

 The Daily Grind

People woke up to the sound of the *jāta* as just before sunrise, one home after another seemed to come alive with the hum of this most basic of women's activities, the refrains of the *jatsār* along with the trundle of the stones against each other, being taken up as if in relay from one household to the next.

FIELDNOTES, HARICHARAN MAURYA, CHACHAK VILLAGE, 2002

Haricharan Maurya's glowing account of the atmosphere in his village in eastern Uttar Pradesh when women were grinding grain and spices on millstones—a practice discontinued twenty or thirty years ago—captures the essence of women's productive labor in villages across rural north India and its ability to cut cross caste divides. Perhaps because the work of processing the food crucial for daily existence is so time-consuming and demanding, the most diverse of women's oral ballads have evolved to accompany these tasks. Maurya remembers waking up to *jatsār* songs every morning and to his ears “the rumble of the grinding stone combined with the words of the song, remains the sweetest and most comforting of sounds.” During my fieldwork, Maurya could barely contain his enthusiasm as the women began a song, often joining in the chorus. While Maurya's pride

in his wife's repertoire was not always shared by others, given that men's musical worlds are distinct from those of women, his observations are relevant to the questions this chapter raises, particularly those regarding women's consciousness in the genre of grinding songs.

This chapter, then, is concerned with the construction and reproduction of gender identity in the work songs known as *jatsār*, which traditionally accompanied women's daily grinding of grain and spices. The songs also serve a pedagogical purpose, transmitting societal values from older to younger women, serving to warn and prepare women for the hardships of married life, and spelling out the limits of transgression, the nature of punishments, and the rewards for compliance. By delineating family relationships that might be threatening and antagonistic, and by outlining codes of honor and conduct, the songs indicate the extent to which women internalize society's values and strictures. The chapter examines songs with diverse narratives and investigates their underlying messages for the women who sing them. A related question is the extent to which lessons learned through the *jatsār* inform female subordination, or the lack thereof, in the sphere of agricultural production, particularly in women's relations with their employers in the field.

As this genre represents only one of the region's many varieties of work songs, it offers only a partial picture of what women sing about when working. Sung within the confines of the household in the inner courtyards of homes, these songs are part of a much wider range of songs associated with women's work, both in homes and fields.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the performance of male ballads, women's work songs match their rhythm to the rhythm of repetitive tasks. While the *jatsār* or ballads of the millstone are not caste-specific but are sung by women of all castes, they are most often heard in upper or middle-caste homes. This shared aspect of the songs tends in some instances to blur caste distinctions and hierarchy.

Grinding grains and spices requires considerable effort, and women sit on the courtyard floor with the *jāta* (grinding stone) held between their legs. The physical act of grinding also resonates with the grind of daily life for village women. One may surmise that in cases where women sing the same kinds of song day after day, they indeed absorb the lessons imparted in the course of this activity. In short, the apparently benign and empowering practice of women singing the songs of the millstone enables



8 Small version of the type of grinding stone still in use in Barsara village, Jaunpur.

wider social and gender-specific lessons, about both power and powerlessness, to be most effectively learned.

In south India, for instance, in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Sufi mystics used grindstone songs to disseminate ideas about Sufism. At least in Bijapur, a number of short poems in Dakani employed indigenous themes and imagery for the propagation of mystical doctrines. Preserved in the oral traditions of Dakani speaking villagers of the Deccan plateau, this folk poetry appears to have been sung by village women engaged in various household chores, especially while grinding grains and spices at the *chakkī* (stone grinding mill) and while spinning thread at the *charkhā* (the spinning wheel). For women the genre's appeal lay not only in the fact that it accompanied their household tasks but also "because it was permeated with imagery especially meaningful to them" (Eaton 2002, 192). Thus, "what the Sufis did was to adapt the simplest elements of Sufi doctrine to the already existing vehicles of folk poetry and to substitute vernacular Dakkani for vernacular Marathi or Kan-

nada” (192). The works of the mystic Burhan al-Din Janam are associated with the *chakkī-nāmā*, a major development in the cultural history of the Deccan. These songs recognized that the power that turns the wheel is witness to the light and thereby to the essence of God (Eaton 2002, 194). The songs appear to have ontologically linked God, the Prophet, and the *pīr* (mystic) with the woman at the grindstone.

Phule and other lower caste radicals also attempted to project a new identity for Maharashtra’s lower castes by drawing on symbols from warrior and agricultural traditions and giving them powerful new meanings, revealing their sophisticated understanding of processes of identity formation (O’Hanlon 1985, 8). The dissemination of new ideologies and worldviews through women’s work songs appears to have been an effective way of reaching people.

These ballads of the millstone as a way of “speaking bitterness” that is gender-specific are by no means unique to India, and a similar process is found in Africa, where women’s working songs serve as a way of expressing grievances. The absence of colonial government documentation about the impact of the Malawi famine of 1949 on rural communities, for example, led Megan Vaughan (1987) to utilize women’s pounding songs—sung by rural women pounding maize in the central courtyard area, where the songs’ content would have had the maximum social impact—as a rich source of gender-specific oral testimony concerning events that occurred forty years before.<sup>2</sup> Unlike these songs, however, whose principal function appears to have been forcing appropriate kin and caste norms on young women, those in Malawi were designed to upbraid male kin for not adhering to kinship obligations, for example, providing food for the women of the household in times of scarcity.<sup>3</sup>

#### FORM, CONTENT, AND METHOD

A striking aspect of the *jatsār* is their duration; they can be very long, lasting the time it takes a woman to grind the 5 kilos of grain or flour necessary to prepare a meal for an extended family. Another is their distinctive rhythm, which not only accompanies but also mimics the trundling of the two millstones (one on top of the other) that completes a full circle.<sup>4</sup> Yet another is their social context; because the singing makes the task of grinding easier, usually two women—one old, one young—sing

the jatsār together. This arrangement facilitates the process of ideological transmission, in that the social values (anxieties, concerns, negative/positive behaviors) familiar to the older woman are conveyed to the younger. In such circumstances, it is the voice not just of experience but also of female authority (i.e., one's mother-in-law) that instructs the subordinate female (i.e., the daughter-in-law).<sup>5</sup>

The punishments accorded for transgression and resistance is an important theme of these songs, the narratives of which fall into three broad categories.<sup>6</sup> First are songs that describe women's daily lives in their conjugal homes, along with the bleakness of their situation. Second are songs about conflict within families and close kin and how this conflict is (or is not) to be resolved. Family relationships in these narratives are characterized as potentially, in many cases actually, antagonistic, reflecting the turbulence experienced by marrying daughters-in-law. Third are songs that narrate, in some detail, the consequences for women who transgress a variety of behavioral norms, such as breaking caste boundaries, violating codes of honor, and so on.

#### JATSĀR SINGERS

How the women who remember and sing these ballads relate to them became an important question for me, one unearthed through the wide-ranging conversations I had with the singers during recording sessions. Here I follow Narayan's insights from an article published in 1995 about Dundes's suggestion back in 1966 that while a focus on context is important to ascertaining the meaning of folksongs, in order to reflect on how the genres are indigenously conceived the researcher must also actively elicit the meaning of the folklore from the folk themselves (Narayan 1993, 178). The differences between versions of the same song may serve to highlight minor distinctions between the song repertoires of the upper and lower castes.

Meena Devi, a young Brahmin woman from village Misraulia, Chhapra district, in Bihar, who has memorized hundreds of songs, says that senior female members of her family sang jatsārs every day, so she was raised on a rich diet of songs in her natal home. In her marital home the tradition of morning singing to the accompaniment of the jāta has continued and enriched her repertoire. Due to her vast and varied repertoire, Meena



9 Meena Devi (Brahmin) in Misraulia, Chhapra.

Devi could often sing for hours at a stretch without pause. Once when a group of Dalit singers in the same village sang a lewd version of a song to embarrass the upper caste males, an incident I describe in the fieldwork section of the introduction to this volume, Meena Devi was quick to distance herself from the Dalit version, emphasizing that her songs were “not like that,” that is, as outspoken, challenging, or subversive as those sung by the lower castes.

Shanti Tewari, another Brahmin woman of village Atara in Jaunpur, says that whenever there is a wedding in the family the food preparations stretch out over several months, and the grain and spices required for the feasts must be prepared in advance. Shanti says, “Only intense concentrated activity and collaboration between several close and distant kin in the village makes it possible to get these tasks completed in time. Kinswomen must lend a hand.” When kinswomen come together in these task teams, assisted by the village women of other castes, they also get to hear and learn new songs.

In Atara village, a Rajput (Thakur) woman confided to me that she regretted forgetting whole stanzas of many of the *jāta* songs she had once known as she now no longer engages in grinding activity. However, by mimicking the semi-circular motion of the hands across the grinding



10a Shanti Tewari and friend enjoy an afternoon singing session with their Kahar helper, Tengra (on floor).



