī festival, each of the other thirteen major festivals of the year seemed to me to express and support the proper structures of patriarchy and gerontocracy in the family, of elaborately stratified relations among the castes, and of dominance by landowners in the village generally. At Divālī, ancestral spirits were to be fed and the goddess of wealth worshiped by the head of the family, acting on behalf of all members. The rites of Gobardhan Divālī, another Krishna-related[§] festival, stressed the unity of the family's agnates through their common interest in the family herds of cattle. On the fourth day of the lunar fortnight which ends at Divālī¹⁰—indeed, on certain fixed dates in every month—the wives fasted for the sake of their husbands. On other dates they fasted for the sake of their children. The brother-sister relation of helpfulness, a vital one for the out-married women, had two further festivals and many fasts giving it ritual support; and the Hoh bonfire itself dramatized the divine punishment of the wicked sister Holikā for her unthinkable betrayal of her brother Prahlāda. At each other festival of the year and also at wedding feasts, the separation of the lower from the higher castes and their strict order of ranking were reiterated both through the services of pollution-removal provided by them, and through the lowering gifts and payments of food made to them in return. Since the economy of the village was [<206-207>] steeply stratified, with one third of the families controlling nearly all the land, every kind of ritual observance, sacramental or festival, tended through ritual patronage and obeisance to give expression to the same order of economic dominance and subordination. Optional, individual ritual observances could also be understood as expressing the secular organization of power, I thought. Rival leaders would compete for the allegiance of others through ceremonies. A wealthy farmer, official, or successful litigant was expected to sponsor special ceremonies and give feasts for lesser folk "to remove the sins" he had no doubt committed in gaining his high position; he who ignored this expectation might overhear stories of the jocular harassment of misers at Holī, or of their robbery on other, darker nights. Once each year, a day for simultaneous

[§] [TN: McKim Marriott does put the word rape within quotation marks.]

[§] [TN: see note 3 above]

¹⁰ Details of some of these festivals are given in McKim Marriott, *op. cit.*, pp. 192–206. The social organization of Kishan Garhi is described more fully in McKim Marriott, "Social Structure and Change in a U.P. Village," in M. N. Srinivas, ed. *India's Villages* (London, 1960), pp. 106–121.

worship of all the local deities required a minimal sort of communal action by women, and smaller singing parties of women were many, but comradeship among men across the lines of kinship and caste was generally regarded with suspicion. In sum, the routine ritual and social forms of the village seemed almost perfect parallels of each other: both maintained a tightly ranked and compartmentalized order. In this order, there was little room for behavior of the kinds attributed to Krishna's boisterous personality.

"Why do you say that it was Lord Krishna who taught you how to celebrate the festival of Holī?" I inquired of the many villagers who asserted that this was so. Answers, when they could be had at all, stressed that it was he who first played Holī with the cowherd boys and with Rādhā and the other *gopīs*. But my searches in the *Bhāgavata*'s tenth book, and even in that book's recent and locally most popular adaptation, the *Ocean of Love*¹¹ could discover no mention of Holī or any of the local festival's traditional activities, from the bonfire to the game of colors. "Just see how they play Holī in Mathurā district, in Lord Krishna's own village of Nandgaon, and in Rādhā 's village of Barsana!" said the landlord. There, I was assured by the barber, who had also seen them, that the women train all year long, drinking milk and eating ghee like wrestlers, and there they beat the men *en masse*, before a huge audience of visitors, to the music of two hundred drums.

"I do not really believe that Lord Krishna grew up in just that village of Nandgaon," the landlord confided in me, "for Nanda, Krishna's foster father, must have lived on this side of the Jumnā River, near [<207-208>] Gokula, as is written in the Purāṇa. But there in Nandgaon and Barsana they keep the old customs best."

The landlord's doubts were well placed, but not extensive enough, for, as I learned from a gazetteer⁵ of the district, the connection of Krishna, Rādhā, and the cowgirls with the rising of the women at Holī in those villages of Mathurā could not have originated before the early seventeenth-century efforts of certain immigrant Bengali Gosvāmin priests. The Gosvāmīs themselves—Rūpa, Sanātana, and their associates—were missionaries of the Krishnaite devotional movement led by Caitanya¹² in sixteenth century Bengal, and that movement in turn had depended on the elaboration of the new notion of Rādhā as Krishna's favorite by the Telugu philosopher Nimbārka, possibly in the thirteenth century, and by other, somewhat earlier sectarians of Bengal and southern India.¹³ The village names "Nandgaon" (village of Nanda) and "Barsana" (to make rain—an allusion to the "dark-as-a-cloud" epithet of Krishna) were probably seventeenth century inventions, like the formal choreography of the battles of the sexes in those villages, that were contrived to attract pilgrims to the summer circuit of Krishna's rediscovered and refurbished holy land of Vraja.¹⁴ Of course, privileged attacks by women upon men must have existed in village custom long before the promotional work of the Gosvāmīs—of this I was convinced by published studies of villages elsewhere, even in the farthest corners of the Hindi-speaking area, where such attacks were part of Holī, but not understood as conveying the message of

¹¹ Lallu Lal, *Premasāgara*, Frederic Pincott, trans. (London, 1897).

