

## Outspoken Women: Representations of Female Voices in a Rajasthani Folklore Community

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### Gender Roles in Oral Performances

The most superficial hearing of women's speech in Rajasthani oral performance traditions counters some prevailing gender stereotypes.<sup>1</sup> In these traditions we find neither the modesty and "embarrassment" (*lāj, śarm*) prescribed as appropriate, ornamental female behavior within the culture, nor the voicelessness and submissiveness depicted in many outsider views of South Asian women from orientalist to feminist.<sup>2</sup>

I lived in a single village in Rajasthan, North India, for almost two years, and I recorded Rajasthani women's songs on many and varied

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<sup>2</sup> See Chandra Mohanty's original, acute critique of Western feminist authors who construct "third world women" as a "homogeneous 'powerless' group often located as implicit *victims* of particular socioeconomic systems" (Mohanty 1991:57). See also Stephens 1989 and Visweswaran 1994 for further insights into problems and limitations within the prevailing scholarship on Indian women's powers and voices. For testimony to South Asian women's expressive oral performances as commentary, subversion, and resistance, see, among others: Narayana Rao 1991; Ramanujan 1991; Mukta 1994; Raheja and Gold 1994; Skinner, Holland, and Adhikari 1994; Raheja 1995; Holland and Skinner 1995; Narayan 1996. Substantial work exists on women's perspectives in oral traditions outside of South Asia; see especially Jordan and Kalčik, who suggest in their introduction to an anthology on women's folklore that "a thoughtful examination of women's culture" disproves the assumption that "women are necessarily powerless." They go on: "Despite male domination of one sort or another, many of the women studied here are very much in control of themselves and their worlds, and a sense of real power is communicated by their folklore" (1985:xii). See also Abu-Lughod 1986, 1990; Caraveli 1986; and Hollis, Pershing, and Young 1993.

occasions of combined worship, celebration, and pleasure.<sup>3</sup> These songs are inhabited by outspoken females who commonly address males directly, often making explicit demands upon them. Other folk performance genres from the same community, including women's stories and men's epic tales, contain frequent examples of bold female voices. The relationship between women's vocalicity in their daily intercourse and the ways in which oral traditions portray this vocalicity is a complex one—evidently neither pure reflection nor fantasy reversal. Under some circumstances of everyday life, the Rajasthani women I knew were as vocal and uninhibited as they were in songs; under others, they played their parts as icons of subordination. Trawick perfectly captures the baffled response of a Western observer: “The notion of the repressed and submissive Indian woman simply did not apply to the people among whom I lived—and yet in some ways it did” (1991:5).

This essay is about the meaning of women's bold speech in North Indian oral performances, and how this performed meaning reflects upon and contributes to the ways gender identities are constructed and negotiated in “real life.” I shall focus on depictions of wife-husband encounters for several reasons. First, there are plenty of them;<sup>4</sup> second, the undertaking of a cross-genre and cross-gender comparison is more effective when focused on a single relationship; third, the husband-wife relationship is arguably surrounded with the most intensely ambivalent emotions and contested control. Finally and most importantly, it is with spousal relationships that performance and behavior appear to diverge most radically.

While most of the examples I present include representations of male speech, my focus will be on women's voices. Women's songs sometimes allow husbands to respond and object to women's expressed desires; women's stories tend to show husbands as “yes-men” carrying out female commands. By contrast, epics performed by men show men as independent speakers—especially in domains that do not belong to women (the yogi's

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<sup>3</sup> Twenty-one months of research in Rajasthan in 1979-81 were supported by the American Institute of Indian Studies and the Social Science Research Council, and an additional six weeks in 1987 again by the AIIS. During both periods I was most pleasantly affiliated with Rupayan Sansthan (the Rajasthan Institute of Folklore) and benefited enormously from the wisdom of its director Komal Kothari.

<sup>4</sup> Although I have not attempted a statistical analysis, evidence from ample song collections—my own and that of Joseph Miller, who worked in the same village—indicates that husbands are the males most frequently addressed by female voices in oral traditions, followed—in no particular order—by brothers, in-laws, and deities.

retreat, the battle expedition). In relation to wives, however, although men usually win the arguments, female speeches often evoke emotional sympathies, and men's rhetoric is well matched by women's.



Dancing and singing together, women and girls freely express themselves in movements as well as words.

In rural North India relations between husband and wife are publicly restrained by prescribed attitudes of shame and modesty for the woman and a less formally enjoined but nonetheless stylized act of detachment or demonstrative authority for men. Women, especially young wives, affect postures of modesty that include silence or extreme reticence in speech, lowered eyes, and covered face. If a woman speaks to her husband at all, she may employ one or more modes of self-effacement: turning her head away, whispering, speaking obliquely in the third person, or pointedly addressing someone else in the room with a message intended for him.

Yet both male and female folklore traditions portray women addressing their husbands in ways that are nothing if not bold, forthright, direct. The communications they thus brazenly deliver may range from material demands to personal criticism, and may include thinly veiled invitations to sexual intimacy and severe threats.<sup>5</sup> Why, in a society that prescribes and values wifely modesty, should cultural performances present so much wifely boldness? How shall we reconcile the tongue-tied submissive brides of “reality” with the articulate, demanding brides of folklore?

At this preliminary moment I wish to suggest a few partial answers. I then exemplify the verbal boldness of folkloric wives in particular contexts, exploring both the desires expressed and results obtained by their commands. I compare, contrast, and elaborate motifs as they vary from genre to genre. Eventually I return to, and speculate briefly on, some further implications of these materials in relation to gender hierarchy in theory and practice.

There is one obvious point of contrast between imagined spousal dialogues in folklore and actual, observable husband-wife relations. All I have said about the latter—concerning women’s reticence before their spouses—applies to public encounters. Private encounters, everyone knows, are different. And of course, by definition, they are unknown to anyone other than the couple themselves.

In private relationships between spouses, moreover, rural South Asian culture allows and imagines intimacy. Despite the near universality of arranged marriages between strangers—and in rural Rajasthan these strangers are even today often children—the private marital relationship is surrounded by romantic ideals. Rajasthani women and men are far from indifferent to the possibility of intense personal love between spouses.

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<sup>5</sup>For women’s oral power as cursers, see Wadley 1994:56.