10b Shanti Tewari (foreground) with upper-caste singing companions.



11 Shanti Tewari and singers at Shanti's doorway, Atara village, Jaunpur.

stone (jāta), the woman was able to remember the words of some of these songs from her youth. Often during recording sessions, when groups of women sang *jatsārs* as a team, the genre's ponderous narrative style generated plenty of discussion among the singers about their own lives and struggles. During one of these recording sessions in Sadiapur, Sitara Devi remarked: "You're hearing us laugh so much and we're having so much fun now, but *Dīdī*, these songs are the saddest songs ever! You know, sometimes we have tears streaming down our eyes, as we sing. Tears will be streaming down your face too, when you really think about the tragedy in the song." Regarding the air of tragedy in these narratives and the desperation that leads the protagonists of the songs to commit suicide, Malti Devi explained, "In the songs, women always protect their honor, that's because they are great *satīs* [formidably chaste women]."

For my recordings of this and other genres, I relied on Munraji of village Barsara, a woman in possession of a rich and varied repertoire. A Mallah by caste, Munraji is marginalized by virtue of belonging to one of the so-called backward castes in the region, situated on the lowest rungs of agrarian and caste hierarchies. Munraji became blind as a result of an attack of chickenpox when she was barely seven years old. As she explains





12 Rajput singer in Atara trying to remember grinding songs.

it, it was the year of the great flood when *mātā* (the chickenpox deity) took away her eyes (“*jis sāl barā būrā āyā rahā*”). Perhaps to compensate for her lack of this critical faculty, Munraji developed a sharp memory and a keen sense of touch that enables her to live independently. She was married very young and, despite the handicap, has raised four children, all of them now adults. Two of her sons are married and live in separate household units in the village.

Munraji clearly appreciates her neighbors’ helpful gestures, though I have always marveled at her remarkable self-sufficiency, cultivating greens and *arhar* pulse in the land adjoining her backyard. She also has a couple of goats that she grazes in the tall grasses along the river at the edge of village Barsara. She cooks simple meals efficiently, and often I have seen her borrow one of her neighbors’ fires, once they have lighted their hearths for the evening meal. It could be said that she is the memory-keeper of this village. Munraji is much respected, both because of her age but also because of her self-sufficiency, her fair and clear thinking, and her integrative approach in dealing with village and caste matters. As she remembers hundreds of songs from a range of genres, she is the natural lead singer at collective gatherings.



- 13 Munraji, Barsara village's memory-keeper, stands outside her hut with Subhavati and her grandchildren.

Subhavati of the Kahar (water-carriers) caste, also of Barsara village and Munraji's friend, is in her forties and, unlike other women in her community, has only one teenage daughter. She and her husband are both vegetable vendors. Her skills lead to her recent unanimous nomination by the village women as leader of the newly formed group-lending society. Subhavati starts her day by going to the wholesale market where she purchases the basket of vegetables she will sell that day. She then sits at a busy intersection at the edge of Khutahan town, close to Jaunpur. She usually manages by the end of the day to sell everything, but if some vegetables remain unsold, she walks through the village calling out her wares. Subhavati is a successful vendor and although her husband sells his vegetables by bicycle over a wider distance, Subhavati manages to make more profits. She explains her strategy as follows: "I have a number of permanent clients who only buy vegetables from me because I am willing to give loans and often advance them goods even if they may not have the amount to make the purchases. My clients know that they can always pay me later if they are short of cash. I also try to add (*cungī*) a small token free gift for an accompanying child, such as a tomato or radish. It makes mothers and children happy and then they always come back to



14 Subhavati in Barsara village, Jaunpur.

me. I am good at calculation and remember to make a mental note of all the loans.”

Owing to her highly practical and enthusiastic approach, Subhavati is recognized as a keen businesswoman. Her hard work is admired, and she is a role model for many, partly because of her ability to hold her own in the male world. She is keen to give her daughter a good education. Yet, despite her obvious pragmatism and solid common sense, our exchange revealed another side to her personality:

“I intend to expand my business once I am free of the demons that visit me,” said Subhavati.

“What demons?” I asked.

“You know, the ones that possess you and will not leave. My entire body is getting very weak because of this. I think my bones are turning watery. That’s why I go every Thursday to Ghaus Pir to exorcise them.”

Ghaus Pir, located in Khutahan near Jaunpur, is the revered shrine of a medieval Sufi saint and is visited by both Hindus and Muslims. Munraji and Subhavati of Barsara often sing together and are familiar with each



15 The aged Bhagirathi Devi sings *jatsār* with her friend, Asha, in Chachakpur village.

other's repertoires, encouraging, prompting, and completing each other's songs. Bhagirathi Devi and Urmila Maurya of Chachakpur village form another such pair, whose repertoires and tonal qualities complement each other, making the recording of songs a scintillating experience. In their explanations of the songs' lyrics, women often compare these narratives with their own lives, remarking, for instance, "see my husband left me when I was so young," or "I too had such a problem when I was married."

Munraji, when asked about the meaning of a particular song has often playfully remarked, "You are a Professor and yet you do not know this simple thing!" before launching into a detailed explanation of the song.

#### WORK SONGS

The recordings presented here allow us to discern patterns and themes in women's preoccupations. I recorded the following song during a session with Bhagirathi Devi and Urmila Maurya. They belong to the Maurya caste of vegetable growers and market gardeners in Chachak village on the outskirts of Jaunpur. Chachakpur, one of the more prosperous villages in the region, is known for the commercial cultivation of flowers, and its relative prosperity is due in part to its proximity to Jaunpur city,

which facilitates access to urban markets. When the recording was made in 2003, Bhagirathi Devi, a small farmer, was well over seventy years old and Urmila was in her fifties. The song they sang provides a good introduction to the jatsār. Haricharan Maurya, with whose observations I began this chapter, himself took up its refrain, citing it as the most representative of the genre.

I

BROTHER DON'T TELL THEM

*Sāsu birnā jo ailen pahunariyā ho na*  
*Sasu kahu banāv jevanravā ho na?*  
*Kothilā mein bāti bahuta sarlī kodaiyā ho na*  
*Bahuvā retvā mein chakvāre ka sagvā ho na*  
*Sāsu kāhu banau jevanravā ho na?*  
*Sāsu sathiyā puthiyā rinhhai bhatvā ho na*  
*Sāsu mungiyā dariyā rinhhai partī ho na*  
*Āva jevahin je baithe sār bahnoiyā ho na*  
*Are Rama bhaiyā ke dhuburkin hain āsuiyā ho na*  
*Bahini re bipat tohre upra bāti ho na*  
*Bahini bari re bipat jevanravā ho na*  
*Hamri bipat bhaiyā māi āge jinni kahyo ho na*  
*Māi maciyā baithlī carkhā katain ho na*  
*Māi carkhā pataki lagiyain rovain ho na*  
*Hamri bipat bhaiyā bahinī āge jin kahiyō ho na*  
*Bhaiyā bipati sunahi bahini sasure na jaihain ho na*  
*Hamri bipat bhaiyā bhaujī āge jinni kahyo na*  
*Bhaujī bipati sunei lagihein rovai ho na*

Mother-in-law, when my brother comes visiting, you know,  
 Mother-in-law, what shall I cook for the meal?  
 “There’s plenty of spoilt kodon grain in the loft,  
 Daughter-in law, some salad leaves in the sandy field.”  
 Mother-in-law, what shall I cook for the meal?  
 Mother-in-law, coarse rice I’ll cook  
 And ground Moong dāl.  
 When husband and brother-in-law sat together, you know,  
 O Rama, brother’s tears started to roll.  
 “Sister dear, such hardship has befallen you.

Sister, your life is so difficult.”

“My hardships, brother, to our mother don’t tell.

Mother seated on the cot spinning, you know,

Tossing aside the spinning wheel, will burst into tears, you know.

Brother, don’t tell of my hardships to sister.

Brother! hearing of my hardships, sister will refuse to go to her conjugal home.

Brother, don’t tell of my hardships to sister-in-law.

On hearing them, sister-in-law will start to weep.”

The bleak reality young women face in their conjugal homes is the poignant theme of this song. The relative indifference of the mother-in-law to the respect that should be accorded a bride’s brother, along with her suggestions for the items to be prepared, compounds the bride’s misery. As we will see in chapter 3, the song hints at cultural sanctions against visits by members of the bride’s natal family. The withdrawal of hospitality appropriate to a visiting guest emerges as but one of the mechanisms conjugal families deploy to discourage periodic visits from brides’ natal family members, thus isolating brides in their marital homes. The song serves as a warning to the brothers of brides that even they can never be sure of the treatment they will receive in the *sasurāl* of their sisters. The song provokes its listeners and singers to reflect on the bride’s state of mind after her conjugal household snubs her brother, greeting his ritual visit with calculated indifference.