⁵ [TN: A gazetteer is a type of work produced by the colonial administration (the redaction of which was continued after Independence) that brings together historical, anthropological, economic and administrative information on a district.]

¹² Frederic Salmon Growse, *Mathurā: A District Memoir* (2nd ed., 1880), pp. 72, 93, 183–184.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 178–221. John Nicol Farquhar, *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India* (London: Oxford University Press, 1920), pp. 238–240.

¹⁴ Growse, *Mathurā: A District Memoir*, pp. 71–94.

Lord Krishna.¹⁵ But once the great flow of devotees to Mathurā had begun from Bengal, Gujarat, and the South, the direction of cultural influence must have been reversed: what had been incorporated of peasant practice and local geography into the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*⁵ and other new sectarian texts must have begun then to reshape peasant conceptions of peasant practice. At least the Krishnaite theology of the "love battles" in Kishan Garhi, and possibly some refinements of their rustic hydrology and stick work,⁵ seemed to have been remodeled according to the famous and widely imitated public performances that had been visible in villages of the neighboring district for the past three centuries or so.⁵ The Mathurā pilgrimage and its literature appeared also to have worked similar effects upon two other festivals of Krishna in Kishan Garhi, in addition to Holī.¹⁶ [[<208-209>](#)]

To postulate the relative recency of the association of Radha and Krishna with the battles of canes and colors in Kishan Garhi was not to assert that the entire Holī festival could have had no connection with legends of Krishna before the seventeenth century. Reports on the mythology of Holī from many other localities described the bonfire, not as the burning of Holikā, but as the cremation of another demoness, Pūtana.¹⁷ Pūtana was a demoness sent by King Kaṁsa of Mathura to kill the infant Krishna by giving him to suck of her poisonous mother's milk. The Pūtana story could no doubt claim a respectable antiquity, occurring as it did in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and the *Harivaṁśa*;⁵ it was known in Kishan Garhi, although not applied currently to the rationalization of the Holī fire, and represented an acquaintance with a Krishna senior in type to the more erotic Krishna of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the later works. Even if I peeled away all explicit references to Krishna, both older and more recent, I would still have confronted other layers of Vaiṣṇavism in the Holī references to Rāma, whose cult centered in the middle Gangetic plain and in the South. And then there was the further Vaiṣṇava figure Prahlāda, another of ancient origin. Finally, I had to consider the proximity of Kishan Garhi to Mathurā, which was more than merely generically Vaiṣṇavite in its ancient religious orientations: Mathurā was thought to have been the original source of the legends of the child Krishna and his brother Balarāma, as suggested by Greek evidence from the fourth century B.C. as well as by the Purāṇic traditions.¹⁸ Assuming that urban cults may always have been influential in villages and that such cults often carried forward what

¹⁵ Women beat men at or near the time of Holi among the Gonds of Mandla district, according to Verrier Elwin, *Leaves from the Jungle* (London: J. Murray, 1936). p.135; in Nimar, according to Stephen Fuchs, *The Children of Hari* (New York: Praeger, 1950). pp. 300–301; and elsewhere in Madhya Pradesh, according to Robert Vane Russell and Hira Lal, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* (London, 1916), Vol. II, p.126, and Vol. III. p.117. The usage is reported also from Alwar in Rajasthan by Hilda Wernher, *op. cit.*, p.208, and from Delhi by O. Lewis and V. Barnouw, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

⁵ [TN: Vaiṣṇava text redacted probably in 15th–16th centuries; see also TN note preceding note 9 above.]

⁵ [TN: During Holi, people spray each other with colored water, sometimes using large syringes, and they thrash each other with sticks. The tone is deliberately ironic, as elsewhere in the text.]

⁵ [TN: see the 2nd TN note following note 8 above.]

¹⁶ At Krishna's birthday anniversary, biographies of his life by poets of Mathurā are read. At the Gobardhan Divālī, the circumambulation of the hill by the [[<230-231>](#)] pilgrims is duplicated in model; see McKim Marriott. "Little Communities," in *op. cit.*, pp. 199–200.

¹⁷ Sec W. Crooke, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 313–314; and Ṛgvedi (pseud.), *Āryāncā Sanāncā Prācīna va Arvācīna Itihāsa* (in Marathi) (Bombay, n.d.), p.399.

⁵ [TN: Two major Vaiṣṇava texts; the first (4th–5th centuries), is one of the eighteen great Purāṇas; the second is an appendix to the *Mahābhārata* epic (around 2nd century); its version of Krishna's childhood is the oldest known.]

