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. . . In South Asia

Comment on SAHLINS, Marshall. 2013. *What kinship is—and is not.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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Marshall Sahlins' *What kinship is—and is not* masterfully demonstrates, once again, the foundational and invaluable place of kinship within anthropological thought. But, for South Asianists looking for a recalibration of kinship in the sub-continent, the news is not so good. Apart from a passing reference to the Andaman Islanders (via a passage in Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Elementary structures of kinship*), just two works from South Asia find their way into the Sahlins' diptych.[1] This is not entirely an omission on Sahlins' part, for we need to acknowledge that certain pretheoretical commitments in the scholarship about contemporary South Asia have resulted in producing an ostensible absence of focus on kinship in its normative form. For a context that is home (or at least one of the early homes) to the "dividual," where all manner of exchange relations are undergoing violent transformations, and where new reproductive technologies have affected a vast number of family formations in ways distinct from similar interventions elsewhere, the thinness of a contemporary scholarly corpus on kinship in India is therefore curious. Equally, as alerted by Andrew Shryock (this volume), summative accounts, such as Sahlins', often cast themselves at a distance in and through the state, capital, and religion in both familiar and new ways.[2] These two analytical impasses (South Asianist and anthropological) are not the same, but are, in fact, co-constitutive—and are, perhaps, different responses to the same question, as I will explain below. Sahlins' book provides a useful prompt to reflect on both these hesitations, but also helps us to understand what a (renewed) interest in South Asian kinship might bring to anthropology.

1. The first is Louis Dumont (1980) and the second—and the only substantive reference—is to Cecilia Busby's (1997a; 1997b) luminous essays on Dravidian kinship.

2. For example, Franklin and McKinnon (2001) and Godelier (2011).

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Dispersed kinship

Of late, discussions of love and desire (or their deficit), within and outside the folds of the family, as well as ideas and ideals of intimacy, sexuality, and conjugality have replaced the scrutiny of the march of hypergamy, the shifting contours of the descent group, and the escalating exchanges that occur at marriage, to say nothing of the steadfast immanence of the ideology of purity and pollution in South Asia. This is not to say that South Asianist scholarship has abandoned the study of kinship. In fact, the documentation of change and transformation has been the mainstay of the sociology and anthropology of contemporary India, the reasons for which merit a separate paper.[3] Some of the more spectacular and enduring changes in the composition of households and families, if not kinship structures (per se) in recent times, have been the widespread increase in the disappearing girl-child and the attendant ready availability of a wide range of reproductive technologies. Scholars such as Ravinder Kaur have meticulously documented the effects of the declining sex ration in India on the gendered subject.[4] Although this body of work is invaluable, it is ultimately concerned with sociological questions. For example, we now know from this work that due to the missing girl-child in north India, women are now being brought in as brides from as far as Assam and even Bangladesh, and can be read as part of the ongoing transformations in the descent group. However, in a number of these cases, these women are abducted or trafficked specifically for the purposes of producing a male child for the abductor household and are not mothers—let alone wives or incoming women, in any preexisting kinship sense.[5] Thus, while we have a fine-grained understanding of the relationship between poverty, migration, and gender as a result of this work, any shifts in ideals of descent, alliance, purity, and pollution still require further attention.

Thus, there seems to be a reticence to attend to structural underpinnings of modes of relatedness within South Asianist anthropology. However, this reticence is neither neglect nor an outcome of the uneven temptations offered by the poiesis of relationships as compared to the dense grammar of kinship. Rather, this hesitation stems from the particular conception of the relational subject of kinship that it shares with Marshall Sahlins, one in which dividuality is seen as an enunciation of premodern subjectivity (Sahlins 2013: 25). Anthropologists of contemporary South

3. One of the main reasons for the preoccupation with change has to do with the politics of knowledge production adopted by South Asianists, which is premised on the falsification of the timelessness of Indian society and, by extension, the atemporality characteristic of earlier anthropological and ethnographic imaginations. A second reason, curiously, finds resonance with the mission of early anthropology, which concerns itself with documenting practices for posterity, as evidence collected in anticipation of their imminent or potential disappearance.

4. See, for example, Kaur (2004, 2008).

5. The original mapping of Indian kinship systems and practices, including the documentation of the limits of endogamous groups in the last century, was as much a product of early ethnological curiosity as it was part of bolstering the knowledge apparatus of the colonial state with a view to regulating native populations and practices (Veena Das, personal communication). A century later, the two cannot be said to any further apart than they were to begin with.

Asia have thus given us valuable accounts of personhood, the transformations of kinship roles and positions, and of the agentive subject of love, desire, and emancipation (see, for example, Alter 1994; Raheja and Gold 1994; Uberoi 2006).[6] At the same time, because dividuality is prejudged to index premodernity, it is deemed as ethnographically inaccessible at best—or, then, politically dangerous at worst.