During my fieldwork, daily confidences from young wives as much as oral traditions provided a constant flow of evidence for the importance placed by women upon this love and the various signs and testimonies of its existence. A few males with whom I became intimate enough to talk about such things, significantly enough, seemed to share these ideals.

Women's songs often comment obliquely on the ironies of the prescribed formalities between husband and wife. Many songs linger around the fuzzy borders—for women, between modesty and coyness, or shame and allurement (A. Gold 1994); and for men as portrayed by women, between lordly detachment and blatant adoration. Many women's songs thus deliberately juxtapose the total intimacy (having much to do with sexual intercourse) that constitutes relationships between spouses with the public aloofness that is normative behavior for young married couples.

All of this might be taken to confirm the suggestion that folklore opens up (imagined) private spaces, where beloved women do freely speak to loving men. Yet private dyadic encounters do not account for all the demanding female voices heard in songs, stories, and epics. Some women's songs explicitly take place in intimate, boudoir settings, but this is by no means the case for all. Others are evidently public in that other persons' presences are assumed, acknowledged, even voiced. Moreover, performances themselves are always public, a fact that would, it seems to me, call into question the whole issue of expressions rooted in the truths of a private arena. Within the performance context itself the shifting poses of modesty and boldness are also enacted and sustained. Bold words emerge from heavily veiled mouths; the stranger-husband poetically evoked may be seated with his back turned, well within hearing range.

Another possible explanation for the vigor of female demands in folklore would be that they constitute safe releases of resistant energy that neither expresses nor affects actual domestic circumstances. Veena Das seems to propose something subtly analogous to this in her suggestive chapter on "Femininity and Orientations to the Body." She explains (1988:201): "Women seem to live their lives on the double register of law and language which emphasises their roles as wives, and poetry and metalanguage which emphasises their roles as standing outside of language and law. . . ." She goes on to suggest that "as the lawful wives of men" women subscribe to the "entire male discourse on female sexuality" but as "outsiders" they are perfectly willing to subvert it. Circularly, their subversions are nevertheless, Das suggests, put to the service of patriarchy.

Part of the male-dominated law and language code is, of course, the imposition of modesty and silence upon women. Folk performances would, in Das's terms, belong to poetry and stand outside the male order of law and language. Thus their consistent shattering of the codes of modesty and reticence would be explicable. Yet Das seems to suggest that the register of poetry is ultimately a trap, or at least that it fails as resistance because the only real impact it makes is co-opted by the dominant register of law and language. If, for Das, the female as subaltern can speak, even her subversive speech is ultimately without independent power. Her example is the case of a woman covertly advising another through verbal play to get a lover—but only in order to get a son and thus fulfill a patriarchal requirement.<sup>6</sup>

Any scheme of law versus poetry seems to me to separate falsely the demands boldly spoken in folklore from the social universe that produces them year-round and also values them. In our co-authored volume, Gloria Raheja and I argue that alternative cultural realities accessible through women's folklore coexist with dominant male views and are contextually deployed (1994). Both of us at times juxtapose male genres to female ones,<sup>7</sup> but the interrelationships that emerge are less disjunctive than dialectical. The worlds created in women's lore are less mirror worlds than worlds where, to borrow A.K. Ramanujan's lovely phrase, "mirrors are windows" (1989).

James Taggart's study of gender relations in Spanish folktales stresses their dialogic constitution (1990:13):<sup>8</sup>

Men and women carry out a dialogue in storytelling through which they share their different perspectives on love, family life, and gender relations. They tell the same stories but change them in subtle but clear ways according to their different male and female points of view.

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<sup>6</sup> For more on songs praising adultery if it produces progeny for barren women, see A. Gold 1994:58-60.

<sup>7</sup> See A. Gold 1995a for a contrast between male views of bad women magicians and women's portrayals of good women falsely accused of black magic. See Raheja 1994 for women's acceptance of cowives in folk theater performed by males and non-acceptance in women's songs.

<sup>8</sup> See also Dwyer 1978 (on Morocco); Caraveli 1986 and Dubisch 1986 (on Greece).

While I am not able, as Taggart is, to present examples of male and female versions of the same stories, the bold, commanding, authoritative female speeches found in both women's and men's performance traditions from Rajasthan will certainly reveal many signs of ongoing intertextualities that are the dynamic substance and soul of a folklore community.<sup>9</sup>

One thing we might hope to learn by looking at demands in female voices is what women lack, what they are missing in their lives, who has the power to give them these things, and what their relationships are with those who hold that power. I shall begin, then, with these related questions. What kinds of demands do women portray themselves as making in their own performance genres? What are the social contexts and what are the emotional overtones in which these demands are made? Do they get what they want? In short, what do demands placed in the mouths of women by women, and by men, tell us about women's status, women's wishes, women's identities?

These are the obvious questions, the meanings that float on the lyric surface of songs or rise to the top of stories' plot summaries. Beneath them lie other problems less easily explored. Any interpretation of women's demanding voices clearly requires an understanding of broader patterns of transactions that go well beyond gender. Apparently, the meaning of boldness and particularly of requests or demands is not necessarily an expression of superior power. Sometimes such voices are linked with intimacy, sometimes with dependency; they transmit emotional as often as material claims.

Wadley discusses asking and giving in the context of North India's caste patronage (*jajmānī*) system's merged economic and moral hierarchy. This system "defines the poor as beggars, because the payments . . . are given only when asked for 'with folded hands'" (Wadley 1994:152-53). Such implied degradation immediately transfers to gender hierarchy. A cotton carder told Wadley, "to beg is to make oneself like a woman, namely, powerless" (153). Perhaps women's assertive demands in folklore are just another modality of abjection.<sup>10</sup> Other social situations, however,

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<sup>9</sup> For the useful concept of folklore community, see Flueckiger 1987.

<sup>10</sup> Yet a third side of this coin is suggested by Wadley (1994) in her analysis of a song sung by men in Karimpur that puts into the mouth of a woman protests against poverty and an unjust social hierarchy. Maybe the doubly subaltern female voice is the appropriate and safe (because actually powerless) vehicle for protests. Maybe men co-opt women's subaltern status to vent grievances about their own without admitting complicity

define the receiver of gifts as honored, worshipable, loved.<sup>11</sup> I shall return to these issues, if briefly, in concluding.