¹⁸ F. S. Growse, *Mathurā: A District Memoir*, p.103.

was already present in rural religious practice,¹⁹ I thought it probable that the ancestors of the people of Kishan Garhi might well have celebrated the pranks of some divine ancestor of the Purāṇic Krishna even before their Jess complete adherence to the cults of Rāma and other gods later known as avatars of Viṣṇu. If these historical evidences and interpretations were generally sound, if Krishna had indeed waxed and waned before, then what both I and the villagers had taken to be their timeless living within a primordial local myth of Krishna appeared instead to represent rather the latest in a lengthy series of revivals and reinterpretations mingling local, regional, and even some quite remote movements of religious fashion. [<209-210>]

Beneath the level of mythological enactment or rationalization, with its many shifts of contents through time, however, I felt that one might find certain more essential, underlying connections between the moral constitution of villages like Kishan Garhi and the general social form of the Holī festival—so the functional assumption of Radcliffe-Brown had led me to hope. Superficially, in various regions and eras, the festival might concern witches or demonesses (Holikā or Holākā, Pūtanā, Ḍhoṇḍhā), Viṣṇu triumphant (as Rāma, Narasimha, or Krishna), Śiva as an ascetic in conflict with gods of lust (Kāma, Madana, or the nonscriptural Nathurām), or others.²⁰ Festival practices might also vary greatly. Were there enduring, widespread features, I wondered? From a distributional and documentary study by N. K. Bose, I learned that spring festivals featuring bonfires, a degree of sexual license, and generally saturnalian carousing had probably existed in villages of many parts of India for at least the better part of the past two thousand years.²¹ Spring festivals of this one general character evidently had remained consistently associated with many of India's complex, caste-bound communities. Even if only some of such festivals had had the puckish, ambiguous Krishna as their presiding deity, and these only in recent centuries, many seemed since the beginning of our knowledge to have enshrined divinities who sanctioned, however briefly, some of the same riotous sort of social behavior.

Now a full year had passed in my investigations, and the Festival of Love was again approaching. Again I was apprehensive for my physical person, but was forewarned with social structural knowledge that might yield better understanding of the events to come. This time, without the draft of marijuana, I began to see the pandemonium of Holī falling into an extraordinarily regular social ordering. But this was an order precisely inverse to the social and ritual principles of routine life. Each riotous act at Holī implied some opposite, positive rule or fact of everyday social organization in the village.

Who were those smiling men whose shins were being most mercilessly beaten by the women? They were the wealthier Brahman and Jāṭ farmers⁵ of the village, and the beaters were those ardent local Rādhās, the "wives of the village," figuring by both the real and the fictional intercaste system of kinship. The wife of an "elder brother" was properly a man's joking mate, while the wife of a "younger [<210-211>] brother" was properly removed from him by rules of extreme respect, but both were

¹⁹ R. Redfield and M. Singer, "The Cultural Role of Cities," *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, III (1954). pp. 53–74.

²⁰ W. Crooke, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 313–314, 319–320; P. V. Kane, *op. cit.*, Vol. V. pp. 237–240; Ṛgvedī, *op. cit.*, pp. 399–400, 405.

²¹ Nirmal Kumar Bose, "The Spring Festival of India," in *Cultural Anthropology and Other Essays* (Calcutta, 1953). pp. 73–102. [<231>]

⁵ [TN: The Jāṭs are an important agricultural caste in northern India; often holding superior rights on the land, they constitute what the anthropology of India designates as "dominant castes," landowners, of high ritual status, and demographically numerous at the local level.]

merged here with a man's mother-surrogates, the wives of his "father's younger brothers," in one revolutionary cabal of "wives" that cut across all lesser lines and links. The boldest beaters in this veiled battalion were often in fact the wives of the farmers' low-caste field laborers, artisans, or menials—the concubines and kitchen help of the victims. "Go and bake bread!" teased one farmer, egging his assailant on. "Do you want some seed from me?" shouted another flattered victim, smarting under the blows, but standing his ground. Six Brahman men in their fifties, pillars of village society, limped past in panting flight from the quarterstaff wielded by a massive young Bhaṅgin, sweeper of their latrines. From this carnage suffered by their village brothers, all daughters of the village stood apart, yet held themselves in readiness to attack any potential husband who might wander in from another, marriageable village to pay a holiday call.

Who was that "King of the Holī" riding backward on the donkey? It was an older boy of high caste, a famous bully, put there by his organized victims (but seeming to relish the prominence of his disgrace).

Who was in that chorus singing so lustily in the potters' lane? Not just the resident caste fellows, but six washermen, a tailor, and three Brahmans, joined each year for this day only in an idealistic musical company patterned on the friendships of the gods.

