

**Introduction**  
**The Paradoxes of Power and Community:**  
**Women's Oral Traditions and the Uses of Ethnography**

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The essays in this volume address theoretical and ethnographic issues concerning oral traditions and women's speech in diverse South Asian communities in northern and southern India and in Nepal, and situated in Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist milieus.<sup>1</sup> Our analyses are brought to bear upon a complex set of questions concerning the relation between women's speech and those cultural traditions and social practices that partly structure their lives. The papers are grounded, first, in an awareness of the colonial, postcolonial, and academic textualizations that so frequently have prevented women's speech from being heard or their silences understood; we are aware that our position as scholars working in the Western academy constricts and compromises our efforts at interpretation, perhaps in more ways than we can yet bring to awareness, yet we write with the conviction that ethnography is nonetheless a possible and indeed critically important undertaking. And secondly, we write with an awareness that the relationship between women's speech, on the one hand, and those more widely known, more audible, and perhaps more pervasive South Asian

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<sup>1</sup> These essays are dedicated to McKim Marriott, who has taught so many of us so much about the paradoxes of cultural production in South Asia, and to the memory of A. K. Ramanujan. I hope that my colleagues John M. Ingham and David Lipset will recognize in this introduction (and not wish to disown) the many ways they have contributed over the years to my thinking about cultural dialogue and the possibility of community, in moments of agreement and of disagreement, theoretically and practically. Early drafts of the papers here (with the exception of Sarah Lamb's) were originally presented at a conference at the University of Minnesota, April 20-22, 1991. Other papers, which contributed much to our thinking but could not be included here, were presented by Prabhakara Jha, Frederique Marglin, Mrinalini Sinha, Margaret Trawick, Sylvia Vatuk, and Susan Wadley. The conference was made possible by support from the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota and by a College of Liberal Arts Scholarly Events Fund Grant.

social and cultural conventions that insist that women be controlled and subordinate, on the other, is seldom a simple or unambiguous one.

We might, with A. K. Ramanujan, express this differently by saying that women's oral traditions, like those of men and like South Asian expressive genres more generally, "look like single entities, like neat little tents, only from a distance" (1989:189). Ramanujan himself and the other authors of the papers presented here try to think seriously about this issue, to think through the ethnographic and theoretical difficulties of considering women's speech as critically responding to dominant conventions, without reducing "resistance" to a simple or unequivocally oppositional voice, and without lapsing into a language that would suggest a homogeneity that women's speech does not possess, or an uncrossable boundary between the speech of men and women. We suggest here only some of the possible ways that the oral traditions of South Asian men and women respond critically to one another, mirror one another, comment ironically upon one another, replicate one another, meld sympathetically with one another, or move to subsume or silence one another, while considering always the relations of power as well as community that frame each performance, each act of speaking.

### **Oral traditions and the possibility of ethnography**

In the 1910 volume of *The Indian Antiquary* William Crooke, a well-known administrator and folklorist in colonial India, published a collection of fifty-six "Religious Songs from Northern India," with transliterated Hindi texts and English translations. Song number forty-seven, said to have been sung by a Brahman woman of the village of Chhawara Mau in District Farrukhabad, ends with the following lines:

*Dhan dhan bahuriyā kī bhāg to kokhī meñ lāl dhare.  
Dwāre to āye un ke damād; Rānī sakuch rahīñ.  
Ab kā, Rānī, sakuch kalī kī rītī yahī.*

Blessed is the mother who has children in her lap.  
At the door sons-in-law have arrived, and the chief housewife (Rani) grows  
sad (thinking that she would have to part with her daughters).  
Be not sad, Rani, this is the way of Kalyug (present [degenerate] age, that  
the mothers are deprived of their daughters at certain age).

However awkward we may judge Crooke's translation to be, we nonetheless can hear the poignancy of the woman's lament as daughters are sent off

with their husbands to an alien place, “this custom of a degenerate age” that looms so large in women’s everyday talk and oral traditions even today.

Justifications of the colonial project in India depended partly upon continual attempts to demonstrate that Indians unthinkingly submitted to the dictates of “tradition,” that they were reluctant “to change any custom” (Temple 1899) and were thus unfit to rule themselves. Such recourse to notions of the rigidity of custom had often to do with representations of Indian women, since this colonial legitimizing project depended upon assertions of the “barbarity” of Indian customs concerning widow-burning (Mani 1989) and widow-remarriage (Carroll 1989), of women’s unthinking submission to them, and of the confinement of women to the *zenānā*, the women’s quarter of the house, a confinement that produced, according to the administrator and folklorist R. C. Temple, “a comparatively low mental and moral condition” of Indian women (Temple 1899:21). Much of the work of nineteenth-century folklorists in South Asia was directed towards this end, of providing an authorizing narrative for colonial rule (Amin 1994; Raheja 1996, forthcoming), as they stressed Indians’ unthinking acquiescence to “custom.”