The song appears to illustrate the rationale for *anuloma*, or hypergamy, the preferred north Indian form of marriage, in which daughters ideally move from lower to upper echelons of caste hierarchies. I explore the implications of this principle in chapter 3. Some scholarly consensus does exist about the preference for this norm, and indeed the rule appears to have been devised to support women in adapting to their new homes and to spare them the pangs of deprivation as seen here. The folklore, however, is replete with tales that violate this norm, despite its apparently preferred status.

The following tale describes societal expectations that require married women to furnish proofs of fidelity and chastity and legitimate the rights of members of the patrilineage to demand them. The narrative indicates the stringent controls brides face within their conjugal homes. While this particular song was sung by a large group of Dalit women, the values of

chastity and morality, and indeed the motif of testing women's chastity, has long been associated with upper-caste women as in Sita's trial by fire.

2

SHIMMERING NECKLACE AND SIMMERING VAT

*Sātahu Bhaiyā ke Satmal Bahiniyā ho na*  
*Bahinī tohen lāibe surujū harauvā ho na*  
*Barah barisvā laute padesiyā ho na*  
*Satmal tinhi letu suruju harauvā ho na*  
*Paehari orhi gaili govanvā ho na*  
*Unke sasurū mangaitin pāni datuan ho na*  
*Paniyā dhulkat jhalkat suruju harauvā ho na*  
*Kahān paiaiyu suruju harauvā ho na*  
*Nata bhaiyā ke Satmal bahiniyā ho na*  
*Sasuru Bhaiyā dīnhi suruju harauvā ho na*  
*Paehri orhi gaili gavanvā ho na*  
*Unke jethau mangaitin pāni datuan ho na*  
*Unke devar*  
*Unke samiyā mangaitin datuan pāni*  
*Paniyā urail jhalkat surujū harauvā ho na*  
*Dhanā kahān pāiu suruju harauvā*  
*Satahi bahiniyā*  
*Parabhu Bhaiyā dibin suruju harauvā ho na*  
*Ham nāhi manbai Dhanā tohari baciniyā ho na*  
*Dhana ham lebe dharami karahiyā ho na*  
*Morai pānco barvā Bhaiyā mitvā ho na*  
*Nauva baba āge khabarvā janāvau ho na*  
*Nai kabe hamre Babāji ke agavā ho na*  
*Ramā tohrī betī bhabe bahi karihavā ho na*  
*Āri āri baithahin gānvu ke logavā ho na*  
*Rama bicavān me dharamī karhaiyā ho na*  
*Āva rove bhaiyā Bābā ho na*  
*Betī āj jau sanaca thārahū*  
*Betī tohein jake dalvā khanaibe ho na*  
*Tuhi galat*  
*Beti jīya the khan ke garaibe ho na*  
*Bicva ho*

*Rama carhī gain dharamī karahiṃā ho na*  
*Khaulat telvā mein Satmal kudein ho na*  
*Dhadhakī aginiyā bujhi gailī ho na*  
*Are mere satilī raniyā chuti gailī ho na*

Seven brothers have a sister, Satmal, you know.

“For you, sister, a shimmering necklace we’ll bring.”

Twelve years later return the travellers, you know.

“Sister, are you there, a shimmering necklace we brought, you know.”

Mother says, “Brothers! It’s only her laughter that is left behind.

All dressed up, Satmal was sent off to her marital home.”

Her father-in-law says, “Fetch the neem brush and water.”

In the water he sees the necklace reflected.

“Where did you get that necklace?” he asks, you know.

“Sister of seven brothers, Satmal am I.

Father-in-law, my brothers gave me the shimmering necklace, you know.”

All dressed up, Satmal for her marital home departed!

Elder brother-in-law asks for the neem brush and water.

Younger brother-in-law asks for the neem brush and water.

“Whence came you by that necklace, wife?”

“Lord, my brothers bought me this shimmering necklace.”

“Wife, your words cannot be believed.

A test of truth from you I want with the shimmering vat.”

My seven brothers are friends.

Barber, you must inform my father.

“Your daughter is to be tested with the heated oil vat.”

On the sides are seated the village folk.

In the center the vat of truth is ready.

Brothers and father, come crying.

“Daughter, we’ll bury you right here with our own hands.

If indeed you are found not to be true.”

In the center the vat of truth is ready.

Into the flames, Satmal leaps.

Into the piping hot oil, Satmal leaps.

The raging flames are immediately extinguished.

“O my true Rani, she left me, alas!”



The homelessness of the woman is poignantly underlined in the unexpected last stanza, where her brothers and father, rather than confirm that the jewel was indeed a gift from them, proceed to endorse her need to furnish the required proof. The statement that they will bury her should she be proved untrue serves as a chilling reminder to all women of the folly of relying on long-term support from their natal homes. Thus a woman's inherent lack of security in both her natal and conjugal homes serves as a powerful weapon of control for ensuring her conformity with established norms and behavioral expectations. Hence, even the abundant filial affection women blessed with as many as seven brothers may enjoy is likely to be quickly withdrawn. Since it is a family's women that represent the honor of its lineage, we see how male members of both the natal and conjugal households are equally concerned about upholding the woman's chastity. The song alerts women to the reality that tests of fidelity, while certainly more stringent for newlyweds, are likely to remain a continuous feature of their married lives.

#### FAMILY CONFLICTS AND THEIR RESOLUTION

This section focuses on songs that attempt to resolve the tensions inherent in the family unit and in the several dyads the family structure comprises. As we will see, the resolutions are violent, leaving almost no room for ambiguity or compromise. The songs depict various scenarios that capture the threatening nature of these relationships and of related problems such as incest, positing in the process extraordinary solutions. Embedded in these solutions are forms of resistance and, very occasionally, clues about how one might subvert existing relations of power.

### 3

#### PREGNANT SOLUTIONS: DISGUISE

*Phūl lorhe gāil re Rama, malin phūlvārīā, nu re ki*  
*Are phūlva lorhat re Nando, are rahelā garabhiyā, nu re ki*  
*Piyā pardes e Nando, are devarū larakivā nu re ki*  
*Iho garabhiyā e Nando, kekere sire dharab nu re ki*  
*Hajipur hatiyā re Bhaujo, Bhaiyā ham dekhnī nu re ki*  
*Malini ke sangavā e Bhaujo, dhūinyan le ramāvale nu re ki*  
*Kholi da chunariyā e Bhaujo, re panhelī lugariyā nu re ki*

*Hathvā ke lehalu e Bhaujo, bāns ke chabeliyā nu re ki  
 Netuin bhes dharahī e ai Bhaujo, Bhaiyā khojī ail nu re ki  
 Eik galī galī e Ram, ki duī galī galī nu re ki  
 ūncī re jharokhvā me carhī, nirkhlean Bhaiyā nu re ki  
 Godnā ke godavle e Netuin, Kāī lebū danvā nu re ki ?  
 Bahiyan bhārī godlī e Ram, kehuniyā bhar godalī nu re ki  
 Tīsar godan godlī e Ram, tuhūn chīnhal nu re ki  
 Deh tore thakau e Raja ji, bahiyān lāge ghunvā nu re ki  
 Tohre kāranva e Ram, Netūin bhes dhailī nu re ki.*

Scented blossoms, O Rama! in the gardener's garden.  
 The heavy scent caused, O sister-in-law! conception in the womb.  
 My husband abroad, sister-in-law! and brother-in-law, barely a child.  
 This pregnancy, O sister-in-law! at whose head, to attribute?  
 At the Hajipur market, O brother's wife! I spotted my brother.  
 With the gardener's daughter, O sister-in-law! in a smokescreen enveloped.  
 "Undo your fancy saree brother's wife, put on the threadbare garment.  
 In your hands, pick up, O brother's wife! a bamboo basket.  
 Disguised as a Netuin, O brother's wife! Go seek out elder brother."  
 The first street, went she, the second street, she went.  
 From a window, looking out, brother she spied.  
 "To make the tattoo, hey Netuin! how much will you charge?"  
 An armful she tattooed, O Ram! until the elbows, she did.  
 On the third tattoo she was recognized.  
 "May your body rot and your arms disintegrate  
 Only because of you, O Ram! this Netuin<sup>7</sup> disguise I adopted."