Who were those transfigured "cowherds" heaping mud and dust on all the leading citizens? They were the water carrier, two young Brahman priests, and a barber's son, avid experts in the daily routines of purification.

Whose household temple was festooned with goat's bones by unknown merrymakers? It was the temple of that Brahman widow who had constantly harassed neighbors and kinsmen with actions at law.

In front of whose house was a burlesque dirge being sung by a professional ascetic of the village? It was the house of a very much alive moneylender, notorious for his punctual collections and his insufficient charities.

Who was it who had his head fondly anointed, not only with handfuls of the sublime red powders, but also with a gallon of diesel oil? It was the village landlord, and the anointer was his cousin and archrival, the police headman of Kishan Garhi. [<211-212>]

Who was it who was made to dance in the street, fluting like Lord Krishna, with a garland of old shoes around his neck? It was I, the visiting anthropologist, who had asked far too many questions, and had always to receive respectful answers.

Here indeed were the many village kinds of love confounded—respectful regard for parents and patrons; the idealized affection for brothers, sisters, and comrades; the longing of man for union with the divine; and the rugged lust of sexual mates—all broken suddenly out of their usual, narrow channels. by a simultaneous increase of intensity. Boundless, unilateral love of every kind flooded over the usual compartmentalization and indifference among separated castes and families. Insubordinate libido inundated all established hierarchies of age, sex, caste, wealth, and power.

The social meaning of Krishna's doctrine in its rural North Indian recension is not unlike one conservative social implication of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon admonishes severely, but at

the same time postpones the destruction of the secular social order until a distant future. Krishna does not postpone the reckoning of the mighty until an ultimate Judgment Day but schedules it regularly as a masque at the full moon of every March. And the Holī of Krishna is no mere doctrine of love: rather it is the script for a drama that must be acted out by each devotee passionately, joyfully.

The dramatic balancing of Holī—the world destruction and world renewal, the world pollution followed by world purification—occurs not only on the abstract level of structural principles, but also in the person of each participant. Under the tutelage of Krishna, each person plays and for the moment may experience the role of his opposite: the servile wife acts the domineering husband, and vice versa; the ravisher acts the ravished; the menial acts the master; the enemy acts the friend; the strictured youths act the rulers of the republic. The observing anthropologist, inquiring and reflecting on the forces that move men in their orbit, finds himself pressed to act the witless bumpkin. Each actor playfully takes the role of others in relation to his own usual self. Each may thereby learn to play his own routine roles afresh, surely with renewed understanding, possibly with greater grace, perhaps with a reciprocating love. [[p.212](#)]

Krishna Worship and the Holī Festival

[p.129>] By planting his observation post at Kishan Garhi as the great disorder of the Holī festival was breaking out, McKim Marriott confronts one of the big questions facing Indian anthropology: that of the conditions in which Hinduism has expanded its sphere of influence by imposing itself everywhere across Indian territory even while conserving strong regional specificities. At its own scale, Holī is in the image of this vastly composite socioreligious system. It is inscribed within the space, time and myths of the Krishnaite religion of the Braj country. Its roots plunge into the reality of a precisely located rural world, and into the pan-Indian imaginary of the great classical texts of Krishnaite mythology. The festival is the result of two opposite but closely interdependent movements: the Krishnaization of Braj through its adoption of beliefs expressed in Sanskrit—the Latin of India—and the "Brajification" of the Krishna-centered religion through its assimilation of a regional and vernacular culture. Marriott anchors this double process in history by showing that it starts in the seventeenth century when literati, imbued with scriptural knowledge and animated by missionary zeal, bring to life the metaphors of mythical tales: in their wake, people will come on pilgrimage to Braj to see the places where Krishna (really) lived, where he (really) loved the cowherdresses (*gopī*). This bringing into perspective, at the time when McKim Marriott first proposed it, is pioneering. Further research has only confirmed and amplified it.

Holī is the feast of love because the imaginary it feeds upon is populated by passionately distraught characters. In the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* (ninth-tenth centuries), Krishna's love life is the metaphor for an identifiable form of religiosity: that which is born of the emotion deeply felt at the direct encounter with the divine. This religion of *bhakti* (devotion), a term that appears only implicitly in Marriott's text, promises Salvation to whoever gives himself ecstatically—dancing and singing—to God and by ignoring all conventions—of social hierarchy as of simple propriety. It offers as a model the cowherdresses infatuated with love who abandon their homes to unite with Krishna in the Vrindaban, the woods of Vrinda (Sanskrit Vrindavana). The *rasa* (nectar) dance, described by the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, is highly suggestive of the dual dimension, erotic and salvific, of their religious experience. Frequently and everywhere, on the illustrated almanacs inspired by miniature paintings, the villagers of Kishan Garhi would have seen representations of the famous round with its alternation of Krishnas and cowherdresses, parable for the intimate union of human souls with God, Krishna's multiplication symbolizing complete union and the divinity's total self-giving to each of his lovers.