Now in the song from Farrukhabad that concludes with a lament about such a custom, we hear the voice of a woman speaking ironically of the practice of sending daughters away, while sons stay on in the parents’ place. Such a reading, a reading that allows for an ironic apperception of “custom,” would, however, go against the grain of colonial representations of Indians’ adherence to “tradition” and of women’s passive capitulation to it, and so Crooke must find a way, as he writes down this song, of taming its recalcitrance and negating its significance. As in other cases in which he must disarm Indian speech that undermines colonial views of the rigidity and inviolability of caste customs, Crooke invokes the notion of “survivals” to interpret the lines of the song.<sup>2</sup> He introduces it by saying that “this song indicates the truth of the statement that among the ancient Hindus there was no dislike to the birth of daughters, such as now exists” (338). Crooke thus dismisses the contemporary salience of the lament; since women are capable only of enacting “custom,” and since no woman (or man) could conceivably be critical of “tradition,” he must reckon the song itself to be a survival, a harmless vestige of an earlier age. No woman he saw before him could be credited with sorrow at the departure of her daughter, or of a critique of custom. Crooke erases the connection between the song and the world of Chhawara Mau, the world the singer knew, and he cannot discern in her voice any power to affect that world, or be affected by it.

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<sup>2</sup> See also Raheja 1996:499-500.

Crooke's appraisal of the song also provides evidence of some of the layers of inscription and interpretation that intervene between our reading of the song and the women who sang it almost ninety years ago. He tells us that the song was recorded by the headmaster of the village school, and he writes that his characterization of the Brahman woman's song is based on a remark made by him. A woman's song that would generally not be sung in the presence of men has thus been sung or recited for the male headmaster, so that it could be presented as a piece of "folklore" to the colonial administrator. And Crooke's interpretation comes at least partly from that Indian man; Indian women were not asked to explicate their own songs and narratives.<sup>3</sup>

But despite the distance between us and the Brahman woman, and despite the colonial attempt to deform the woman's speech by removing it from the world of Chhawara Mau and speaking of it as a mere survival of an earlier time when daughters were cared for and "custom" not so entrenched, the intensity of the woman's lament and her critique of the "custom of a degenerate age" can still be apprehended, as we read the words the headmaster set down. The words *kalī kī rītī yahī* are too eloquent and too insistent to be obliterated entirely by those colonial interpretations and by our own inability to imagine the world that woman inhabited. And thus, although our apprehension of the words of contemporary Indian women may be similarly occluded, the power of those words in everyday life, and their ability to seep through the encrusted colonial and postcolonial interpretations, provides a justification for an ethnographic undertaking, that always difficult and hazardous task of listening and interpreting and writing.<sup>4</sup>

Although the residues of those colonial attempts to construct the South Asian woman as passive and silently submissive to the dictates of "tradition" are still with us, and although attempts were made by late nineteenth and early twentieth century Indian reformers to silence the often bawdy contestatory oral traditions of Indian women (Banerjee 1989; Kumar 1991), the power of contemporary South Asian women's songs and stories,

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<sup>3</sup> See Raheja and Gold 1994:14 and Raheja 1995 for further discussion of the ways that women's oral traditions were framed by colonial accounts.

<sup>4</sup> Sherry Ortner has recently written that "the ethnographic stance holds that ethnography is never impossible" because, despite the powerful political and textual domination to which they are subjected, the voices and perspectives of those we write about push back against the mold of our texts (1995:188-89).

and the persistent critiques of “custom” they often contain, are by now well-documented.<sup>5</sup>

Our readings of the songs South Asian women sing today, of the stories they tell and of the memories they narrate to us, are of course conditioned by our own positionings, and by the distance between ourselves and the women whose speech we record. Writing down the words of others, and attempting thereby to convey something of the tenor of their lives and the power relations in which those lives are led, is a project always fraught with difficulties both epistemological and political. To whom do we choose to listen? Why do we write down some words and not others? How can we extract a “text” from the situation in which the words were uttered and not obscure the particular and perhaps shifting purposes of the speaker and thus the meaning of the words themselves? How can we relate the stories of pain and of contestation that women’s words sometimes evince without then lapsing into the colonial and postcolonial rhetorics that see Indian women as powerless “victims” of an oppressive “tradition”? Is it possible for us to listen to these words today, to interpret them in ways that are not tied, inextricably and hopelessly, to the colonial interpretations that have so shaped the histories of anthropology and of folklore? How can we understand women’s complex perspectives on such “customs,” and how can we think about their possible resistance to them without regarding the social world they inhabit as entirely fractured and splintered by those contending voices? How can we understand the differences in the speech of women and men without reifying and essentializing those differences? These have been for us the most compelling questions as we set about the task of trying to make sense of the words that women spoke to us and of the oral traditions they performed in our presence.