### **Of Presents, Presence, and Prescience**

In women's songs addressed to husbands, the central demands are for demonstrations and tokens of love—readily summed up as presence and presents. Women claim power over their husbands by summoning them to their sides—and their rivals are only occasionally other women. More often they must recall their men from the company of male companions, city jobs, war, and other distractions that seem to represent the whole cultural system of sex-role segregation that conspires to separate husbands from wives and make husbands pretend indifference to the “species of women.” Songs also portray goddesses making demands upon their divine spouses for company and gifts.

In most songs the woman's yearning for private intimacy with her husband is fully mingled with her desires for gifts. Gifts breach, or bridge, the private/public distinction. Gifts of adornment to wear or food to share are at once tokens of the most intimate love and public signs of a devoted husband. It seems women desire these signs as much as they desire their man, for in some songs the coy bride resists her husband's amorous advances by sending him off to get her new clothing (A. Gold 1994:51-52).

Configurations of love and power represented in stories told on occasions of women's worship are somewhat different from those portrayed in song. In songs, women make demands on their husbands; in stories, they command them. The stories show women possessing knowledge, skill, foresight, and divine blessings. They still act in relation to husbands, but it is not so much that they want things for themselves from men, as that they know what is needed for everyone and can tell men how to proceed in getting it. In the stories it appears that female demands are based on

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in the complaint. Although I will not pursue this third flip here, it demands attention.

<sup>11</sup> For ways that receiving gifts may be valued, and the status of receiver as a “high” one, see Raheja 1995 on the dowry complex and its meanings for women; see also Inden 1976.

genuine prescience. Women speak with authority; if men accept and act on their wives' council, all goes well.<sup>12</sup>

I shall first consider two songs addressed to absent spouses, one mortal and one divine. Many women's songs begin with a situation of absence: the desired man is far away. Moreover, husbands are often addressed as "strangers" or "foreigners" or "honored guests."<sup>13</sup> This is due in part to the village exogamy practiced throughout most of North Indian—marriage patterns prescribing that a husband be "foreign." It is due in part to women's long visits to their natal homes, where they may, despite the value placed on such visits, wish for their husbands to come fetch them. It was also due in the eighties, I would hazard, to the economic conditions that were sending more and more men to work in the cities.<sup>14</sup> These absent bread-winners return home for major holidays, occasions that then become reinvested with the ambiance of romantic reunion. Both of the songs that follow here offer similarly combined demands for presence and presents.

The first example belongs to the festival of Gangaur—mythically a celebration of divine marriage bonds. At Gangaur virgin girls pray for a handsome, long-lived husband and married women yearn for their absent spouses. The husband must be persuaded to come home bringing gifts for his bride, and then further persuasions are exerted to keep him lingering a while by her side:

*mārā māthā na mānmand lyāy mārā anjān mārūn*  
*yāñī revo sā*  
*yāñī ro pardeśī chel yāñī revo sā*  
*yāñī ro gorī kā chel yāñī revo sā*

Bring a pendant for my forehead, O my stranger-spouse,  
 Please stay right here, sir,

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<sup>12</sup> The inverse is also true: men who ignore their wives make mistakes with disastrous results.

<sup>13</sup> As I went to work translating songs addressed to spouses, it began to appear to me that husbands are to Rajasthani women as snowflakes are to Eskimos, or cows to the Nuer (proverbially, if not in reality). There are countless terms in the song texts that my helpers in the village told me referred to the singer's husband—and none of these are part of daily speech. Each has a separate and subtle meaning, and I have attempted to capture some of this in my translations.

<sup>14</sup> See Narayan's essay in this volume.

Stay here, foreign gorgeous man, stay right here, sir,  
 Stay here, fair woman's gorgeous man, stay right here, sir!

As its verses progress, the same song unites the woman's proffered enticements of sweets and intimacy with her demands for ornaments and attention:

*thān perā khavāvañ Gaṅgor mārā āchhyā mārūñ  
 yāñī revo jī . . . etc.*

I will feed you milk sweets at Gangaur, O my good spouse,  
 Please stay right here, sir, . . . etc.

*mārā pagalyāñ na pāyaḷ lyāy mārā anjāñ mārūñ  
 yāñī revo jī . . . etc*

Bring bracelets for my ankles, O my stranger-spouse,  
 Please stay right here, sir, . . . etc.

*thāña sejāñ malai lī Gaṅgor mārā anjāñ mārūñ  
 yāñī revo sā . . . etc.*

I'll meet you in the bridal chamber at Gangaur,  
 O my stranger-spouse  
 Please stay right here, sir, . . . etc.

[recorded March 18, 1980]

The second example is a dialogue between the deities Radha and Krishna recorded on the morning of the Day of Cow Worship (A. Gold 1988:123-30). It begins with the identical combination of a demand for a forehead pendant and a complaint of absence.<sup>15</sup> The interwoven desires for jewelry, attentive love, and auspicious wifeness are apparently experienced by goddesses as much as by ordinary women.

*sāñvariya jī mātā na māñmand lyāy  
 rakharī to tolā tīs kī jī bhagvāñ  
 sāñvariya jī khāñ ra giyā chā māñjhal rāt*

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<sup>15</sup> The forehead pendants—called *māñmand*—are worn in Ghatiyali by Rajput women with living husbands. Although most other castes do not wear them, they are sung about by women of all communities.

*mailā me ḍarpūn ekalī vo bhagvān*

Dark lord,<sup>16</sup> bring a pendant for my forehead.  
The head-and-ear-piece should weigh thirty *tolās*,<sup>17</sup> O God.  
Dark lord, where have you gone  
in the middle of the night?  
I'm afraid all alone in the castle, O God.

*ye rādhā ye giyā giyā sāthīrān rī lār*  
*phūlarān re chālai lāgaryā vo bhagvān*

Radha, I went along with my friends,  
We were playing with flowers, O God.<sup>18</sup>

*sānvariya jī thānkā mukharā me āvai bās*  
*apuṭhā phar bolasyā vo bhagvān*

Dark Lord, from your mouth comes a stink,<sup>19</sup>  
So I'll speak with my back turned, O God.

[recorded September 6, 1980]

While both songs begin in the same way, they progress differently. The first moves from longing to reunion and reconciliation in the bridal chamber; the second moves from longing to disjunction. Krishna is not an

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<sup>16</sup> “Dark lord” (*sānvariya*) is actually a name of Krishna, but it appears in other women's songs to refer more generally to a “Divine Husband.”