The Textual Context of Field Work

The Krishnaite myth still fascinates philologists, anthropologists and historians, as evidenced by the continual updates of its vast bibliography, but its chief elements have been known since the studies by the first orientalists. Two works, already old at the time when McKim Marriott writes, constitute his main sources: that of the orientalist John Nicol Farquhar (1861–1929)—a remarkable synthesis of Hinduism's history of ideas published in 1920—and the memoir of Frederic Salmon Growse (1836–1893) on the Mathura district, composed some forty years earlier [[129-130](#)], in 1880, in which the colonial administrator confers on Braj its letters of nobility by placing it on the map of universal history. However, in the 1950s, the vast field of the Krishna religion remains to be opened up, of which we would be convinced by consulting the work published in 1987 by the specialist of Braj culture Alan

Entwistle¹⁰ (1949–1996) which, a century after *Mathura: A District Memoir* by his illustrious predecessor and compatriot Growse, serves as the reference manual for many years to come on the constitution of Braj as the sacred terrain of the Krishna devotees. But though entire sections of this history remained to be written in 1966, although the first in-depth researches do not start till about a dozen years later,¹¹ Marriott, armed with his Growse and his Farquhar, comes to grips with the essential question when questioning the composite nature of the Krishnaite religion of Braj.

The recent work of another great Braj specialist, J. S. Hawley, shows that this question deserves to be dwelt upon further. In *A Storm of Songs. India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement*, the professor at Columbia University deals with the history of the idea of the "bhakti movement," that is, of devotion to Krishna.¹² To talk about the "bhakti movement," writes Hawley, is not to take note of a phenomenon but to express an idea, and this idea is the product of a history. If the time has come to question how we had talked about facts, and when and why, this is because the facts themselves are much better known than they were at the period when Marriott was writing his article.

Hawley argues that the idea of a "*bhakti* movement," an essentially Vaishnava and North Indian idea, emerges in the first decades of the twentieth century within the framework of Indian nation-building, by turning the emotional force of *bhakti* into a factor of national integration. In examining the premises of this idea, Hawley looks back at the history of how the Krishnaite religion was constructed and sheds a new light on the theses enunciated forty years earlier by Marriott. The mystics enamored of Krishna, he shows, could not have been able to evangelize the small rural hamlets around Mathura and to transform them in record time into a great religious center if the region had not enjoyed the patronage of the Muslim Mughal Empire and its Hindu allies, the Rajputs of the Kingdom of Amber-Jaipur, and the political stability thus imposed on all of northwestern India. They would not moreover have elaborated their scholarly theses on divine loves if they had not bathed in a composite milieu, both Hindu and Sufi. The religion of Krishna is not done with revealing his manifold nature.

The Paroxysms of Holī

How do we pass from the divine loves of Krishna's gest to the exacerbated, even violent, frenzy that seizes the villagers of Kishan Garhi at the time of Holī? Frenzy that impels them to throw on their neighbors colored water but also urine, to cover them with colored powders but also with mud! That drives the women to thrash the men with blows from cudgels! And the men to mime the sexual act in the most grotesque and crude way. Would these events be a metaphor for physical love in its lustful, obscene and violent dimensions? The behaviors that the author observes seem to him, at the very least, a conception of love that is misaligned to that of the Krishnaite universe.

To make sense of these disorders, Marriott develops a thesis that may be summarized in just a few words: when they play at Holī, the villagers of Kishan Garhi are the heirs of closely [[130-131](#)]

¹⁰ Alan W. Entwistle, *Braj: Center of Krishna Pilgrimage*, Groningen Oriental Studies, vol. 3, Groningen, Egbert Forsten, 1987

¹¹ It was in 1976 that the classical study by Charlotte Vaudeville (1918-2006), French specialist of the religious literature of North India on the "rediscovery" of Braj ("Braj lost and found"), appears; see Charlotte Vaudeville, *Myths, Saints, and Legends in Medieval India*, collected texts by Vasudha Dalmia, New York, Oxford University Press, 1996.

¹² John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs. India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement*, Cambridge / London, Harvard University Press, 2015.