### **Oral traditions, gender, and the performance of cultural critique: beyond binarisms**

Oral narratives, whether song, poetry, story, proverb, or autobiographical narrative, are always situated communicative practices that may serve to reproduce a social order, to critique and undermine it, or something in between (Bauman and Briggs 1990). Anthropological and folkloristic work on women’s oral traditions in India and elsewhere has over the past ten years or so begun to demonstrate that gender ideologies

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<sup>5</sup> E.g., Flueckiger 1996; Grima 1991; Holland and Skinner 1995; Narayan 1986; Raheja and Gold 1994; Oldenburg 1991; Trawick 1986, 1988, 1991.

and kinship practices are almost always subject to such performed critiques. Initially, the task seemed simply twofold: first, to discern the gendered nature of oral traditions (and of expressive possibilities more generally), to demonstrate the diversity of “tradition” and the fact that oral performances were not illustrative of a homogeneous “native mind” but instead were intimately tied to the social positionings (gender, class, caste, and so forth) of those who spoke or sung them; and second, to understand that these performances do not simply reflect a previously existing and congealed social reality, but instead constantly create or recreate, authorize or undermine the social practices and cultural forms of the everyday world of singers and speakers (Gal 1991; Sherzer 1987). We began to see then that we could not understand oral traditions without grasping the power relationships that informed the lives of the tellers and singers, and that songs and stories might either uphold or challenge the ideologies that sustained those relations of power. We could no longer accept the decontextualizing and depoliticizing of folklore that so characterized the interpretive strategies of Crooke and so many others like him.

And we began then to speak of South Asian women’s spoken and sung resistance to the ideologies of gender and kinship that circumscribed their lives. The idea of resistance has been an enticing one to anthropologists and folklorists: it provided us with one kind of language with which to think about the diversity of narrative traditions within a folklore community; it allowed us to think about relations of power and challenges posed to them in “traditional” expressive forms; it allowed us to begin to counter the colonial and postcolonial representations of the silence and the passivity of Indian women; and it provided one kind of framework for thinking about the dynamic relationship between narrative texts and social life, about the fact that such texts do not simply mirror already given social differentiations and hierarchies of power, but may in fact come to constitute or reconstitute them. Yet some difficulties present themselves when we consider how this idea has shaped interpretations of gender and community.

Some of the most influential studies of resistance were concerned with struggles between oppressed groups and more or less external sources of domination, especially the state and state capitalism (Scott 1985, 1990) and, in South Asia, colonial governments and local elites whose power had been buttressed by colonial rule.<sup>6</sup> Because of the interest in understanding the peasant’s awareness of his social world, there has been in this work

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the work of the Subaltern Studies scholars, as illustrated by Bhadra 1985; Guha 1982, 1983; Hardiman 1984.

some attention paid to critical voices evident in the folklore that has been preserved from the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> But this focus on external domination and collective responses to it has meant that there has been little attention to challenges to “community consciousness” (Hardiman 1992) from within. For example, in the work of the Subaltern Studies scholars there have been few studies of women’s challenges to the patriarchal hierarchies that were so frequently reinforced and rigidified by colonial rule,<sup>8</sup> apart from Guha’s reading (1987) of the speech of women preserved in fragments of judicial records concerning a death brought about by abortion. Although Hardiman, for example, points out that there is often a tension between community-based solidarities and internal cleavages based on gender, caste, class, religion, age, and so forth, the latter most often tend to recede into the background as communal resistance to colonial rule or to landlords outside of the immediate peasant community moves to the center of the analyses.<sup>9</sup> He concludes that “community-based resistance does not therefore preclude the self-assertion of subordinate groups within the community” (1992:10).

Conversely, in Guha’s reading of strategies of resistance to those patriarchal practices that were often reinforced by colonial policy, women’s muted but critical speech is read only in terms of an entirely cohesive solidarity of women, utterly opposed to a solidarity of men, a unified female voice opposed to an equally unified male voice.<sup>10</sup> And in studies of women’s oral traditions more generally, it is those challenges to internal hierarchies and the challenges to shared discursive forms that come most often to the fore, as their always dialogic relationship with ideas of community drop out of view. Thus, while studies of resistance such as those of the Subaltern Studies scholars often lose sight of the fractures in

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<sup>7</sup> E.g., Arnold 1984; Guha 1983. But there has been in this work, as Ortner (1995:180-81) points out, insufficiently detailed textual analyses of the words peasants spoke and of the cultural texts that inform their world.