<sup>17</sup> A *tolā* is a measure of weight used for gold and silver; according to Chaturvedi and Tiwari (1979), it equals one-eightieth of a *seer*.

<sup>18</sup> I had difficulty construing this line, although the meaning is clear enough: Krishna's admission to “playing with flowers” is a confession of adultery. Peter Hook, a linguist who has worked extensively on North Indian languages including Rajasthani, suggested that *phūlarān* was a genitive plural—a common form in Rajasthani (personal communication).

<sup>19</sup> Note the connection between Radha's imputing bad breath to her unfaithful lover and Sadu's warning to Nevo from the Bagaravat Brother's epic cited below—to the effect that “enjoying another man's wife is like eating garlic; after eating it the smell spreads” (thanks to Peter Hook for calling this to my attention). The fifteenth-century devotional poet Kabir has a similar maxim: “Carrying on with another man's wife / is just like eating garlic: / You can hide in a corner to eat it / but finally can't keep it a secret” (D. Gold 1988:140).

absent husband but an unfaithful lover. In both songs, however, female voices are uninhibited, female wishes directly stated.

Turning from these songs associated with annual festivals to a life cycle song—from the genre called “Songs of the New Mother Queen”—a third example reveals the mingled pride and power of the new mother with an acknowledgment of the husband’s separate domain of power: the outside world with its markets and doctors.<sup>20</sup> An auspicious yellow wrap is worn by the new mother at the postpartum ritual of Sun Worship, generally nine days after a birth, when she sits at the center of attention holding her baby in her lap. Songs of the New Mother Queen are sung outside her room every night before this ritual.

In this song, the new mother’s moment of anticipated glory is shadowed by the threat of the evil eye:

*jaipar śayar kos..., ānnātā, pīlo mangādyo*  
*jaipar śayar kos..., ānnātā, pīlo mangādyo*  
*pīlo mangādyo manañvā mārūñ sā*  
*pīlo meñ oṛhūñ*

Order a yellow wrap from Jaipur city, Grain-giver  
 Order a yellow wrap from Jaipur city, Grain-giver,  
 Order a yellow wrap, my Heart’s Desire.  
 I’ll put on the yellow wrap.

*hāthāñ ṭkkīśāñ sā annātā gajāñ ṭ paccīśāñ*  
*hāthā ṭkkīśāñ sā annātā gajāñ ṭ paccīśāñ*  
*to jaipar syūñ pīlo mangādyo manañvā mārūñ sā*  
*pīlo mangādyo*

Twenty-one hands, Grain-giver, twenty-five yards,  
 Twenty-one hands, Grain-giver, twenty-five yards.  
 So order a yellow wrap from Jaipur, my Heart’s Desire,  
 Order a yellow wrap.

*pīlo mangādyo pīlo to oṛh*  
*mārī jacyā cauk barājyā*  
*to khuṇ savāgaṇ najar lagāī?*  
*manañvā mārūñ jī, pīlo mangādyo*

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<sup>20</sup> The husband’s greater power to travel and to shop is of course implied in the preceding examples as well, and stresses not only his greater mobility but also his control over economic resources.

The yellow wrap was ordered, and wrapped round her;  
my New Mother Queen well seated in the courtyard.  
So what evil eye struck her auspicious wifehood?  
My Heart's Desire, order a yellow wrap.

[recorded September 1979]

The rest of this almost narrative song, which I will not cite in full detail, suggests that, the evil eye having struck, the baby becomes fretful and its eyes will not open. The power of the birthgiver is diminished, but she continues to command her husband, as her link to outside power: go and get the doctor. Thus ordered by his wife, the gallant, concerned husband brings a doctor from Udaipur city who takes the baby's pulse and prescribes a remedy; the child recovers and the yellow wrap is once more requested, along with a horse for the Barber and a flowered sari for the Barber's wife.



Women dress a baby boy in new clothes at a celebration ritual they perform to ensure his well-being.

Both these figures are important to the Sun Worship rite. The Barber's wife may, moreover, have acted as midwife and is also present in the company of singers. The husband's gifts to this couple will again be signs of his appreciation of his wife as birthgiver.<sup>21</sup>

This song seems to vibrate between the realm of intimacy, love, and beauty, and the realm of ritual and social form: the yellow wrap is a love gift whose necessity is ritually determined and which can thus stand for both dimensions. Basing her right to command on her status as "new mother queen"—and these childbirth songs always assume the birth of a son—the wife in her childbirth bed could certainly be seen as subsumed within the patriarchal domain with its respect for male progeny. However, sung by women gathered around an unwashed mother and child before their purification from birth pollution, songs of the New Mother Queen suggest at the performative level a firm rejection of the negativity surrounding women's bodily processes in the "law and language" register, and a proud claim to unique knowledge of and control over valued reproduction.<sup>22</sup>

Returning to festivals, I excerpt a song of *Tij*, recorded from a mixed-caste group of neighbors that included high-ranking brahmins and washerwomen, as my final example. *Tij* involves a difficult fast undertaken by wives for their husbands' well-being, and is, like Gangaur, a time to summon absent spouses home to their lonely brides.<sup>23</sup> Here the wife's voice is firmly authoritative. Her authority derives both from her outspoken love of the absent husband, and from the holiday's enduring traditions. Summoning these conjoined authorities, the female voice devalues external considerations of money or the prestige of city employment. Here women's domestic power actually extends outward to

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<sup>21</sup> See Raheja 1988 on the necessity to remove inauspiciousness after birth through proper gifts and rituals. This necessity could explain the epithet "treasure-and-grain-giver" as well as the importance of the Barber and his wife as receivers of munificence. The *nārī* caste, whose traditional occupation is that of barber, also perform numerous ritual functions in North India, particularly in connection with life-cycle rites such as birth and marriage.

<sup>22</sup> The two non-Rajput male scribes who worked on the three tapes I made of Rajput women's "Songs of the New Mother Queen" often expressed their appreciation of these songs' fullness and narrative coherence.