MEENA DEVI MISRAULIA, CHHAPRA

This jatsār provides an ingenious solution to an illegitimate pregnancy, and thus pushes against many societal norms. In this sense it echoes the so-called bedtrick tales common to several cultures (Doniger 2000). First, here it is none other than the brother's own sister who finds the solution, pointing to a shared and secret understanding between these kinswomen, who are traditionally portrayed as antagonists. The plan and its successful execution depend on the resourcefulness of the sister-in-law, and the fact that the absent brother is himself spied in town in an alliance with the gardener's daughter somehow mitigates the enormity of the subterfuge. Here, when the disguised pregnant woman is recognized by her husband,

her trick backfires, and the option to prove the “legitimacy” of her pregnancy is now closed. Instead, her curses suggest that having discovered her husband’s infidelity, she can claim that it was the need to uncover his dalliance that led her to adopt the disguise. The lower-caste Netuin’s disguise and the art of tattooing clearly made for greater geographical mobility and appear to have been available to women in distress.

The song is easily recognized as a jatsār through its typical line endings of “O Ram,” which along with “Nu re ki” and “Arai Rama” are common in this genre. These line endings impart a rhythmic quality to the song and coincide with the circular hand motions of the singers.

4

## SISTER-IN-LAW FOR A TATTOO

*Are āni are āni Sasujī, ghūmne tūi aniyā nu re ki*  
*Are kām kar le āyi Sasujī, godaitī godhanvā Sasujī*  
*Are godhnā ke godainī Netuī, are mānge lāgin danvā nu re ki*  
*Toharā ke debai Netui, Dāl bhar sonavā nu re ki*  
*Dāl bhar rūpavā nu re ki, godhanā ke godainī Netuī*  
*Ihe debau danvā nu re ki, āgi to lagāibe Sanvariya*  
*Are Dāl bhar sonavā nu re ki, are Dāl bhar rupavā nu re ki*  
*Are chotkī nanadiyā Sanvariya, ihe dayei de danvā nu re ki*  
*Chotki nanadiyā Sanvariya, are dei dailī danvā nu re ki*  
*Har phari āile Saudagar, kudariya phāri āyele nu re ki*  
*Are oriyā kar baithat Saudagar, nīchā mūri gārile nu re ki*  
*Sabh kehu lauke Dhaniya, anganā se dūarā nu re ki*  
*Are chotki bahiniya Dhaniya, kahan u diāyulī nu re ki*  
*Purba se āndhi āule, are pachimā se barkhā nu re ki*  
*Are ahi me āve Svāmijī, are bahinī udhī āili nu re ki*  
*Pīsū pīsū āve Dhaniya, are jiyavā se satuiyā nu re ki*  
*Are hamahū to jayene he Rama, are Bahinī ka udesvā nu re ki*  
*Ek kos gaile Bhaiya, are dūī kos gailen nu re ki*  
*Are netuā ke sirikiyā ho dhāile, Didiyā bari khar nu re ki*  
*Calu calu āhe didiyā, are āpan ū desvā nu re ki*  
*Are purvā se āndhī ho āile, pachim se barkhā nu re ki*  
*Are ohī me āye u Netuā, are didiyā udhī āvalī nu re ki*  
*Khāilā mai Netuvā ke bhatvā, are godiyā paisi sutlī nu re ki*  
*Are Bhaujī godailī godanvā, uhe dailī danvā nu re ki*

“Oh! look who comes, mother-in-law roaming around, who comes.  
 Work done, mother-in-law, allow me to get tattooed.”  
 Oh! Netuin, the tattooer of tattoos, began to ask for her fee.  
 “To you I’ll give Netuin a basketful of gold, a basketful of silver.  
 To the tattooer of tattoos, the Netuin, this is what I’ll give as fee.”  
 “To hell with your fee, young one, the basketful of gold and basketful of silver.  
 Your husband’s younger sister, O young one. It’s her I demand as my fee.”  
 So the sister was given away as fee.  
 After ploughing the husband returned, having wielded the sickle, he returned.  
 On the porch he sat, the husband, head hanging down, he sat.  
 “Everyone I can see, wife, from the courtyard to the door.  
 Younger sister, O wife, oh where did you send her away?”  
 “In the east rose a storm, in the west, lashed the rain.  
 In that disappeared the sister-in-law.”  
 “Grind and pack for me, wife, some nourishing sattu food.  
 Oh, I must go on a journey for the purpose of finding my sister.”  
 Two miles went the brother, four miles went the brother.  
 Holding a stick at Netua’s place, the sister stands.  
 “Come on sister, let’s go, let’s return to our land.”  
 In the east rose a storm, in the west lashed the rain.  
 In that O Netua, my sister disappeared.  
 Oh, but the sister, she refused to return.  
 “I have shared the Netua’s rice and slept in his lap.  
 Your wife, O brother, got herself tattooed and for that, she gave me away.”

MEENA DEVI, MISRAULIA, CHHAPRA

While the opposition between a husband’s wife and his sister remains the subtext in this song, this opposition is expressed in an unusual way as the wife gives away her sister-in-law to the tattooer, thus permanently eliminating her presence from the household without actually killing her. The tension inherent in this relationship and its perceived worthlessness to the wife appears as the fulfillment of the unexpressed wish of wives in general. Commensal and conjugal relations, once entered into, are irreversible, and the narrative powerfully underlines this fact. That the Netuin household of itinerant tattooers, where the sister has taken residence, numbers among the lowest of the lower castes, with its polluting overtones, doubly underscores the permanency of the sister’s fall in status.

An acceptance of her fate, as ordained by the brother's wife, resolves the tension, but the last stanza also provides an interesting twist, for as the mean wife prepares the worst fate possible for her sister-in-law, the sister accepts it with unexpected aplomb. In refusing to return to her former world she subverts the system in an unexpected way so that the shoe is now on the other foot. By shaming her brother's wife in willingly acquiescing to her fate in the Netuin's home, the sister also registers her resistance to established caste norms.

If, on the other hand, the wife had connived to give away her sister-in-law at the sister's own behest, the above scenario would be cast in an entirely different light. In this case, the wife would appear as her sister-in-law's abettor and would be complicit in her elopement, given that no other alternatives to her union were available. Indeed, an individual's ingenious resolution of such problems, with minimal disturbance to the established social order and patriarchal controls, remains the motivating force behind these narratives.<sup>8</sup>

5

## MOTHER-IN-LAW'S POISON

*Ghar līpe goilī Rama, sāsū ki irikhā nu re Ram,*  
*Gorvā tari parle e Sāsujī gabuvan sarapvā nu re Ram.*  
*Morā khātīr āho Bahūā saurā machariā nu re Ram.*  
*Mūriyā se pūncchvā e Sāsu duarā bigī āilu nu e Ram,*  
*Bīce ke guriavā e Sāsujī hardī lagāilī re Ram.*  
*Sabh dīn dihalu e Sāsu hudiyā ke bhātava nu e Ram,*  
*Tutahi bhariavā nu e Ram, āju kāhe dihalu e Sāsu, jī*  
*Phulahā thāriavā nu e Ram, dhānava ke bhātva nu e Ram?*  
*Sabh dīn dihalu e Sāsu, mūriyā se pūncchvā nu e Ram,*  
*Āju kāhe dihalu e Sāsujī, bīc ke guriavā nu e Ram?*  
*Khāt pīat e Sāsujī, bari nik lāgale nu e Ram.*  
*Āncve ke beriā e Sāsujī, ghūrme la kaparvā nu e Ram.*  
*Sūti rah āle he bahuā, sasur ke sejiyavā nu e Ram.*  
*Har phāri āile saudāgar, kudariā phāri āile nu e Ram.*  
*Oriā tar baiṭhat saudāgar nīcha mūri gārle nu e Ram.*  
*Sabh kehū lauke e āmā, āngnā se dūarā nu e Ram.*  
*Patari tiriavā e āmā, kahān rūsi gailī nu e Ram?*  
*Patari tiriavā e Babuā, jariye ke bigaral e Ram,*

*Sutalī bāri āho e Babuā, sasur ke sejiyavā nu e Ram.  
 Ek sont marle saudagar, duī sont marle nu e Ram.  
 Ānkh se na taklī sanvariya, mukh se na bolali nu e Ram.  
 Javne mahuriā e āmā, dhaniyā ke dihanī nu e Ram,  
 Āhe re mahuriā e āmā, ham ke khilaitu nu e Ram.  
 Dhaniko mualake e āmā, Ganga dahvāib nu e Ram,  
 Candan gāch katvaib nu e Ram.  
 Tobare mualke e āmā, gādh me dabaibū nu e Ram.  
 Dhanike mualke e āmā, bābhnā nevat bu nu e Ram  
 Tobre mualke e āmā, kagavā nevat bu ne Ram*