<sup>8</sup> On the ways that colonial rule, despite its insistence on the “reform” of practices seen as oppressive to women, rigidified “custom” and worked to the disadvantage of women, see for example Chowdhry 1994.

<sup>9</sup> Ann Gold has elsewhere made a related point: not only have women’s modes of resistance been given less attention than male subaltern struggles in this literature, but it seems that the rituals and expressive forms in which male subalterns enact and give voice to political struggle have been subject to far fewer dismissive gestures, in academic writing, than have women’s speech and women’s ritual (forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> I have discussed Guha’s argument at some length in my article in this volume.

collective identities that open up at gendered sites, feminist scholars and scholars of women's oral traditions often lose sight of the local solidarities of kinship and community without which human life is impossible. But in such internal contestations, as Hardiman himself points out (1992:10), the discursive struggle is over the definition of the nature of the community itself. Such struggles over the definition of community, and the strategies through which both resistance to internal hierarchies and the bonds of community can be maintained, need to be pulled to the center of our analyses of oral traditions.

It now seems clear that we need to move beyond dichotomous modes of analysis, and beyond that earlier twofold task of examining the gendered aspects of oral traditions and the ways in which such traditions are at least partly constitutive of the social world in which they occur. The challenge now, it seems, is to keep in simultaneous analytical and ethnographic view those two kinds of identities and two kinds of solidarities: solidarities that find their justification in reference to a community of kinship ties and local ties, and the struggles within such communities that find their justification in reference to the claims of those who discover that that larger solidarity is all too often predicated upon their own disadvantaging. How might analyses of the politics of women's speech come to terms with this tension? How might women themselves, and men as well, take a stand with respect to that tension in their songs and oral narratives? And how might we begin to interpret these multiple solidarities and overlapping ties without lapsing into a rhetoric that speaks, simplistically, only of women's complicity with the community hierarchies that seem so often to prevail?

Women's speech and women's oral traditions have often been dismissed as powerless and ineffective, partly because the critiques they pose seem so seldom to entail a thorough and unambiguous opposition to male discourse and practice and, in South Asia, because they may appear so seldom to define a solidarity of women opposed to male solidarities. But the paradox of women's critical voices coexisting with a politics among women ought not to confound us, but rather make us more aware of the multiple projects in which women must engage during their daily lives and the multiple hierarchies with which they must contend. The power of women's speech and the spoken and sung critiques that we have heard in it, and their value to South Asian women themselves, might in fact come precisely from their indeterminacy, from their ambiguities and complexities and shifting purposes. It may come from the oscillating boundaries of the collectivities that women strategically and selectively define and value in their oral traditions. What looks to some observers like inconsistency and even co-optation may in fact be strategic deployments of different



relationships that advance a woman's interests in different ways at different times of her life, or when the configurations of power around her shift from day to day.

We look therefore, in the essays that follow, not at a monolithically defined "women's perspective" that is always unambiguously opposed to a dominant or male perspective; we do not dismiss women's speech when it appears to stress mutuality rather than opposition to male kinsmen; we do not dismiss as necessarily ineffective women's speech that stresses differences among women and the politics of women's relationships with one another. We have discerned that there is no unitary South Asian female voice, because women are always positioned by caste and class and age and experience, and we do not therefore dismiss as unimportant those resistant stances that are not predicated on a solidarity of women. Given the fact that the privileges of upper-caste and economically well off women are often predicated on the labor of other low-caste women (Kapadia 1995; Wadley 1994), we recognize that "resistance" cannot everywhere be the same for South Asian women, and that their expressive forms might therefore imagine and critique gender hierarchies somewhat differently. We recognize that South Asian women, as women elsewhere, are engaged in multiple projects and that these projects may collide with one another or smoothly dovetail, and thus women's resistance may at times appear as ambivalent and ambiguous, and too complex to easily classify by the terms of Western social science.<sup>11</sup> And we recognize too that an apprehension of the realities of power does not mean that we can acknowledge only a singleminded oppositional stance on the one hand, or a capitulation to power on the other, in the words women speak to us and in our hearing (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:45). By not expecting that women either unthinkingly submit to or unambiguously oppose male projects and the ethos of patrilineal kinship (and not devaluing their always complex intentions), and by not expecting that women must speak in a single voice, we think that we are able to more adequately recognize them as authors of their own complexly multiple projects and strategic interventions, projects that are often imagined and evoked in the stories they tell and the songs they sing.