<sup>23</sup> Note that *Tij* takes place in the rainy season; according to Vaudeville (1986:28), "almost all folk-poetry in India" connects this season with "sexual frustration." For *Tij* songs as songs of resistance, see also Raheja 1994:131-32, 142-45; Holland and Skinner 1995; and Skinner, Holland, and Adhikari 1994.

city domains via the love that binds husband to wife. Some selected verses follow:

[Refrain]

*kīśan gaṛh ho sā mukan gaṛh chākarī ḍholā sāyabā jī  
tīj sunyān ghar āy*

Whether your work's in Kishan Garh or Mukan Garh,  
husband-lord,  
Having heard [of] Tij, come home.

*thānn to piyārī lāge naukarī ḍholā sābā jī  
mānn to piyārā lāgo āp*

Your job is beloved to you, husband-lord,  
Lord, you are beloved to me.

[Refrain]

*kīśan gaṛh ho sā mukan gaṛh naukarī ḍholā sāyabā jī  
tīj sunyān ghar āy*

Whether your job's in Kishan Garh, or Mukan Garh,  
husband-lord,  
Having heard Tij, come home!

*pharī to choryā vo thānkī naukarī ḍholā sāyabā jī  
āyā āyā tīj thañvār*

Leave your job at once, husband-lord,  
For the festival of Tij has come.

[Refrain]

*kīśan gaṛh ho sā mukan gaṛh naukarī ḍholā sāyabā jī  
tīj sunyān ghar āy*

Whether your job's in Kishan Garh or Mukan Garh,  
husband-lord,  
Having heard Tij, come home!

[recorded August 28, 1980]

With its insistence on women's authority deriving from their participation in important festivals involving vows and fasts, this song makes a nice transition to the storytelling genre, where female voices speak

yet more coherently and authoritatively. In women's ritual storytelling traditions, there are many stories where women frankly and forthrightly tell men what to do. These stories—often called *vrat kathā* (“fast day tales”), although in Ghatiyali they are labeled *kahaniyān* (“stories”)—regularly feature imperious women and males who are at best passive and compliant, at worst deluded and stubborn.

I will give only two examples. The first is from the set of stories told for the goddess known as Dasa Mata, the Mother of Well Being (A. Gold 1995b). A young woman, wished ill by her stepmother, is married to one of five brothers—into a household with no women. The “five bachelors” (*pañch dhīngā*), as they are called even after one is married, live in a state of paradigmatic, amoral disorder. They have separated their hearths; they send their old father out to beg; they do not even make bread, but subsist on parched grain.

The bride's first day in her new home is spent destroying the separate hearths and restoring proper unity to the household. She forbids the old man to go begging but assigns him the easier chore of gathering firewood for her to cook with. She obtains rudimentary ingredients for a meal from her indulgent or compassionate female neighbors. When the bachelors return in the evening, dying of hunger, she orders them to bathe and worship in the temple; then they may eat. Note the rhythmic repetition of the imperative verbs she uses:<sup>24</sup>

*the to talāv jāvo saphāi karo āpkā dīl kī ar pachai āp pāchā ātā thakān  
mandar jājyo jyo thākur jī ka dhok detā ājyo thākur jī . . . ar pachai āp  
roṭyā khājyo.*

Then go to the tank and bathe. After you have cleaned your bodies and washed your clothes, on the way back, go to the temple and bow in front of Thakurji . . . and then come home and eat bread (A. Gold 1995b:440-41).

The bachelors attempt to comply with her commands, stumbling around comically. So out of practice are they at bathing and worship that they do not know how to wet themselves or exactly to what they should make prostrations.

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Hook tells me that in Rajasthani *lyo* would refer to an action in the more distant future than *lo*, just as in Hindi the ultra-cordial *lījiyegā* implies a more distant future than *lījiye*. The time element works to soften the imperative by reducing its immediacy (personal communication).

Built into the narrative structure is a meta-commentary on the bride's demanding manner. The storyteller first portrays some villagers observing the five men's out-of-character behavior and gossiping about them as henpecked: "Ah, who has put a nose-ring on the bachelors today?" The term used for nose-ring—*nath*—refers to iron hoops installed in the nostrils of (castrated) oxen and thus implies emasculation. However, the gossips' disapproval of a bossy woman is but a superficial reading of the situation and an expression of ignorance on their parts. The storyteller continues: "But persons in the know said, 'Ah, today Lakshmi has come into their house'." The commanding female voice is the manifestation of a goddess—for those who have eyes to see or ears to hear.

The men benefit substantially from having a woman tell them what to do. Immediately, their reward is a homecooked dinner and they stuff themselves. In the long run the clever bride—after issuing many more orders still, including orders directly addressed to her father-in-law—brings the grace of the goddess to dwell with them, so that they will enjoy every kind of prosperity and well-being for generations to come.

This story would nicely fit into a model in which women's fasts and devotion, and the stories they tell of their commanding powers, are understood as for the well-being of males (although certainly also simultaneously ensuring that of their spouses). Let me turn, however, to another tale from another fast-and-festival day, one that portrays a wife issuing imperatives that do not seem to benefit anyone but herself. The heroine of the story of Tij, as I recorded it in Ghatiyali, is one of seven daughters-in-law.<sup>25</sup> On the holiday of Tij, she alone does not receive any of the sweets called *sātū* that women's natal families traditionally send to their daughters' marital homes. *Sātū* is the special food with which the daughters should break their fasts. The other six daughters-in-law do receive *sātū* and taunt the unlucky one. Disconsolate, the heroine declares her intention not to break her fast at all, but rather to go to bed hungry.<sup>26</sup>

Her evidently doting husband hears her resolve in alarm, fearing for her delicate life should she go to bed without eating. "What do you want?" he asks her. She answers, "So bring some, even if you have to go steal, bring *sātū* made of chickpea flour." He fulfills her demands to the letter, breaking into a merchant's kitchen, assembling the ingredients for the sweet

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<sup>25</sup> A translation appears in A. Gold 1981:70-73.

<sup>26</sup> Normally women break the fast of Tij at moonrise.

cakes, and cooking them himself. When caught red-handed by the police, the excuse he gives is that his wife was going to die of hunger. Certainly a bit of fun is poked here at the figure of this man so engrossed in his young wife's well-being, nor would I deny an element of wishful fantasy on the part of wives. But there is more to it.