intertwined religious traditions, some learned as we mentioned, others of their own. These go back to the night of time, he proposes, invoking the contemporary Indian anthropologist N. K. Bose who, based on a comparative study of Spring festivals from several parts of India, concludes that practices associating festivities and sexual license existed for 2,000 years. The ancestors of the residents of Kishan Garhi, continues Marriott, were probably indulging in saturnalia long before the arrival of those mystic scholars who invented Vrindaban in the seventeenth century. However, at Kishan Garhi, these festivities had been reinterpreted in the light of their description of Krishna's amorous pastimes. At this stage, his explanation seems to be based on a hypothesis already present in William Crooke (1848–1923). According to this greatest folklorist of northern India in colonial times, the Holī festival could have indeed originated from fertility rites supposed to reinvigorate the exhausted energies of the past year, and therefore unrelated to orthodox Hinduism. But legends would have been invented to associate them with the worship of the great gods like Krishna.¹³ However, Marriott does not stick to this reading, which reduces the village elements to pieces of a puzzle that is essentially savant in conception. Similarly, he evokes only in passing the association of the four big festivals with the four classes of brahmanical social ideology (*varṇa*): last festival of the year, the uninhibited and bawdy Holī would be that of the fourth and last *varṇa*, *śūdras* or menials. This relationship between the festivals and *varṇa* fits into a vast system of sophisticated correspondences between cosmic order and social order. If, as noted by Jean-Luc Chambard (1928–2015), specialist of the popular Hinduism of North India, we know it "on the field" at the village,¹⁴ it is from the village brahmin's mouth that the ethnologist learns of it.

Marriott, for his part, offers a more complex reading: it is an interlacing of traditions that would explain the link that the villagers of Kishan Garhi establish between their uninhibited mode of celebrating Holī and the salvific message of the loves of Radha and Krishna. According to him, in the religion of Krishna, the villagers have found practices, though transfigured, that since the dawn of time, had characterized their own festivals and carnivals, and which the zealous Krishnaite literati made use of to give life to the metaphors of the myths. We could say that McKim Marriott makes of village culture a substrate, giving the latter term the meaning it takes in linguistics: it is comparable to a language the traces of which are still perceptible within that by which it has been supplanted.

The Experience of Excess

To be sprinkled with urine, to suffer beatings, to be drugged, that is what McKim Marriott probably did not expect while undertaking his investigation of Holī in Kishan Garhi village. But what did he know about the paroxysmal character of this festival when he arrived in this Braj village in 1950, and fifteen years later when he did return to this experience in his article? According to his late testimonies, Marriott,¹⁵ at the end of the 1940s, drew his knowledge of the North Indian rural world from reading the "little book" written on the village of Karimpur, in Uttar Pradesh, by the Wiser couple,¹⁶ *Behind Mud*

¹³ William Crooke, "The Holi: A Vernal Festival of the Hindus, *Folklore*, vol. 25, No. 1 (March 31, 1914), pp. 55-83, 62-63, 70, 77, 83.

¹⁴ Jean-Luc Chambard, "Les trois grands dieux à la porte du roi Bali. La tradition orale d'un village et notre image de l'hindouisme populaire en Inde du Nord," in C. Champion (ed.), *Traditions orales dans le monde indien*, Paris, EHESS, "Purusartha", 1996, p. 229-272, 248-249 and 262.

¹⁵ McKim Marriott, interviewed by Roland Lardinois, Paris, May 16, 1995.

¹⁶ William H. Wiser and Charlotte Viall Wiser, *Behind Mud Walls 1930-1960 with a sequel The Village in 1970*, preface by David G. Mandelbaum, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971 (1st ed. revised and augmented 1963 and 1971).

Walls, first published in 1930 before this book, reissued in 1963 and then in 1971, became a classic of the anthropological literature on India. From this account of village life, by these American Presbyterian missionaries engaged in rural development, Marriott could understand that [<131-134>] bodily contacts between members of different castes obeyed strict rules, that the caste hierarchy was basically a hierarchy of bodies: those who consider themselves the purest preserving their superior status only by engaging in frequent rites of purification and avoiding physical contact with bodies considered the least pure. It was not for nothing that those who were at the bottom of the social hierarchy were called untouchable. It was the same for a *mleccha* (lit. barbarian) like him, Marriott, who did not belong to the caste system but who was respectfully called *sahib* like the Wisers. However, the book by the Wisers contains no evocation of the festivals of the Hindu calendar, and Holī is not mentioned.

Did McKim Marriott know that the spring festival gave rise to physical excess? We mentioned the article of the folklorist William Crooke published in 1915 that Marriott however does not quote. He could have still been informed about this festival by reading the book of Margaret Sinclair Stevenson,¹⁷ *The Rites of the Twice-Born*, published in 1920. In this work, the content of which is more anthropological than that of the Wisers, the author, likewise a Protestant missionary in India, sheds light on the ritual practices observed by the Brahmins of the Kathiawar Peninsula in Gujarat; she devotes several pages to the Holī festival, evokes the excesses to which this celebration gives rise, but does not dwell on it. However, Marriott again does not mention this book in the collection of village studies that he published in 1955, and to which we return below.