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<sup>11</sup> See Ortner 1995:190-91. Pandey has made a similar observation with respect to the consciousness of low-caste Muslim weavers in nineteenth-century India (1984:269).

**Alternative solidarities and dialogues across forms of local difference**

As Kathryn March points out in this volume, we have had a double purpose in writing the essays presented here: “to gain knowledge of meanings generated across the profound chasms of difference between ourselves and the voices we solicit in the anthropological field, and to discern what possibilities exist for dialogue across forms of local difference” within the communities we have studied. We are interested primarily in the ways that women’s speech stakes out its encounters with authoritative representations of gender, kinship, sexuality, and authority. What then have we found to be the sources of the complexities of those encounters ?

*Women speak in many voices*

In “The Flowering Tree: A Woman’s Tale,” A. K. Ramanujan translates one of many South Asian oral narratives in which a woman’s agency is dependent upon her capacity for speech and on her ability to ensure that her words will be heard; he suggests some of the ways that women’s tales may differ from those told by and about men in their insistence on the importance of speech. But the paradox of a stress on gender and positionality, and on what Ramanujan calls the universe of women’s discourse, is that it can deprive our interlocutors of that agency so much stressed in the stories themselves. It has this effect if we come to imagine that “women’s speech” is a whole and discrete and homogeneous universe, in which individual creativity or complex and shifting and ambiguous perspectives are not to be found.

South Asian women are of course multiply positioned—by caste and class, by religious affiliation, by individual circumstances, by age, and by their multiple and shifting locations within webs of kinship connections. While we have just begun to understand how women’s expressive traditions and everyday talk in South Asia are inflected by caste and class differences (the work of Margaret Trawick and Joyce Flueckiger being perhaps the most interesting to date on this problem), we are in these essays primarily interested in the ways that oral traditions come to be nuanced and inflected by those positionings that change through one woman’s lifetime, or shift from moment to moment as she foregrounds one kinship positioning (that of wife, say, or sister or daughter) or one set of experiences or intentions over another.

In “Singing of Separation: Women’s Voices in and about Kangra Songs,” Kirin Narayan has written of the tendency to think of expressive forms as somehow providing an understanding of the subjectivity of the members of the culture in which they are found, or, if such a monolithic conceptualization has been critiqued in favor of an emphasis on performance and positionality, of the subjectivity of some given subgroup within the culture. Yet as she demonstrates, an awareness of women’s reflexive commentaries on their own oral texts reveals that although women’s songs may be collectively performed, their meanings are never fixed and uniform but rather complex, multifarious, and often ambiguous. Each song, each set of images or thematic elements, is situated “at the intersection between collective symbolic forms and individual subjectivities,” and women draw upon and interpret these meanings selectively and strategically in relation to their own unique experiences, memories, and aesthetic pleasures.

While Narayan focuses on individual experiences that cause songs to lodge differently in the hearts and minds of particular women and to have different emotional resonances for them, Raheja’s paper in this volume stresses the fact that women’s songs from northwestern Uttar Pradesh consistently critique the male-oriented solidarities so valued in local ideologies of patrilineal kinship, and that they do so not from a unified female position but from the constantly shifting and often contradictory perspectives of daughter, sister, or wife. Thus, although women’s singing groups almost always include women who have married into the village as wives, others who have returned from their marital homes to visit their natal kin, young unmarried girls, newly married brides, and older mothers-in-law alike, each song they sing together speaks of the very different and often contradictory longings of a sister or a wife. A sister hopes that her brother will not forget her as she goes away to her husband’s place and as he must attend to the demands of his wife, while a wife longs for intimacy with her husband and castigates him, and often his mother and sisters as well, if he attaches too much importance to ties to them or to his brothers. In their oral traditions women thus stake out claims to two different and often contradictory kinds of solidarities, that between brother and sister and that between husband and wife. Disparate though the two alternative solidarities may be, the valuation of either one goes against the grain of patrilineal ideology, with its stress on the unity of male patrikin and the subordination of the marital bond and women’s emotional needs to its demands. Thus women’s oral traditions articulate a critical perspective, though not necessarily in terms of a female solidarity opposed to a solidarity of men, and not in terms of a unified and homogeneous female

voice. As the paper points out, a woman may rely upon the alternative solidarities celebrated in oral traditions in moments of crisis: she may invoke the solidarity of brother and sister if she is mistreated or rejected by her husband and his kin, or she may insist upon the importance of the *joṛā*, the husband-wife “pair,” to diminish the isolation, dependency, and subordination she may experience in her conjugal place. That such strategizing must often take place in opposition to other women is indeed an unfortunate consequence of the more audible and more publicly proclaimed requirements of patrilineal kinship in the region; but the presence of this evidence of a politics among women ought not lead us to dismiss this very real struggle against the burdens imposed by such kinship conventions as wholly ineffective, wholly self-defeating.