If it was easy to see the wife who straightened out the five bachelors as a consort—a *śakti* or Lakshmi—what are we to make of the young wife here who puts her husband in danger for her own selfish ends? The fast of Tij is ultimately a fast, like many others, intended to sustain the condition of auspicious wifehood. But the story might also be read as an ironic commentary on the many tales of self-sacrificing women who suppress their own needs and desires for the sake of their male kin. Why, it seems to ask in all simplicity, should men not sacrifice themselves too? In the context of rainy-season sexual longings, this tale together with the song of Tij—which also seems to place the wife's needs above the family's—hints at a complex of cultural motifs that approve the fulfillment of women's desires.

The happy ending vindicates the husband's devotion: the robbery victim not only drops the charges but adopts the daughter-in-law and personally sends her not only sweets but new clothes every year. All of these fine outcomes are swept under the umbrella blessing of the mother goddess of Tij. In both stories, and in most women's worship tales, the wife is prescient and the demands she makes result in well-being.

Before turning to look at women's demanding voices in male genres, let me briefly summarize those persuasions thus far encountered in women's songs and stories. Women's performances portray female voices asking for love, attention, gifts, and even self-sacrifice on the part of men. These requests may vary in emotional pitch, and the responses from males vary as well. But I may generalize this much: female genres posit the legitimacy of female desires and place a strong positive value on their fulfillment—a value divinely sanctioned in the songs by parallel demands of goddesses, and in the stories by the worshipful context of their telling and by subsuming all good results into the category of blessings from deities.

### **Co-opted Commands and Resistant Refrains**

In turning to look at male performance traditions, we find once again articulate women speaking boldly to their husbands. Their speeches include

demands for attention and love—like those in women's songs—and commands to behave properly—like those in women's stories. In a number of male-female encounters in male epic traditions, the gist of women's messages to men boils down nicely to two little words: "Don't go!" While inviting a man to come home and begging him not to leave are both variants of a desired presence motif, differences emerge when the ways in which male traditions portray gender interactions are examined more closely.

Predictably, male genres allow men to speak with eloquence equal to women's in ways that women's genres do not. The husband does not so readily acquiesce to the goddess incarnate in his home, but answers back. Most tellingly, at the conclusion of a "don't go" encounter the men depart despite their women's attempts to stop them. In male epic genres, however, women's speeches also exhibit more rhetorical variety, often including warnings, threats, and curses as well as beseechings. Women's genres tend to portray domestic exchanges; male genres involve public oratory (Ramanujan 1986). The protracted process of cross-gender argument in male performance traditions is a meaningful one. That women lose these arguments is more than a statement of ultimate female powerlessness. It by no means implies that their verbal fireworks are but wasted energies. For one thing, audiences cherish these struggles.

In the two related Nath yogi epics that I have translated in their entirety (A. Gold 1992), exceptionally articulate women oppose their husbands (and brothers), becoming world-renouncers with elaborate counterclaims based on duty as well as love, on the logic of responsible behavior as well as emotional pull.

I shall give just a brief example from one of the best loved moments in the tale of King Bharthari. This segment is referred to by the local audience as Queen Pingala's lament (*vilāp*); it is a favorite request piece.<sup>27</sup> Briefly, the context is that King Bharthari is already an initiated yogi. The first time he left his palace he sneaked out in the night while the queen was asleep, fully aware, as he forthrightly declares, that she would never have allowed him to go. But the implacable guru has set Bharthari the task of calling his wife Pingala "Mother" and bringing back alms from her hand.

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<sup>27</sup> For a video recorded by Joseph C. Miller in 1991, Madhu Nath—from whom I had previously tape-recorded all of Bharthari in 1988—spontaneously chose to perform "Pingala's Lament" to present to foreign audiences. Cassettes of Bharthari's tale by professional singers also highlight this exchange.

Their dialogue, in both the sung and prose accounts, is very extensive. A fragment from the prose goes like this (A. Gold 1992:153-54):

*Jadai yā balāp karya, “He rājājī khālyo pīlyo māyā māṅlyo karlyo jīvara kā lād. Ar manakh jamārā sarī moj pher nahīn āyegī.*

Then she lamented, “Hey Honored King, eat and drink and accept wealth, and treat your soul with love. The pleasures of a human birth will not come again.

*“Rājājī khuṅt par to mūn pherūn ṭoṭī jhūmarā ar khuṅ khuṅ bājūbandh kī lūm? ar annātā jī yā kāi karai ke thūn julam?”*

“Honored king, for whom shall I wear these dangling earrings, and for whom my tasseled armband?<sup>28</sup> And grain-giver, what is this outrage you’ve committed?”

*Jadyān khiyo, “Kai thārai tumārā devar, khuṅ? Vīr Vakaramādīt ar ye rāj talak iske kar giyā ar iske ūpar nai khūb moj kar ke.”*

Then he said, “You have your young brother-in-law,<sup>29</sup> who? Hero Vikramaditya. The auspicious mark of rule was given to him and you can live with him in bliss.”

*“Rājā, ke āmān kī thas āmalyānū na jāvai. Rājā Bhartharī, ar the to jogī ar mai thānkī jogaṅ ar manai lārān le chālo jyo halamalar donī jogapanoṅ sād hān.”*

“King, a craving for mangoes isn’t satisfied by tamarinds. King Bharthari, if you must be a yogi, then take me with you. I’ll be your yogini, and we’ll cooperate in yogic practices, we’ll both live in the condition of yoga.”

This exchange continues at length. Pingala confronts Bharthari with many truths about his obligations to her, lamenting that she did not remain in her father’s house forever a virgin and regretting every step of the marriage ritual. Another portion of their argument reveals women’s verbal power to curse. Pingala curses the ritual specialists who helped to bring her

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<sup>28</sup> Note the familiar association here of adornment with the auspicious and intimate married state.

<sup>29</sup> *Devar*: husband’s younger brother, with whom sexual joking is permitted and a marriage after widowhood might be approved.

to the married state now ending so bitterly. I translate here from the sung text (A. Gold 1992:156):

*Rājājī. . . .*  
*khuṇī ne bāndyā re haḷdyā ḍoraṛā*  
*mairā khānvan, ḍoraṛa?*  
*khuṇ re bāndyo re śar par mor*  
*samajho Bhartharī*  
*kuṇ bāndyo re śar par mor*  
*samajho Bhartharī*  
*samajho Bhartar he Panvār Dhārā ī Nangarī kā*  
*the to mārī joṛī kā re sirdār*  
*nirdhan mel cālyā jī*

Honored King . . .  
 Who tied the yellow wedding bracelets,  
 my husband, the wedding bracelets?  
 Who tied the wedding crest on your head?  
 You must realize, Bharthari,  
 Who tied the wedding crest on your head?  
 You must realize, Bharthari,  
 You must realize, Bharthari Panvar of Dhara Nagar,  
 You're the master of my union but you've gone and left me destitute.