Went to mop the floor and faced mother-in-law's bitterness.  
 Under the feet, O mother-in-law, I see the poisonous cobra.  
 For you, O daughter-in-law, the cobra, for me the Saur pond fish.<sup>9</sup>  
 The head and tail, O mother-in-law, I went and threw out.  
 The middle portion, O mother-in-law, I wrapped in turmeric.  
 Everyday you gave me, mother-in-law, the kodon gruel,  
 Served in a broken platter, then why today, mother-in-law,  
 The precious metal dinner plate and the rare rice meal?  
 Everyday you gave me, mother-in-law, the fish head or tail,  
 then why today, mother-in-law, the tender middle portion?  
 The meal, mother-in-law, tasted so good.  
 When washing up after the meal, mother-in-law, the head began to spin.  
 "Go sleep, daughter-in-law, on the bed of father-in-law."  
 Having ploughed, returned the son, wielding the sickle he returned.  
 On the porch he seated himself, head sunk low.  
 "Everyone, O mother, I see, from the courtyard to the door.  
 My slim wife, O mother, where is she hiding, in pique?"  
 "Your slim wife, my son, a born slut!  
 There she sleeps, O son, on the bed of her father-in-law."  
 One blow he dealt her, then the second blow.  
 Not an eye did she raise, the beauty, nor a word did she speak.  
 "The very poison, O mother, you gave to my wife,  
 The same poison, O mother, feed it to me.  
 My wife's remains, O mother, into the Ganga I'll consign, sandalwood trees I'll  
 get cut.  
 Your remains, O mother, under the earth will be buried.

At my wife's funeral, O mother, Brahmins I'll invite to feast.  
On your funeral, O mother, black crows I'll invite."

MEENA DEVI, MISRAULIA, CHHAPRA

In this macabre tale, the simmering antagonism between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, an integral part of north Indian folklore, reaches extreme proportions, with the senior woman plotting and successfully poisoning her daughter-in-law while also attempting to prove her guilty of incest with her father-in-law. In a patriarchal context that reveres the mothers of sons, the ending of this song comes as something of a surprise, for here the son actually acknowledges his mother's brutality. The son's resolve not to carry out his mother's last rites in accordance with scriptural norms, namely, with fragrant sandalwood for the funeral pyre and the feeding of Brahmins, is especially interesting. The last lines allude to the son preference in Indian society, which is largely predicated on the ritual responsibility of sons to ensure the parental soul's proper transition to the next world.

The song also follows the recognizable formula characteristic of *jatsārs*. For instance, to build the tension, the singer underlines again and again how this particular day is different from other days. Again, when the husbands of these songs return, invariably after ploughing, they ominously wield a sickle or an axe. They see "everyone from the courtyard to the door," except their "slim" wives. This is the cue for the big troubles in store for the *patari tiriyaṅvā* (slim wife)! The husbands of these tales are quick to inflict violence on their wives at the instigation of their mothers and only repent when it is too late.

6

THE TRAVELER'S BENGALIN

*Tuhūn to jaibā rāur Muniya, se hamrā ke kā le aiya re Muniya?*  
*Toharā ke laiba Muniya, kasma re choliyā, se apana ke purbī Bengālin rāur*  
*Muniya*

*Jab hun Bengālin goyrā bīc āile, se ūnce re mandiliyā nīc bhail ho re*  
*Jab ho Bengālin dūarva bīc āilī, ki sasur ke pagariyā nīc bhail ho*  
*Jab ho Bengālin dūarva bīc gailī, ho sāsū ki akiliyā nāhin cale re*  
*Maciyā baithal raurā sāsū barhaita, se eik hi akilyā batlaitī.*  
*Pisiyā me gehuān pakiehā me pūriya, se parīc parīc māhurī dariyā.*  
*Paḥile je pūriya Bengālini ke diḥā, se tab khaihen kul parivār rāur Muniya*

*Khāt pāt Muniya barni nibhan lāgele, āncve ke beriyā bāthe kapār rāur Muniya*  
*Se sūti rahā sasur ke sejiyā rāur Muniya,*  
*Se sab din dīhalu sāsū tutī khativā, se āj kāhe sasur ke sejiyā?*  
*Har phāri aile Sāmi kudariyā phāri aile, se oriyā to nīcha muh garli*  
*Sab kahu lauke angnā se duarā, se pūrbi Bengālin kahān gailī rāur Muniya*  
*Pūrbi Bengālin Babua jāri eik bigral, Se sūtal bāri sasur ke sejihvā*  
*Kānc ke katlin Sāmi cirkī bānulin, se māre lagre sobaran satakvā*  
*Ānkh se na taklī Muniya, Muh se na bolālī*  
*Se kaun mahuriā ā dihil rāur Muniya?*

“When you go on your journey, pray, what will you bring for me?”

“For you I’ll get a form-fitting blouse, for myself, an eastern Bengalin.”<sup>10</sup>

When the Bengalin arrived in our midst, the imposing temple just diminished in size.

When the Bengalin came to the door, Father-in-law’s turban was lowered.

When that Bengalin went through the door, Mother-in-law’s senses stopped functioning.

From her perch on the cot, mother-in-law, just one piece of advice, she gave.

“In the flour you grind to bake the bread, in that flour, add poison.

The first bread, serve to the Bengalin, then serve the other family members.”

She ate and drank and then the headache came, “Go sleep on father-in-law’s bed.”

“Everyday you gave me mother-in-law, a broken cot, why today, father-in-law’s bed?”

Returning from the field kudar in hand, husband sat on the porch with bowed head.

“Everyone is visible from the courtyard to the door, Bengalin, where did she disappear?”

“That eastern Bengalin from birth, a slut, sleeps on father-in-law’s bed.”

Of the kachnar tree, husband fashioned a stick, then rained down blows on her, he did.

With her eyes she did not see, she uttered nothing.

What kind of poison was given to her?

MEENA DEVI, MISRAULIA, CHHAPRA

The anxieties of the wife who must stay behind while her husband migrates to far-off lands is the subject of this narrative. Calcutta, home to



the Bengalin of this tale, has long been the favored destination of migrant workers from the Bhojpuri-speaking belt. Since the days of the East India Company, and throughout the history of industrialization, the region drew its workforce from eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The songs richly document the absence of male family members, who went away for years during which time they invariably entered into second marriages and alliances with local women. Folksongs recount how men succumbed to the charms of the women of Bengal and in the process lost the urge to return. Back home the trauma of separation and the break up of family life was devastating, and its impact has yet to be adequately understood.

In this song, the absent son's return with his new wife from Bengal causes so much alarm, sadness, and loss of face within the village community that the only solution appears to be to murder her. In these songs, aggrieved women redress the wrongs they perceive their migrant husbands have done them. Again, we encounter the plotting and devious mother-in-law, who offers the fatal suggestion about sleeping on the father-in-law's bed, calculated to trigger her son's murderous response.

7

## SATI FOR A BROTHER-IN-LAW

*Apanā osarvā e Tikuli are jhāre lāgi kesiyā nu re ki*  
*Are parai to gaile Rama, are bhasur ke najariyā nu re ki*  
*Gharī rāt bitale ho Rama, paharī rāt bitale nu re ki*  
*Are ādhi rāt āve Rama, are bhasur tāti phāre lāge nu re ki*  
*Are piyavā pardesiyā nu re ki, hamrā biyehūā oh Rama*  
*Are larrikā nadanavā nu re ki, are eihon to hoibe Rama*  
*Are bhasurjī hamare nu re ki, tohrā biyehūā ke Tikuli*  
*Are belā tāl mārlā nu re ki, are chandanā lakariyā ai Tikuli*  
*Are cirwhā sajaulī nu re ki, Gor to lāgi bhasurjī*  
*Are kari le minattiyā nu re ki, Are tani aisā āve bhasurjī*  
*Are sāmī dekh leutī nu re ki, lālī lālī doliyā ai Rama*  
*Are sabujī oharavā nu re ki, are laggi uh te gaile ho Rama*  
*Are batison kaharavā nu re ki*  
*Eki kos gailī ho Tikuli, are duī kos gailī nu re ki*  
*tīsar kos āiele ho Rama, are chilhiyā nu re ki*  
*Gor tore lāgi bhasurjī, are karilā minatiyā nu re ki*  
*tani aisa karihā bhasurjī, are agiyā ani dihatī nu re ki*

*Are sāmī mukh tārtī nu re ki, jab le ke āve bhasurjī*  
*Are agiyā āni gaiylā nu re ki are tab le ke āve Tikuli*  
*Are kari minitiyā nu re ki sat ke tū hoibai sāmī*  
*Are hamrī biyehuvā nu re ki, are aggiyā ūthi jaitā nu re ki*  
*Sat ke to haile sāmī are ghar ke biyehuva nu re ki*  
*Āncre se agiyā he ūthle Sāmī mukh tarle nu re ki*  
*Jo ham janatī e Tikuli aisan chal karatiu nu re ki aisan dhokhā karitī nu re ki*