Like Narayan, Sarah Lamb writes of the way that recurring narrative themes resonate with the ambiguities of particular women’s life experiences. She focuses her investigation on the personal narratives women told to her and to other women, in interviews and in the flow of everyday conversations, as they scrutinized and critiqued the social worlds they inhabit. “The Beggared Mother: Older Women’s Narratives in West Bengal” marks an advance in our understanding of gender and South Asian oral traditions in its focus on the voices and perspectives of older women, and on the tales of kinship reciprocities and their waning that appear over and over again in the stories they tell. In the *vratakathā* ritual narratives typically read and recited by young married women for the protection of their husbands and their children, older women are viewed as commanding respect and deference; they are said to be “like deities” and to be owed unending devotion and support in return for the loving care they had lavished on their children. But Lamb tells us that older women take little interest in these “official” religious narratives; when they tell their own stories in courtyards and village lanes, it is the realities of widowhood and isolation and the failure of just that sort of family reciprocity that come to the fore. A woman goes away from her natal kin at her marriage, her daughter goes away at her own, and a husband may shun her or die, leaving her as a widow. Only a son, who comes from a woman’s own body and does not go away, can create an enduring identity. And so when the obligations of that bond are forgotten or made subsidiary to the son’s ties to his wife, a woman feels impoverished indeed. Here too then we do not hear a generic female voice, or a voice that speaks of women’s solidarity against an oppressive and wholly male world. Yet the narratives recited by elderly Bengali women are poignantly critical of the contradictions and economic and emotional vulnerabilities most women experience as they move from

natal place to conjugal place, and from young motherhood to old age and, often, widowhood.

Thus, although the papers in this volume cannot attend to all of the many ways in which women's speech is grounded in specific rather than generically female experiences, they do suggest some ways of thinking about issues of agency and critical awareness, as women strategically invoke different interpretations of marital relations, different solidarities, and different images of kinship reciprocities in their everyday struggles for dignity and for survival.

### *The Indeterminacy of Meaning*

How can a collectively performed song or story speak to a woman's particular predicaments, experiences, and memories? Working in Tamil Nadu, Margaret Trawick (1986, 1988) has written of individually composed songs that through eloquent poetic imagery refer explicitly to the hardships and deprivations the singer has had to bear in her own life. Such individual women's songs have seldom been documented for any other part of South Asia. Yet women respond individually to the collectively performed songs and narratives: a woman who has lost a brother may feel overwhelmed at hearing a wedding song that speaks of a brother's sadness as his sister goes away; a woman who has been abandoned or scorned by her husband may well feel a particular poignancy when she sings of a husband's "foreignness." Several of the papers in this volume address the question of how individual meaning is made from these collective oral performances or shared discursive forms, and in so doing illustrate the multiplicity of meanings that pervade each image or theme in women's oral traditions.

The older Bengali women who spoke of their own life stories with Sarah Lamb frequently used the image of the elderly impoverished beggar in their narratives. Some of these women, whose relatives could not provide for them, did indeed beg in order to eat. But many others made use of the image of beggary to speak, poetically, of other things. "Even if not literally beggared," Lamb writes, "these women narrate circumstances in their own lives that make them, in significant respects, like beggars. The theme of the mother as beggar works here . . . as a polyvalent metaphor conveying a loss of love, vulnerability to poverty, and the ephemeral character of a woman's identity over the life course." And the image of the beggared mother speaks also to the vicissitudes of a woman's life in "modern society" (*adhunik samāj*), when pursuing a job and an independent life in the city may, for a son, take precedence over obligations to his kin.

Similarly, Narayan tells us that the theme of male absence, a common one in Kangra oral traditions as well as those of north India more generally, sometimes, for the women who sing the genre called *pakharu*, refers quite literally to enforced separation from one's husband brought about by the economic necessity of migrant labor. But, she continues, the image of the absent husband does many other things as well. It can serve as a criticism of the men who stay at home and may not support their families adequately; it may serve as a commentary on the emotional distance and not just the geographical distance between men and women; and it may also serve as an indictment of the isolation and alienation a woman often experiences within her husband's extended family, an alienation that is only heightened when he goes away.<sup>12</sup> Or it can, according to Narayan, speak to the sorrow a woman experiences at the unfaithfulness or death of her husband. Thus the very traditional theme of separation, *virāha*, takes on many varied and often individual meanings, some of which are connected with enduring sorrows of being a woman, others with Pahari women's experiences concerning the demands of a market economy.