*Rānījī. . . .*  
*bāmaṇ ne bāndyā ye haḷdyā ḍoraṛā, rānī mārī, ab ḍoraṛā*  
*nāī kā ne bāndyo re śar par mor*  
*samjho tariyā kī*  
*samjho tariyā kī ye jāī*  
*khiyo māro mān jāvo jī*

Honored Queen . . .  
 The Brahmin tied the yellow wedding bracelets,  
 my queen, the bracelets.  
 The Barber's son tied the wedding crest on my head,  
 You must realize, female,  
 You must realize, female species,  
 and accept what I say.

*Rājājī. . . .*  
*bāmaṇ par paṛjyo jī ābā bījī mairā khānvan bījaḷī*  
*nāī kā nai khājyo re kāḷo ab nāg*  
*samajho Bhartharī*  
*nāī kā nai khājyo re kāḷo ab nāg*

*samajho Bharthari*  
*samajho Bhartar he Panvār Dhārā ī Nangarī kā*  
*the to mārī joṛī kā jī śirdār*  
*nirdhan mel cālyā jī*

Honored King . . .  
 Let lightning strike the Brahman, my husband,  
     lightning,  
 Let a black snake bite the Barber's son,  
 You must realize, Bharthari,  
 Let a black snake bite the Barber's son,  
 You must realize, Bharthari.  
 You must realize, Bharthari Panvar of Dhara Nagar,  
 you're the master of my union but you've gone and left me destitute.

When finally Pingala acquiesces to Bharthari's fate, and her own, she nevertheless continues to speak in the imperative, commanding him to complete the very process she has so eloquently protested and resisted (A. Gold 1992:157):

*Rājāji . . . .*  
*bhojan jīmo mārā hāth kā*  
*mairā khānvan, hāth kā*  
*garū jī ke le jāvo re panvāro rājā vo Bharthari*  
*pherūn mānai darśan dījyo bhoḷā nāth samjho Bharthari*

Honored King . . .  
 Feast on food from my hand,  
 my husband, from my hand.  
 Take the guru's portion, O King Bharthari,  
 Then give me *darśan* once again, Innocent Nath.  
 [The refrain continues as above with "You must realize, Bharthari."]

In fact, the refrain of Pingala's lament runs throughout the entire epic, always in the same blunt request form: the *o*-imperative, *samajho*. By constant repetition even when totally disconnected from the action, the refrain seems to suggest that ultimately Bharthari's behavior is eternally unacceptable.

Elsewhere I have discussed at length the unresolved tensions in these exoteric yogic texts between the world-renunciation they seek to glorify and the householder's life of attachment with which they intensely sympathize

(1989). In another essay I have explored at length the particular part women play in these configurations (1991). Here let me just note that if the greater power of the guru sovereign ultimately prevails over women's pleas and commands, it does not and cannot fully silence them. And as the tales construe it, the immortality gained by renunciation may seem a poor prize when set against the gleaming castles and loving families lost in attaining it.

The position of women in yogic teachings might suggest both special power (as manifestations of *śakti*) and special disadvantage (as the embodiment of worldly entanglements). Not trusting yogis' texts as my sole example of women's voices in male productions but wishing to retain my footing in Ghatiyali's folklore community, I sought commanding women's voices in another epic text recorded in the same village by folklorist Joseph C. Miller: "The Twenty-Four Bagarāvāt Brothers and Lord Devnārāyaṇ" (1994). In this epic—easily five times the length of the two Nath epics put together—are several scenes that present perfect parallels to the "don't go" scenes in the yogi epics: scenes where articulate women attempt to prevent the departure of stubborn men. The only difference is that these men were not going off to become renouncers, but rather to get drunk or to fetch a dangerous co-wife or to fight bloody battles. Additionally, the dialogues are longer and more complex, as is everything else about the Devnārāyaṇ epic.

In the interests of space, I cite here from Miller's unpublished plot summary. Each paragraph represents a discrete segment—ranging from 11 to 30 lines—of the *arthāv* or prose "explanation" that the performing priest uses to clarify and elaborate on the sung text (Miller 1991):<sup>30</sup>

After completing her sixteen adornments Sāḍū [wife of the hero Bhoj, later mother of the divine Devnārāyaṇ] came to the gateway and sweetly asked her *devar* [husband's younger brother] Nevo where he was going.

Nevo told her that he was going to Rāṇ to enjoy drinking songs with his "brother" Rāvajī, to get liquor from Pātū and to feast with Rāvajī. Sāḍū said it was wrong to feast someone in their house. She bid him to stay so she could prepare a feast.

Sāḍū forbade him to go to Rāṇ. She promised to order a camel caravan full of liquor from her father's village so he and Rāvajī could drink right in the hamlets.

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<sup>30</sup> See Miller 1994:486-516 for the complete translation and transliteration.

She warned that Rāṇ is filled with man eaters, temptresses and magicians who will seduce and capture Nevo.

Nevo replied that he was determined to go and protect his brother Bhoj. He would return with Jaimatī and make her Sāḍū's co-wife.

Sāḍū replied that it is bad to take a co-wife. . . . She forbid Nevo to go to Rāṇ.

[She promises him other women but he has elaborate and scathing criticisms of them all.]

Sāḍū explained that keeping the wife of a brother in your house is as bad as cutting an auspicious pīpaḷ tree down to make a roof.

She told Nevo that another's wife is like a sweet dagger. She spoils wealth, reduces youth and kills respect. Enjoying another's wife is like eating garlic, after eating it the smell spreads.

. . . .

Sāḍū told him that death lurks around you. It is inescapable. Accept the advice of the womenfolk.

. . . .

Sāḍū described her terrible dream to Nevo. She saw the Brothers fighting on the bank of the River Khārī. Heads were rolling, dead bodies were stacked. She saw twenty-four funeral pyres and the wives blazing in them. She saw . . . the Goddess in her terrible form. She asked Nevo not to go to Rāṇ.