Faced with the excesses that he observes and to which his victimized body is subjected, McKim Marriott therefore does not seem prepared. He feels from the outset a certain apprehension. This is associated with the village character of the festival. Holī, he is given to understand, is the festival of the vulgar *śūdras*, not of educated people. But, on the one hand, his university readings reassure him: the Krishnaite myth that is at the foundation of the whole thing is harmless. On the other hand, he obeys the Malinowskian principle of "participant observation." Once confronted by its unleashing, he is helpless, he is afraid, he hides himself. Forced to go out to rescue a victim, he is attacked. Further on into the festival, he is drugged, so much so that he loses his footing: he has only a vague awareness of what his body is enduring, and on which he is informed only by his condition upon awakening. The observation half is therefore missing from the participant-observation of bodies at paroxysm, only the participation half remains. This crucial fact does not hold his attention: no doubt he knows himself capable of completing his investigation the following year?

The second time, McKim Marriott is prepared both physically—he is not drugged—and intellectually—he has Radcliffe-Brown and his functionalism in mind. From then on everything happens externally, outside of him, and his only physical test is to be transformed into a "witless bumpkin," disguised as a grotesque Krishna wearing a necklace of old shoes. From participant-observation, it is now the participation half that is absent. And it is a safe bet that the notes of his second fieldwork are the basis on which the ethnologist manages to write his article and draw from Holī a nice sociological lesson, because from his first fieldwork his notebook retains only doodles and colored stain. McKim Marriott lets us suppose that he noted subjective impressions in his field notebook, his feeling of fear,

¹⁷ Margaret Sinclair Stevenson, *The Rites of the Twice-Born*, London, Oxford University Press, 1920 (Les *Rites des deux-fois-nés*, trans. from English by Nicole Ménant, introduction by Lokenath Bhattacharya, Paris, Le Soleil Noir, 1982).

his troubled perception due to consuming marijuana, but it does not seem that understanding his affects was part of his "project of knowledge."¹⁸ Unless, by its nature, participating in the paroxysm of bodies is beyond verbal communication. [[134-135](#)]

The Concept of Village at the Test of Functionalist Anthropology

Written in the first person, the description of the festival positions the anthropologist as an external observer vis-à-vis the villagers. The latter hardly exist as subjects engaged in action, reduced to nameless social types (the owner, the barber's wife, the brahmin), rendered dumb by Marriott who does not restitute any specific conversation that he could have had with them. If the course of the festival always retains a spontaneous, improvised, character, a more systematic study would be needed to describe what might be called the grammars of the rituals and actions that do not fail to evoke the carnivals studied by anthropologists and historians in other cultures and parts of the world.

Nourished by the knowledge of classical authors of anthropology—Durkheim, Malinowski and especially Radcliffe-Brown—Marriott expounds an interpretation of Holī that draws on the structural functionalism of the latter. Feast of Love, Holī is to be understood in the relation of homology that can be established between the "collective rites" that punctuate the annual cycle of rural life and "the moral community" of Kishan Garhi. In this moment of ritualized disorder and violence, placed under the aegis of the loves of Krishna and his beloved Radha, procedures of inversion dominate in which social roles and positions of wealth, gender, servitude, are overturned, exchanged—not without excess nor violence. Then, with the cosmogonic cycle of destruction-renewal of the world coming to an end, the caste society can resume the ordinary course of its hierarchical relations. Holī is not only the opportunity to represent, even if only as parody, the loves of Krishna and Radha; the very festival itself, suggests Marriott, can be understood as a play "that every devotee must interpret with passion," each actor endorsing, for the duration of the festival, the role that the others habitually play towards him, including the anthropologist present at this moment in the village.

From this functionalist interpretation of Holī emerges the implicit idea that the village is a structural unit of the rural world in which the solidarity between the castes would be put to the test, every year, during the rituals of this festival. The author points out in passing that in some villages the Holī festival could not be organized because of old conflicts between castes, but this observation hardly holds him back. Yet, if the primary function of the festival is to reaffirm inter-caste solidarity and the moral unity of the village, how to explain that the festival cannot contribute to this in cases of conflicts that would seem to require its function of integrating the village group?

In fact, the hypothesis of the village conceived as a "moral community," which underlies this functionalist interpretation of the Holī festival, is contradicted by Marriott himself in two other articles dealing with this same village. Presenting the social structure of Kishan Garhi, the author shows that the dominant castes¹⁹ who control the land, here the Jats and their high caste tenants, the Brahmans, form the central pole of village society, to which the other castes are subordinated in all respects. Internally divided according to the caste lines, the village is not an isolatable social unit: on the one hand, kinship and alliance, structured by caste, put it in relation to other villages—as Marriott bears witness while relating visits to the relatives of his landlord, outside the village, on the second day of Holī; on the other

¹⁸ Jeanne Favret-Saasa, « Être affecté », in *Désorceler*, Paris, L'Olivier, « Penser/Rêver », 2009, p. 145-161.