On her porch, Tikuli started brushing her tresses.  
 Oh was cast on her, the glance of elder brother-in-law.  
 The night hour drew near and its first phase passed.  
 When midnight came, elder brother-in-law began banging the door.  
 “My husband, O Ram! but an adolescent  
 and this, O Ram, my respected elder brother-in-law”  
 “Your husband Tikuli, lies dead under the Bel tree.  
 With sandalwood, Tikuli, I have prepared the pyre.”  
 “I fall at your feet, brother-in-law, entreat you, brother-in-law  
 if just for a moment, brother-in-law I could see him.”  
 Red palanquins readied, with green canopies.  
 Already in attendance are thirty-two palanquin carriers.  
 One kos<sup>11</sup> she went, Tikuli, and the next she went.  
 On the third kos came the funeral pyre.  
 “Fall at your feet, elder brother-in-law, entreat you, brother-in-law,  
 Please fetch the light for the pyre.”  
 “If indeed I’m a chaste and faithful wife,  
 Then let the fire rise from my bosom.”  
 “If indeed I am a chaste and wedded wife  
 Then from my bosom cloth should rise  
 The fire offered to the husband’s pyre.”  
 And the fire leapt from her bosom.  
 “Alas, had I known, Tikuli, this deception you would play on me!”

MEENA DEVI, MISRAULIA, CHHAPRA

This song elaborates one of the many *sati* narratives<sup>12</sup> that celebrate the chastity of married women and their attempts to protect their honor in the face of threats from even their closest of kin, including their husbands’ brothers. In this song, which takes place in a region where reverence and

respect for an elder brother-in-law is expressed by maintaining one's distance and by avoiding close encounters as one would with one's father-in-law, the practice of sati is endorsed by the wife's preference for death over an incestuous relationship with her brother-in-law. In north Indian folklore, it is through sati that chaste women establish their honor and successfully restore and even elevate their own status, along with that of their conjugal families.

Ironically, while the offending brother-in-law appears to remain blameless for succumbing to the attraction, the woman of his attentions must die for the social order to be restored. Through the act of death staged in the trial by fire, women not only avert the misfortune of a threatening or illicit relationship but also secure for themselves an elevated status that is denied to them in their quotidian lives. This recurrent theme confirms the presence of social tensions, particularly where the threat is so close to home, with veiling and the minimizing of contact between women and their elder brothers-in-law being two ways the social order has sought to manage and contain such tensions. The horror that attends suspected incest with one's father-in-law, for which the women in the above songs pay with their lives, here extends to elder brothers-in-law.

#### TRANSGRESSION

These songs confirm that potential contradictions exist in the discourse about gender. It is clear, for example, that following a woman's abduction (and rape), the only way for her to redeem the honor of her clan and caste is by taking her own life. How does this gender-specific code (of honor) accord with the predation of high-caste males against low-caste females? If a high-caste woman is dishonored in this manner, and if the code applies to women generally, what happens when women in poor peasant households are harassed or raped by males from rich peasant or landlord families? Are they subject to the same code, or does it not apply to them? If not, then this would suggest that the code of female honor applies only where the honor of upper-caste women from landowning families is in question. A related question is the degree to which the patriarchal ideology reproduced in the *jatsār* songs also licenses control over women-as-workers.

## ELOPING WITH A DUSADH

*Pānī ke piyasal saudagar, ghorā daurāvale re ki  
 Pāniyā hi piyat saudagar, dantavā jhalkale nu re ki  
 Aisan man kare saudagar, toharā sanghe chalti nu re ki.  
 Hamrā sanghe calbū Sānwariyo, Urahari kahaibu nu re ki  
 Babā ghare rabhū e hario, Babunī kahaibu nu re ki  
 Pānī ke piyasal saudagar, ghorā baithāwal nu re ki  
 Ūncī atariyā ho carhī, Dhaniyā nirekhali nu re ki  
 Ghora daurāval e Parbhū, Urahār le āve re ki  
 Urahārī le aib e Parbhū, kaunā ghare rakhab nu re ki  
 Chunarī tu khol e Sanwaro, lugarī pahīr nu re ki  
 Hathavā le chhariā e Sanwaro, suarī charāv nu re ki  
 Jāhu ham janatin e Ram, are jāt ke tū Dusādh nu re ki  
 Babā ghare rahatin e Ram, Babunī kahaitin nu re ki.*

Thirsty for a drink, the traveler, riding a horse came by.

Just as his thirst he quenched, his teeth flashed.

In my heart arose the desire, O traveler, to take off with you.

If you go with me, fair one, Urahari, the Eloper, you'll be called.

In your father's house, if you stay, Babuni, "beloved daughter," you'll be.

Then the thirsty traveler, seating her on his horse, left.

From her high perch, his wife, in the distance she saw.

"Riding a horse, O god! Urahari, the eloper, he's brought!

Urahari, he's brought, O god!" Where to keep her, which room?

"Undo your fancy sari, fair one, put on the torn one.

Take this stick in your hand, fair one, go graze the swine."

"Had I known, O Ram, that by caste you're Dusadh,

I would not have left father's home, would have stayed Babuni forever."

MEENA DEVI, MISRAULIA, CHHAPRA

This tale about the repercussions of transgression, the price one pays for acting on impulse without thought to the consequences, and the trauma that results from unseemly alliances, mostly with lower caste men however compelling their attractions, states its moral clearly and unequivocally. An interesting dichotomy is set up between the woman who elopes and the ideal daughter worthy of a father's affections, since it is with the transgression of this moral code that daughters forever forfeit

their fathers' love as well as their natal homes. There is no fate worse than grazing, raising, and trading in pigs, the occupation of the Dusadh, the lowliest of castes. That the errant woman is lured away without first ascertaining the caste of her seducer reinforces the importance of establishing such social relationships before engaging in romance. The narrative packs fear of the lowborn and of pollution through association with lower castes, and projects the latent threat to the established caste order that the actions of low-caste men represent.

The perspective this song reflects must be viewed in light of the Dusadh caste's political activism in recent years. Within the Dalit movement, Dusadhs have been systematically claiming and forging a separate cultural identity linked to a self-contained counter-public sphere (Beth 2005, 397–410). They have also sought recognition within mainstream national consciousness. The Dusadh folk hero Chuharmal, who has a festival named after him and is celebrated locally in areas of Bihar, is a case in point (Narayan 2001). This Dalit caste, next only to the Chamars in number, has raised its profile in the village Mor, in Bihar, by organizing large-scale cultural festivals, which in 1976 were attended by between 8,000 and 9,000 members. By 1981, the Chuharmal *melā* had increased in popularity with 100,000 participants, by 1998, with 300,000. How the caste, in its efforts to redefine a powerful identity, view songs like the above is a question worth investigating. That the caste seeks visibility, a sign of power, through festivals and melas adds an interesting contemporary twist on the discussion in chapter 5 of this volume on women's exclusion from festivals and public spaces. The women who sing these songs appear to punish themselves most harshly for adultery and elopement.

To suggest travel over a great distance, *jatsārs* invariably adopt the formula of crossing one forest, then another and another, or a couple of miles (*kos*), then another *kos* and another *kos* as the case may be. Further, after their long journeys, the eloping heroines of *jatsārs* invariably end up devastated by the new conditions they encounter. They must confront loss of face and status, which, of course, fills them with remorse.

9

AT THE BANGLEMAN'S ABODE

*Eik ban gailī Raniyā, duī ban gailī ho na**Are Rama tīsre me churiyā maraiyā ho na*

*Bhītrai bātiu ki bāhire maraiyā ho na*  
*Māi patari patohiyā paricchā ho na*  
*Sāsu leī aile rere kai musarvā ho na*  
*Sāsu leī ailīn bāns ke supaliyā ho na*  
*Sāsu le ailīn palārī me bhatvā ho na*  
*Bahuvā latvā se marlinī bhatvā ho na*  
*Bahuvā latvā se budhiyā dhakelin ho na*  
*Bahuvā ulī-paltī tākin maraiyā ho na*  
*Cunarī utārī Rani lugari pahinā ho na*  
*Hamre māi sanga suarī carāva ho na*  
*Raniyā bahut rovai le curilā ke gohanavā ho na*  
*Curilā nāhin janli jāti ke Khatikvā ho na*  
*Curli chhor dīhalu āpan rājdhaniyā ho na*  
*Chorrhi dīhalun godī ke balakvā ho na*

She went into one forest, Rani, then into the next.  
 O Rama, in the third was the hut of the bangle-seller.  
 Are you within mother? Come out.  
 Welcome the slim daughter-in-law.  
 Mother-in-law brought the pestle for the ritual welcome.  
 Mother-in-law brought the bamboo grain-tosser.  
 She brought cooked rice, in a bowl.  
 Daughter-in-law kicked aside the rice dish.  
 She pushed the old woman with her foot.  
 Daughter-in-law stared at the hut in anger.  
 “Undo your fine sari, Rani, put on the torn one.  
 With my mother, go graze the pigs.”  
 Rani cried and cried and cursed the bangle-seller.  
 “Bangle-seller, I did not know your caste is Khatik.  
 Oh, why did I leave my palace of comfort?  
 My infant son, I left for the bangle-seller!”