Many stanzas later Sadu asks Nevo how beautiful this queen is, and he launches into an elaborate toe-to-head description of her fine qualities. This apparently sells Sadu on the idea of a co-wife:

After hearing this Sāḍū advised Nevo to bring her as soon as possible. Sāḍū promised Nevo that she would welcome such an elegant Queen and share Bhoj with her. She told Nevo to bring Queen Jaimatī.

Note how despite many differences in style this situation is structurally similar to the one in which we observed Bharthari and Pingala. Sadu is not Nevo's wife, but as *devar* he is in a husband-like relationship to her. He goes not to be a yogi but to have a good time and bring home a new woman for his elder brother, Sadu's husband. This woman will destroy the Bagaravats' family happiness, just as Bharthari being a yogi destroys Pingala's. And, just as Pingala continues to speak to Bharthari in commands even when she has lost the argument, so Sadu—after hearing the lengthy description of Jaimti's beauty—acquiesces and actually commands Nevo to bring this woman: the very thing she has just been arguing against at such length.

Both male epics, then, involve turnarounds in female imperatives. The women in the end are persuaded to add their voices and power to male enterprises rather than simply desist from refusing them. We could interpret this pattern as meaning that male epics fully co-opt female power. But an alternative and perhaps equally valid way of looking at it would be to note that even when women give into men, folklore continues to perceive them as articulate and commanding presences. Moreover, definitively in the case of Sadu, and arguably in the case of Pingala, they were right the first time! Bringing Jaimti was definitely a mistake. Abandoning home and wife for a yogi's begging life, as most who listen to Bharthari's tale agree, is a desperate course of action leading to misery.

### **Acknowledged Mutualities**

I have offered examples of forthright female voices in women's songs and stories and in two male oral epics—all from the same small Rajasthani community. Certain factors are common to all the genres I have considered. Women are not portrayed as shy or ashamed. Rather they speak boldly and present articulate demands. In all the genres these demands include demands for love—in the form of fidelity, gifts, services, and perhaps above all physical proximity: “come home,” “stay here,” “don't go.” When women send men out on missions, to “bring me a yellow wrap” or “get me the sweets even if you must steal them,” these are always errands with a “go and come back” plan to them.<sup>31</sup>

These commonalities contradict the visual images of veiled women in rural Rajasthan and the muffled or whispered voices such women affect in the actual presences of spouses. In oral performances women not only address their husbands but command them. Das's (1988) double register of law and language where women have no voice of their own, versus poetry where they may partially subvert male dominance, does not seem an adequate model. Cultural performances including women's songs are neither whispered nor debased, but rather loud and valued. At rural Rajasthani weddings in recent decades, celebrants commonly hire a loudspeaker system. Men control the microphone; from time to time,

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<sup>31</sup> Marglin 1995 comes to similar conclusions on gender interdependence and mutualities.

between cassette recordings of popular hits, they turn the microphone toward the singing women, thus magnifying their voices across the entire community. Although this is a recent electronic innovation, I hope I have demonstrated here that folkloric performances regularly dismantle the spatial and conceptual sexual segregation of Rajasthani society. With both sense and sound, Rajasthani expressive traditions seem to voice a will for gender togetherness and to acknowledge the true interdependence of couples.

Contrasts have certainly emerged between female voices as portrayed in male and as portrayed in female genres. In the male genres women may not only lose the argument in the end, but join their voices to the other side, taking the male view and relinquishing their own demands. Let the guru's will be obeyed; let the beautiful rival come into the house. But by thus acquiescing are they as good as silenced? I suggest that the co-option of women's demands in the epics is less a squelching of female power than a necessary incorporation of it into male projects. That the domesticity-despising guru requires Bharthari to bring alms from his wife may be a recognition that women's consent is required even for the enterprise of abandoning women. This might seem an insignificant manipulation of power, but the refrain of Bharthari's epic suggests in Pingala's commanding voice that women's objections are never totally submerged.

Let me finally return to the point that in South Asia demands themselves are demeaning. As I read through my collection of women's songs, plucking out the many demanding voices, I was struck by a single example in which women portray males as demanders and in doing so gently seem to mock the whole enterprise. The context in which I recorded this song was the celebration of a first son's first haircut dedicated to the deity responsible for the child's birth. Songs of the bridegroom-prince (*banā*) are regularly performed on such occasions, and the same songs that are sung for weddings are sung for haircuts. However, I never came across this song in a wedding context. Perhaps it is a deliberately babyish bridegroom prince who is portrayed here.

*banon ūbo sarak par, nār māṅge*  
*unkā bābūjī syūn rapayā hajār māṅge*  
*vānkā nānnījī syūn anguṭhī rūmāl māṅge*  
*vānkā dādyān syūn bīṭī rūmāl māṅge*  
*dholā kāch kā gilās me ṭhaṇḍāt māṅge*  
*hariyā hariyā dūndā me jalebī māṅge*

O Bridegroom prince who stands on the street,  
 for a woman he asks.  
 From his father a thousand rupees he asks;  
 from his Grannie a ring and a hankie he asks;  
 from his Grandma a ring and a hankie he asks;  
 a clear glass of almond milk he asks;  
 sweet twists in the greenest leaf cups he asks.

[recorded May 30, 1980]

If women perform charming but condescending songs about a baby bridegroom prince's crude or precious demands for intoxicants, money, sweets, and a woman, it might well be a meta-metacommentary on their own roles as petitioners that they recognize as a partially assumed posture of dependency. I can only wonder if these singers are mocking their own perpetual demands by imagining how a "bridegroom-prince" would sound making them: infantilized in his concern with self-gratification and his unabashed dependency?<sup>32</sup> It is also true that the demanding baby has a lot of actual power in its babbling voice, as well as evoking boundless adoration. Perhaps this song suggests not only a merging of adult with childish, but of male with female dependencies—and thus of male with female identities. Perhaps it thereby acknowledges the mutuality and interdependency between the sexes that is after all one given condition of human life.

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<sup>32</sup> Jyotsna Kapur (personal communication) amended my interpretation of this song with the following illuminating suggestion: "Could it be that folk songs by recognizing women's boldness are more honest in recognizing that the power struggle between men and women is not so easily reconciled—that there are always ways in which women assert themselves—unlike what Das suggests, that the victory of men is not a foregone conclusion? Possibly, women's folk songs depict this contested terrain because women control this arena—folk songs? I don't see this as contradicting your argument of mutuality, but only as supplementing it—love and war together!"

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