¹⁹ On the notion of dominant caste, see note 37 (translators' note) in Marriott's text

hand, socio-economic ties inscribe the [<135-136>] village into a chain of political authority by which land policies and the modalities of taxation are defined in the long term of regional history. Thus, Marriott concludes: "It seems that there has never been [in Kishan Garhi] types of association that consider the village as a unit in which all groups would belong equally, or that envisage the problems of the village as problems concerning everyone."²⁰

That the village is not, in India, this elementary unit of rural society that many writers have seen in it, from Karl Marx to Gandhi, is a subject that attracted the very early attention of Louis Dumont. In the first issue of the journal he founded in 1957, with the British anthropologist David Pocock, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Dumont²¹ does a long review of two major village studies both published in 1955.²² But if the village in India is not a "community," from a sociological point of view, and if the divisions between the castes can thwart the holding of the Holī festival, then it is difficult to defend the thesis proposed by McKim Marriott, in this article, according to which Holī would serve a function of cohesion, of social integration of the different castes of the village in the same "moral community."

This contradiction may find its explanation, in part, in the fifteen years that separate the redaction of this study based on field work and the first articles that the author then writes. In the 1950s, the village presented itself as the preferred practical setting in which are anchored the investigations of McKim Marriott, who had come to India to investigate there the effects of the agrarian policy launched by the government of independent India. But in the course of the debates which intervene then among the anthropologists of India, the notion of village loses the heuristic virtues that it could have seemed to possess, from a sociological point of view. Twenty years later, Marriott's article on Holī responds to another demand, that of the Sanskritists and historians of literature and religion. Reflection on the village no longer appears to be a primary concern when it comes to making sense of Krishna worship and the Holī festival observed and experienced by Marriott first at Kishan Garhi. The functionalist type of response then seems obvious by its simplicity.

In the 1950s and 1960s, however, Louis Dumont proposed another approach to get the study of Hinduism, in its twofold dimension of social structure and religion, out of this contradiction. First of all, it was necessary to abandon the village as a framework of inquiry to the benefit of caste, a way of entering the social world that is more pertinent from a sociological point of view;²³ it was then a question of conducting a structural analysis of the Hindu pantheon in order to identify the fundamental principles,

²⁰ McKim Marriott, "Social Structure and Change in a U. P. Village," in M. N. Srinivas (dir.), *India's Village*, Bombay, Media Promoters and Publishers, 1978 (1st re-ed. 1955), p. 117; id., « Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilization », in McKim Marriott (dir.), *Village India. Studies in the Little Community*, Chicago/London, The University of Chicago Press, 1955, p. 171-222.

²¹ See [Louis Dumont, non-signed article], « Village Studies », *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, I, April 1957, p. 23-41 ; for a socio-historical critique of the notion of village community, see Louis Dumont, « The "Village Community" from Munro to Maine », *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, IX, 1966, p. 67-89 (abridged French translation, « La "communauté de village" de Munro à Maine » in Louis Dumont, *La Civilisation indienne et nous*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1975, p. 111-140).

²² See note 20.

²³ Louis Dumont, *Une sous-caste de l'Inde du Sud. Organisation sociale et religion des Pramalai Kallar*, Paris/La Haye, Mouton, 1957. {Louis Dumont, *A South Indian Subcaste: Social Organization and Religion of the Pramalai Kallar* (French Studies on South Asian Culture and Society). Hardcover – December 18, 1986. Oxford University Press; Revised edition (December 18, 1986)}

whether it be of Hinduism observed in village society²⁴ or that expressed in the more scholarly, pan-Indian myths, those of the Puranas²⁵ for example. This is perhaps why, in his review of the book edited by Milton Singer, Louis Dumont makes no comment on the article by McKim Marriott, close to his own work, but whose approach could not have seemed convincing to him. We are here at the heart of the methodological controversies that arose between Chicago and Paris, with the publication, in 1966, of Louis Dumont's major book, *Homo Hierarchicus*,²⁶ of which Marriott²⁷ was then a severe critic before, years later, profoundly modifying his appreciation of this book.²⁸ [[p.136](#)]

²⁴ Louis Dumont, « Définition structurale d'un dieu populaire tamoul : Aiyandar, le maître », *Journal asiatique*, t. 241, 1953, p. 255-270 (re-published in *La Civilisation indienne et nous*, op. cit., p. 92–110).

²⁵ Madeleine Biarreau, *Études de mythologie hindoue, tome 1 : Cosmologies puraniques*, Paris, École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1981 (this is a digest of the lectures given by the Biarreau at the École pratique des hautes études, Ve Section des Sciences religieuses, in 1961–1962).

²⁶ Louis Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus. Le système des castes et ses implications*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966. [*Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, Jan. 1981]

²⁷ McKim Marriott, "Review of Louis Dumont's *Homo hierarchicus* : essai sur le système des castes [sic]," *American Anthropologist*, 71, 6, 1969, p. 1166-1175.

²⁸ We thank Denis Matringe for his careful reading of this whole essay and for his valuable suggestions.