In Joyce Flueckiger's contribution, "There are Only Two Castes: Men and Women': Negotiating Gender as a Female Healer in South Asian Islam," we see that a woman's narratives may hold meanings for her audience that are different from her own. As the Muslim female healer called Amma constructs an account of her life and her role in the public domain, she has before her no model for female action to which she can connect her own authority and innovative practices; she thus sees her own life and accomplishments as lying outside of the boundaries and potentials of her gender. Yet as women hear her story, Flueckiger suggests, the boundaries of the existing repertoire of possible female stories expands, as the women themselves stress not Amma's uniqueness, but rather the possibility that any woman could do what she does with the proper literacy skills. A narrative that is not subversive at the outset, for the teller, takes on a different and somewhat more challenging meaning for those who listen to it. Again we see the impossibility of erecting a boundary between speech that is complicit with gender hegemonies and speech that subverts them, and we see too the ambiguities of any resistant stance.

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<sup>12</sup> This latter is a pervasive theme in women's songs from Uttar Pradesh as well, as described in Raheja and Gold 1994:121-48.

*Dialogue and disjunction: the paradoxes of gender and community in South Asian oral traditions*

An awareness of disjunction and difference in oral traditions and in the politics of everyday life, as men and women evince their often distinct understanding of the worlds, ought not to blind us to the ways that human beings nonetheless also struggle to maintain some sense of the whole, some way of holding on to those often tenuous bonds of intimacy and communal life with one another, across the differences. This problem—of simultaneously holding in view both power, positionality and difference on the one hand, and culture, community and a sense of the whole on the other—seems to me to be a central theoretical dilemma across the disciplines. In the ethnographic settings here, for example, women speak not just as women, but as members of a community in which solidarities of many kinds—of husband and wife, of a mother with her children, of women, of members of one caste, and of groups of kinsmen of many and various sorts—may all come into play as songs are sung and stories told, as conversations take place, as work is done and the myriad exchange relationships in which people are involved unfold. That sense of community, of bonds of intimacy across difference, of course comes into play when communities are confronted by others who threaten their identities, their livelihoods, and their security, but they also come into play with the perception of crisscrossing bonds of loyalty, affection, and interdependence. It is just this complexity of relationship, of loyalties and affections, and all of the ambivalences and ambiguities with which they are attended, that necessitates the writing of a detailed ethnography of women's speech, if we are to understand the ways in which women's oral traditions come variously to grips with ideologies of domination. And men speak not just as men, from impermeably gendered masculine subjectivities, but from their own particular positionalities, sometimes silencing or overpowering women's speech to be sure, but sometimes seeking to create mutuality or to understand the hardships of a woman's life, as is particularly evident in March's ethnography from Nepal. Elucidating these paradoxes of disjunction and community is an ethnographic as well as a theoretical problem, since it is usually only in the micropolitics of daily life that such complex and contextually shifting subjectivities might become evident, and their traces discerned in everyday talk and in the performance of oral traditions.

To say this is not in any way to minimize the existence of relations of power, or to minimize women's resistance to them. It is, to be sure, a hallmark of much colonial and orientalist rhetoric to imagine that women in

India, Africa, and elsewhere are only victims of their men, to see the colonial project as one entailing the “saving of brown women from brown men,” as Gayatri Spivak has put it (1985:121). And so any project that sees itself as seeking to undermine orientalist representations insofar as gender is concerned may find it important to think critically about any theoretical stance that requires it to see women’s interests as always and everywhere opposed to those of men, or to regard men as always and everywhere acting only to wield power over women.

Colonial studies of oral traditions in India, involved as they were in the effort to provide a justification for the “reform” of Indian custom, often portrayed men’s interests and perspectives as altogether different from those of women. Sir Alexander Cunningham, for example, in his *Report of a Tour in the Punjab*, provided the Hindi text and English translation of a song for the deity Gugga. He had collected the song in the town of Sirsawa, just twenty miles or so from the village of Pahansu, in which I recorded most of the songs I write about in my essay for this volume. Sirsawa was said to be the birthplace of Bachal Rani, the mother of Gugga, and the song tells of his mother and the birth. It ends with a comment on those who are awake as Gugga is born in the middle of the night:

In the city of the Raja, who sleepeth, who waketh?  
Awake are the women grinding the weary mill!  
Awake are old women, and women labouring with child!