It remains unclear why, for Sahlins, the dividual is premodern. But the echo of this pretheoretical commitment can be sensed in the configuration of relationality in kinship in (and of) contemporary India, as an inquiry into "backwardness [comprising of] superstitions, taboos, obscure ideas of bygone centuries [that] stand in the way of progress [and are] disruptive to the national cause" (Cohen 2007, quoted in Copeman and Reddy 2012: 63).[7] The premodernity of dividuality is indexed against the modernity of the kinship subject as ushered in and through the Indian Constitution, especially through the Hindu Marriage Act and the Hindu Succession Acts of 1955 and 1956, respectively. In a recent paper on the tussle between caste councils and state law on marriage rules, I have shown how kinship practices and commitments that do not conform to their legal counterparts are not only condemned as retrogressive in popular opinion, but are also approached as thus in scholarly debates (Kapila forthcoming).[8] This is not surprising, for as Marilyn Strathern reminds us, "the more we give legal certainty (to social parenthood), the more we cut from under our feet assumptions about the intrinsic nature of relationships themselves" (Strathern 1992: 30). The appropriate and proper subject of contemporary Indian kinship has come to be the transformations in relationships and roles brought about through capital, the state, and empire as handmaidens of modernity. A simultaneous, if not immediate, demand for commensurability is therefore placed on any ethnography that remains outside of the narratives of state, capital, or empire.[9] It is because of this imperative that kinship finds itself studied in dispersed sites, often figuring in the background and providing ethnographic nuance to the foregrounded matter at hand, be it of labor, law, violence, statecraft, health, migration, art, popular culture, etc.[10]

The strongest refutation of the premodernity of the dividual is doubtlessly Strathern's work on new reproductive technologies (see especially Strathern 1992: 90–116). Unlike other contexts, the spurt in new reproductive technologies (NRT) in India did not quite make for the burgeoning of new kinship studies. This is all

6. These are indicative references since the list is extensive and impossible to cite in its full form.

7. Lawrence Cohen is writing about the class-contingent violence against homosexuality in India.

8. See Beteille (1991) on this deep entanglement of anthropological scholarship with nation-statism in India.

9. An apposite example of this is the recent paper by Chris Gregory (2011). Gregory presents a nuanced account of touch in configuring and articulating mutuality of being in Bastar. It is difficult to read this, however, without noticing the gap between the intricacies of touching and kissing in Bastar and the violence of untouchability.

10. See, for example, Birla 2010; Chatterjee 1998; Das 2007; Donner 2008; Kaur 2004; Pinto 2011; Ramaswamy 2010; Uberoi 2006.

the more significant given that a very significant proportion of new family formations in are directly touched by NRT through the widespread use of amniocentesis and the resultant high rates of female foeticide. Technology in contemporary India has, by and large, assisted the production of existing ideals of family (heteronormative and male-child focused) rather than making space for the normalization of non-modular families. Furthermore, as mentioned in the preceding discussion of the emerging practice of non-surrogate contractual child-birth in north India, new techniques of family formations here demonstrate that the "facts of bi-presence" (Sahlins 2013: 33) can be rearranged to project a sinjularity of the male presence. This reduction of bi-presence to singularity finds resonance in the structures of mutuality underpinning commercial surrogacy—the other most visible development in contemporary South Asian kinship in recent times (see Pande 2009). While foeticide and commercial surrogacy belong to different registers of death and birth, ironically they have produced the same effect on the contours of "mutuality of being," in that both foeticide and commercial surrogacy prohibit the acknowledgment of relatedness. One (surrogacy) does so in life, and the other (foeticide) articulates it through death. Where female foeticide has been deployed to readicate the existence of female relatives across a severalty of generations and degrees (as daughter, sister, niece, granddaughter), commercial surrogacy erases the acknowledgment of relatedness that is distributed across a severalty of social divides (of class, caste, race, nationality). If, in Euro-America, technologically assisted mutuality emerged from an exploitation of the reproductive potential, then the opposite seems to be true for its hitherto Indian career, where it has primarily been unleashed to curtail possibilities and reduce potential forms of kin (sisters, classificatory mothers).

Many years ago, Arjun Appadurai (1986) alerted us to why certain kinds of anthropological ideas become fixed to particular places. Given the primacy of hierarchy and inequality underpinning social formations in India, in some ways, therefore, it is not surprising that sociological preoccupations and agentive transformations dominate the study of relatedness. In such a context, co-presence and mutuality can hardly become an obvious starting point or a conceptual anchor. Even new technologies further entrench existing hierarchies or create new ones. So if we are to heed to Sahlins' call to universalize the concept of mutuality (cf. Pina-Cabral 2013: 263), then we need to go beyond the foundational capacities of sharing and focus equally on the limits of mutuality that are made visible in the routine and routinized denial, prohibition, and elimination of real and potential relations. In this regard, contemporary Indian kinship ideas and practices may well be a good starting point. We may also need to pay more attention to why the Maori, quoted by Sahlins (2013: 57), say they want to be like the stars so that they can "effectively live alone and forever."

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