URMILA MAURYA AND FRIENDS, CHACHAKPUR

Suffused with regret and traumatized at discovering that her impulsive act has brought her to the humble bangle-seller's abode, where she must graze pigs, the highborn eloper of this tale is disconsolate to the point of lashing out at her mother-in-law, who stands ready to give her a ritual welcome with the grain tosser and rice. This scene, possibly an excerpt

from a longer tale, focuses on the horrifying consequences of the eloper's actions and the self-pity that results. This song tells the tale from the perspective of the eloping woman rather than the judgmental eyes of society (as in earlier tales and songs). The punishing remorse the act evokes in the eloping woman makes the tale's cautionary message even more effective.

10

ABDUCTION AND SUICIDE

*Ghorvā carhī āile sipahiyā re, u jo Laichi par najariyā parri gail re*  
*Toharā ke debai Kuttni kān du thai sonā, hamrā Laichi se milanavā ho karrai*  
*dīha na*  
*Hathva ke le lihu Kuttni, cheapri goyeithā to agiyā āni na*  
*Gāi Laichi ānganva to agiyā āni na.*  
*In mahinavā ke lāgal ba tīrathavā ho*  
*So calahū Laichi na Gangasagar asnanvā to calahū Laichi na*  
*Ek ori āyo Aditsingh, ho karai dātunvā ho ek oriyā na*  
*Laichi karai asnanvā ho se ek oriyā na*  
*Bīr karo dhīre karu dhīre karu asnanvā, ho ki parī re jaibai na*  
*Mora dehiyā par chittakavā, ho se pari jaibai na*  
*Tora niya Laicchi ho dehiyā par chittakavā ho se mora lekhā na*  
*Jaise chandan abharanavā ho se mora lekhā na*  
*Aisā na boli kāhai, bolela sipahiyā ho ki toharā aisa na*  
*Hamrā baba ke nokaravā ho ki toharā aisa na, aisa na boli kāhe*  
*Bolelu tu Laichi ho ki tohrā aisā na, rakhni, randī kasminiyā ho ki tohrā aisā na*  
*Ek kos gailī Laichi, duī kos gailī ho se lagri gailī na*  
*Ho se madhurī piyasiyā, ho se lagri gailī na*  
*Jab le ke Adit Singh, tab le ke na, Laichi khila lī patalvā*  
*Ho se tab le ke na, hāth le jali mukhe khalī panavā*  
*Ho se tīn kulavā na, rakhlī Laichi bahiniyā ho se tīn kulavā na.*

On horseback arrived the soldier, his glance fell on the maiden, Laichi.  
 To you Kutni, I'll give gold earrings, if you introduce me to beautiful Laichi.  
 For your hands, bracelets, Kutni.  
 Kutni went to Laichi's courtyard to borrow the hearthfire.  
 "This month starts the holy fair. Come with me Laichi, to the fair let's go.  
 To the Gangasagar holy dip, come let's go."  
 On one side came the soldier, Aditsingh, rinsing with the neem brush,

on the other bathed, Laichi.

“Please bathe carefully,

for drops may fall on my body, careful, not to spray this way.”

“On your body, Laichi the spray from me is like sandalwood, according to me.”

“Why do you speak thus?” “Because like you soldier,

are servants in my father’s employ, just like you” “Why do you speak thus?”

“And, Laichi, like you, are whores and fallen women, just like you.”

And he made off with her.

She went one kos, Laichi, and another kos she went.

Then she felt arise a great wonderful thirst.

And while Aditsingh went to fetch a drink,

Within that time, Laichi was already in the netherworld.

And that’s how she saved the honor of three generations.

Laichi sister, preserved the honor of three generations.

MEENA DEVI, MISRAULIA, CHHAPRA

In the verbal sparring that occurs before Laichi is abducted, Laichi’s higher caste and class status is clearly established. Her suicide, whereby she resolves the threat the abduction poses to the honor of the clan, is presented as the most praiseworthy outcome, the most acceptable exercise of female questioning. In the narrative, the abduction of the woman threatens the honor of the entire clan, caste, and village community, and this honor must be restored at all costs. The last two lines of the narrative deliver an approving judgment, thus presenting the episode as a pedagogical tool for showing how any threat to women’s chastity is a threat to the honor of her caste and clan, and it is this honor rather than the woman’s *per se* that must be appropriately restored.

The concerns the narrative takes up reflect the prevailing upper-caste anxieties that upwardly mobile groups adopt when seeking to alter the public’s perception of their status. Thus the narrative operates as discourse defining gender behavior for the upwardly mobile groups as well. Perhaps no other narrative matches the content and serves so well the function of a morality tale. While, for the purposes of the story, the means of Laichi’s death remain obscure, the tale points to suicide in general as the only option available to good girls caught in bad circumstances.

With reference to songs in this section, Prem Chowdhury argues that in Haryana the implicit duality of women’s voices is apparent in the



figuration of lower-caste men as the lovers of upper-caste women. In these songs, women covet the marginalized and outcaste lovers, generally specialists in their crafts—ascetics, tailors, and artisans—that upper-caste women are likely to meet (Chowdhury 2001, 35–46). North Indian folklore is replete with appeal of the ascetic orders, particularly given that holy men were known to cure women’s barrenness. Indeed, as Chowdhury argues, “this in a way acknowledges the impotence of the husband or his class/caste men and underlines the virility and potency of men occupying the margins” (36).

## II

## DOM LOVER

*Jan tuhūn Domvā hamke lobhāniyu ho Ram, Domvā Baba joge hathiyā besārau  
ho Ram*

*Hasī hasī Domva hathiyā besārai ho Ram, are Rama royī royī carhe le Baba ho Ram  
Bhaiyā uthū ke karā datuanīyā ho Ram, bahini kaisan karī datuanīyā ho Ram  
Bahini Domva moharā chenkaike baithal ho Ram*

*Jo tuhūn Domva hamke lobhānieu ho Ram, Domva Bhaiyā joge ghorvā besārau  
ho Ram*

*Hasī hasī Domva ghorvā besārae ho Ram, Rama royī royī bīran bhaiyā cārhai  
ho Ram*

*Hame joge dariyā phanāvau ho Ram, are Rama carhein gayin Kusuma betī ho Ram  
Bhaiyā nahin dehin piyari moharavā ho Ram*

*Eik ban gailin, dūsar ban gailen, tīsar ban Bhaiyā ke sagarvā ho Ram*

*Kaharā dekhleitin Bhaiyā ke sagarvā ho Ram*

*Cup rahān biyahiti dhaniyā ho Ram, Dhanā āngane me sagarvā khodiāhen ho Ram*

*Domva bhaiyā ke sagarvā barī dūrvā ho Ram*

*Kusumā nikali parī bīce sagarvā ho Ram*

*Eik būri būrain, dūsar būri.*

*Are Rama tīsare me būri gailī patahuvan ho Ram*

*Royī royī Domva*

If you’ve fallen in love with me, then for my father please get an elephant, Dom. Dom happily gets the elephant for father; weeping, father mounts the elephant. “Brother, rise, perform morning ablutions.” “Sister, how can I? Dom blocks the entrance.”

If you’ve fallen in love with me, Dom, then for brother, do get a horse. Dom happily gets the horse for brother; weeping, brother mounts the horse.

Now the carriage is ready and Kusuma daughter mounts it.  
 Brother did not give her the auspicious saree at the entrance.  
 She went to the first, the second, and the third forest.  
 “Kahar carriers stop! Do let me see my brother’s lake.”  
 “Hush! Wife, I shall get a lake built in our own courtyard.”  
 “Dom, but brother’s lake stretches out far.”  
 Kusuma stepped out in the middle of the lake.  
 The first dip, the second, and on the third, the bride drowned.  
 The Dom wept bitterly.

MUNRAJI, BARSARA VILLAGE

This excerpt comes from an inordinately long ballad about a lower-caste Dom lover, who cheerfully supplies horses and elephants for the woman’s male kin and articles of clothing for her female relatives. The marriage is solemnized and the bride mounts the carriage and sets off for her marital home. On the way they pass through her brother’s lake. The bride requests that the palanquin bearers stop, and she drowns herself in the lake. Note the extended negotiations that the heroine enters into with the lower-caste man to appease her family members, as if purchasing their consent for the union. It is interesting that the Dom blocks the doorway of each of the relatives, until he is able to elicit their reluctant and weeping consent, albeit after presenting his bribe. Even more surprising is that the rich Dom complies with and fulfills every demand.