Cunningham then goes on to comment on the authorship of the song: “The last lines afford a most convincing proof that this song was the composition of women. No man, and certainly no Hindu man, would have thought of the weary lot of the three classes of women who alone of all the Raja’s subjects could not sleep on such a happy occasion.”

Although I see no reason to doubt that this song is indeed a woman’s song, in asserting that “no Hindu man” would be capable of imagining the hardships of women, Cunningham drew the seemingly inevitable colonial conclusion concerning Hindu men’s victimization of women and thus the necessity of colonial intervention in Indian domestic life.<sup>13</sup>

In Raheja’s ethnographic interpretation of men’s and women’s songs from northern India, it is indeed the disjunction between the gendered

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<sup>13</sup> For some representative discussions of such colonial interventions in the area of inheritance law, see Carroll 1989, Chowdhry 1994, and Viswanathan 1995; in the area of criminal law and the colonial rigidification of gender hierarchies, see Guha 1987 and Singha 1996.



perspectives that comes most to the fore. And yet even there, in a discursive universe in which women speak of the limitations placed upon them by the norms of patrilineal kinship and men's traditions do not, there is always the recognition by women that men too may harbor feelings that are at odds with official ideologies, that they must act behind the scenes to circumvent them (see also Raheja and Gold 1994:55-56, 133-35).

Kathryn March's analysis of oral performances in a Tamang community of Nepal is particularly focused on the possibility that the "pain of separation" that women endure when they move at marriage from natal to conjugal kin is indeed imaginatively recognized in men's song performances. Unlike the situation in most South Asian Hindu communities, Tamang songs are not thought of as belonging exclusively to men or to women, and the images and points of view contained within them are thus accessible to both. And like Narayan and Lamb, March also suggests that the theme of separation, a theme that is ubiquitous in South Asian oral traditions, is one that can take on many meanings and significances. In this Buddhist community, she points out, the image of women's separation from their natal kin is invoked in song and narrative not so much to challenge the gendered arrangements that produce the pain of rupture as a central fact of women's lives and not of men's as to "call to mind the shared human embeddedness in a cycle of painful rebirths." And yet the element of critique, or at least the acknowledgment of the painful consequences of kinship ideologies, is never absent from the oral traditions and everyday talk both of women and of men.

Although March comments that the growing Hindu hegemony over Tamang Buddhists in Nepali society may mean that such expressions of mutuality in oral traditions and everyday life could diminish in favor of more hierarchical ones, it also seems clear that such dialogic constitution of male and female expressive forms often surfaces in Hindu oral traditions as well. In her analyses of songs and epics from a Rajasthani folklore community, Ann Gold argues that there is a difference between attitudes exhibited in public performance contexts, in which spousal intimacy and woman's forthright speech are discouraged and men must feign indifference to the "species of women," and those often in evidence in private settings, in which intense emotional engagement is often valued and women's voices need to be heard. Women's songs, Gold suggests, often comment on the ironies and the paradoxes surrounding the existence or at least the possibility of private spousal intimacy that is at odds with more public requirements. In examining spousal dialogues as they are rehearsed in both men's and women's folklore, Gold is able to explicate some of the ambiguities surrounding representations of women's forthright speech and

demanding voices. Women's folklore genres, writes Gold, "posit the legitimacy of female desires and place a strong positive value on their fulfillment." In men's genres, on the other hand, women demand and threaten, curse and beseech, yet their desires often go unfulfilled. Gold, however, argues that in the elaborate claims and counterclaims that are made by men and women in men's folklore, both men and women in the audience experience the tension between conflicting cultural logics and come to reflect upon the emotional costs of kinship practices, gender hierarchies, and religious ideologies. And if male prerogatives more often win out in men's oral traditions, audiences are at least reminded of the burdens that women, as well as men, must bear because of it.

We have come, then, a long way from Ranajit Guha's solidarity of women opposed to a solidarity of men, and a long way from thinking of "community" as if fractures within it could somehow be ignored or held in analytical abeyance. South Asian expressive forms give evidence neither of unambiguously bounded gendered perspectives nor of an undifferentiated "folk" tradition. They give evidence neither of women's unequivocal opposition to those ideologies of gender, kinship, and hierarchy that seem so very pervasive nor of their capitulation to them. Songs and narratives seem rather to posit a complexly figured and always shifting social reality, in which women readily see that their projects and their interests may sometimes be furthered by stressing gendered solidarities and at other times by forging ties with brothers and sons or demanding and valuing marital intimacy, often in ways that undermine the authority of "custom" but often, too, in ways that value the crisscrossing and sometimes shifting ties that constitute community over against the fragmentations and absences brought about by the demands of modernity or by exclusive solidarities.

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