In my conversations with the singers after making these recordings, it always appeared to me that they were in agreement with the song’s underlying messages. For instance, Munraji informed me that by committing suicide “the woman had saved the honor of her family.” Munraji pointed out that by drowning herself in her brother’s lake, “the heroine chooses to return to her brother” and thus to “keep his honor.” Munraji pointed to the significance of the line in the song wherein, as an expression of his displeasure, the bride’s brother refuses to give her the ritual gift of the yellow sari (*piyari*). The women present during the recording suggested that the brother, through this action, made clear his intention to sever relations with the bride. These lower-caste singers, intently listening to the song and joining in the chorus, endorsed the upper-caste heroine’s refusal to transgress her caste norms. Surprisingly, they commended her choice to drown herself rather than live out her life with the Dom.<sup>13</sup>

The song reinforces Chowdhury's argument that "articulations in women's songs indirectly attack the self-image of the upper-caste male as strong, virile, and sexually potent, shattered not by his kinsmen or castemen but by an inferior, who is denigrated and ridiculed by them" (39). Through such songs women indeed appear to provoke and challenge male authority within their own castes. These songs also appear to challenge "the reality of sexual exploitation and liaisons with lower-caste women by men from dominant groups" (43). Thus men may see these songs as representations of the sexuality of women they seek to control: "Women do not see themselves as transgressors nor condemn their sexual activity/desires/lustfulness. Men are brought in as sexual players in a total reversal of sexual roles and in a clear subversion of the dominant fixation and idolization of female chastity, and the very concept of the ideal woman" (45).

#### WOMEN'S COMMUNITIES

The texts of these grinding songs provide unique perspectives from which to understand the restrictions nineteenth-century caste reformers placed on women of intermediate occupational caste groups such as Yadavas (dairy and cattle keepers), Koeris (market gardeners), Kurmis (cultivators), and Kalvars (distillers). These restrictions ranged from prohibitions against women's public singing and their attendance at marriage processions (*barāts*) and fairs and festivals to controls on women's interactions with bangle sellers and other itinerant peddlers. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the even stricter controls against women of upwardly mobile groups such as Yadavas, Ahirs, and Kurmis, going as far as banning women from visiting fairs where interactions with such caste specialists would have been inevitable leveled, articulated this anxiety. Many pamphlets advocating the upward mobility of castes actually recommended that women's contact with tattooers and bangle-sellers be monitored. As these pamphlets' concerns echo those of the grinding songs, we can assume that they likely based their arguments on the folk understandings embedded within these traditional narratives by and about women.

While it is not possible to date these women's ballads, it is possible that social reformers received their cues about the purported dangers for women in public spaces from women's own narrative traditions, which,

in the reformer's hands, were ironically turned against them. More to the point, the songs' purported obscenity, as indicated by the reformers, did not stem merely from hints at sexual transgression, but, as we have seen, from "the transgression of caste/gender boundaries. Also, such transgressions crucially attacked upper-caste masculinity. Since notions of masculinity were themselves undergoing considerable change, with the growth of a so-called martial Hindu identity, masculinity acquired more aggressive and physical overtones" (Gupta 1998, 727–36). It was these changes that appear to have encouraged the dominant castes to mount protests against women's songs in which "their" masculinity could have been ridiculed (*ibid.*). As a corollary to the evolving masculine aggressivity, emphasis was now placed on feminine chastity and purity. The popular literature, including women's manuals and tracts of the period, emphasized the *patīvratā* models of women's behavior.

In addition to the unease in the nineteenth century generated by the explosive content of many women's song genres, another concern related to the customs of women's singing lay at the heart of the severe strictures against the practice. Women's power as enacted in community singing was threatening to the patriarchal order. As has been noted in other contexts, women's collectivities invariably arouse patriarchal anxieties. For instance, Abu-Lughod cites similar evidence from the Middle East, where women were called upon to be good wives and companions to the "new men." She contends the process was "linked to a denunciation of women's homosocial networks that encouraged certain kinds of subversions of men's authority" (1998, 12). It seems clear that the restrictions imposed on women's singing indeed ensured the dispersal and fragmentation of women's communities, especially where these communities were also inclusive, cutting across caste and class divides. In the interest of forging strong caste identities, the breakup of the more inclusive women's collectivities could well have been a significant strategic move on the part of caste patriarchies.

We have no way of assessing the long-term impact of such fragmentation, nor is there documentary evidence to suggest how successful these measures were or how they were implemented. Yet, we may conclude that the proposed reform sought to drive a wedge within even the most informal and spontaneous of singing communities. Signifying social protest as well as social control, a variety of women's songs, including *jatsārs*, while

anathema to social reformers, articulated the dominant patriarchal values even as they critiqued them.

Several related themes emerging from these narratives would benefit from some discussion in terms of the pedagogical functions the genre served. One might argue that the narratives succeed in preparing women to confront misfortune and face adversity. With so much going against them, women can find in these narratives encouragement to cultivate their reserves of inner strength. From brothers who may never offer the necessary assistance, to husbands who may one day bring home a Bengalin, to mothers-in-law who, happy to poison their daughters-in-law, are tantamount to one's worst enemy, the songs hint at the need to cultivate nerves of steel, like Sita's. In fact, Sita's trial by fire is never far from the reality the women of these tales face. Knowing the nature of the adversity that could strike from many quarters is one step toward being prepared for it, even armed against it.

It would be useful, for instance, to know how to deal with an unwanted pregnancy, how to handle an elder brother-in-law's advances, and even how to handle the consequences of elopement. The narratives imagine in detail the many solutions these fictional women adopt to solve their problems, the nature of the risks they take, and where they end up. Thus, the songs are not only about what happens to women and the many possible ways in which the system oppresses them but also the miseries women might inadvertently end up wreaking on themselves. In this sense, *jatsārs* weave together cautionary tales and dark, disturbing stories.

Songs that take up the theme of elopement, for instance, suggest that even when women decide to elope, they must still confront the problems inherent in working within caste-based occupational structures, this time within structures unfamiliar to them. And since the heroines of these tales never elope with a noble, for instance, they must also contend with a drop in status. Just as the *uraharī* was, upon her arrival, handed torn clothes or the swineherd's hook for grazing pigs, the narratives force both listeners and singers to reflect on what will befall the elopers next, for women, lacking a caste themselves, adopt the caste of their men. Despite such dire warnings, the songs nevertheless highlight the considerable attractions, indeed the very irresistibility, of lower-caste men, including bangle-sellers, tattooers, soldiers, and even the low-caste *Dom*. These songs

therefore are not simply about sexual transgression per se, but the transgression of caste and gender boundaries in ways that target upper-caste masculinity. While the stories' warnings and morals are quite clear, their genius lies in their capacity to open the imagination to alternative scenarios in which women's sexuality does, sometimes, transcend the confines of class and caste.

These refreshingly candid and nonjudgmental songs in fact celebrate women's ingenuity at many levels, including seeking solutions for unwanted pregnancies. In a culture where the clash of interests between women within the conjugal household is a given, reinventions of the sister-in-law figure provide alternative scenarios and create ambivalence, belying norms and stereotypes.

Finally, looming large in these narratives is the threat of incest, a reality that aids our comprehension of cultural codes regarding women's avoidance of their elder brothers-in-law and fathers-in-law. The songs play out the possible repercussions of a woman's refusal to observe veiling in the company of these relatives. That the logic of these avoidance relationships is worked out so effectively in sung tales serves as another significant illustration of the genre's pedagogic function.

I have suggested throughout this chapter that songs sung in the village courtyard about tensions within kin relationships are not just a method of enforcing gender and caste norms on women, but have implications for the agrarian labor these women perform. It is important to recognize, therefore, that a discourse delivered by women to women about intrakin relations (i.e., fidelity, caste endogamy) may also contain as an ideological subtext a discourse licensing female subordination to patriarchal authority in other nondomestic situations. In short, the discourse about the desirability of female obedience in the domestic domain can also be translated into the desirability of women-worker obedience in the sphere of agricultural production, whether this sphere involves female laborers working on land owned or operated by the male head of their household or working on his behalf on holdings owned or operated by nonkin. This economic dimension, which disempowers women not just within the domestic sphere but also beyond its confines, is frequently overlooked. Collective acts of singing remain ubiquitous, particularly in the sphere of agricultural production. The next chapter examines some implications of a genre sung while women work in the fields, the lighthearted, and pithier, *kajlī*.