

 Singing Bargains

Shakti's violence to Brahma and Vishnu persuades Shiva to try bargaining instead of refusal, and Shakti is quite willing to bargain. The assaulting decapitating goddess quite readily relinquishes some power (her masculine power, her third eye) in order to achieve her goal of creation. Cooperation, not murder is the way to get things done, but it is negotiated only after a violent display.

ANN GRODZINS GOLD, "GENDER, VIOLENCE AND POWER," 26

All over north India, agricultural operations carried out by women are accompanied by rich and varied song genres, so much so that these songs are inseparable from women's work cultures. Since songs lighten repetitive tasks, agricultural production and cultural creativity proceed hand in hand. With the exception of ploughing, women participate in varying measure in every agricultural task, including tilling, sowing, spreading manure, irrigating, weeding, cutting and reaping, carrying and transporting the harvest, threshing, winnowing, and the processing and storing of food (Jassal 2001, 70; Bhargava 1996). Nevertheless, until as late as the 1980s, women's work in agriculture remained invisible and their enormous contributions were largely subsumed under the labor of the male peasant. That women's songs accompany

agricultural tasks provides at least one, albeit unexpected, source of proof that women labor as agricultural producers and further established the need to link cultural and economic analysis. This chapter investigates the usefulness of work songs as source material for unearthing the labor conditions of women on lower rungs of caste and agrarian hierarchies. The song genre explored here is the *kajlī*, a generic term in the north Indian countryside for songs performed largely by female agricultural laborers on the lowest rungs of caste hierarchies and, occasionally, by women of intermediate castes. Arjun Das Kesari, the folklorist and renowned compiler of the *kajlī* genre who based his collections on those of the villages of Mirzapur and Sonebhadra, argues that the genre originated as a musical offering to the goddess of the region, Kajjala Devi (1996). What might we learn from these songs about the conditions of these women's labor? Alternatively, what might we learn about the relations of production from the songs sung during this production?

In 1975, the Report on the Committee on the Status of Women (CSWI) exposed the degree to which official statistics highlighting unpaid family labor underestimated women's contributions. In 1988, a Commission of Enquiry on Self-employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector submitted its report on the nonrecognition of women's work (Shramshakti 1988). Yet women's contributions, so crucial to the livelihood and security of agrarian households, remained peripheral to the way "work" was defined, and numerous inadequacies in its documentation persisted. During the 1980s, the concept of work and the invisibility of women's work—two major areas of scholarly research—emerged from feminist concerns and the recognition of gender as an analytic category (Kalpagam 1986; Deitrich 1983). This focus on women's roles in agriculture, in turn, yielded the new understanding of the peasantry as a vastly differentiated, rather than homogenous, group. The taken-for-granted character of women's agricultural activity, which was subsumed within the labor performed by peasant households, and its hidden and uncompensated nature has attracted the attention of feminist scholarship over the past decades (Boserup 1970; Tinker 1990; Agarwal 1995; Jassal 2003).

Just as the labor of women in the countryside was obscured by the assumption that women's work in the fields was an extension of their household duties, a predisposition not to hear women who labor has

likewise muffled their voices so that, even today, little is known about their lives. This predisposition does not mean that women have been silent, but rather that women on the lowest rungs of caste and class hierarchies have not been heard, especially within the privileged enclaves of the academy.¹ Paradoxically, songs about women's intimate worlds are best heard in the relative anonymity of open spaces. Such anonymity is also relevant to discussions of the fluidity of folksongs and, as Wendy Doniger has argued in relation to folk traditions in general, "the anonymity of the text makes it appear to be part of communal experience, like a ritual, like the whole sky; the author is as fluid as the text" (Doniger 1995, 31).

Paul Stoller's suggestion that we "learn how to hear" is pertinent to this inquiry, as is his plea that we "consider in a new light the dynamic nature of sound, an open door to the comprehension of cultural sentiment" (Stoller 1984, 561). Quite apart from the information song texts impart as "maps of shared experience," therefore, the chapter focuses on the melodic structure of work songs, and treats the transformative aspects inherent in music and those qualities that promote women's sense of community as equally worthy of attention (Feld 1987, 200). Indeed, the sensation that the sounds and feelings of the songs engender lingers powerfully, long after the songs' performance.

Against the backdrop of women's invaluable, though uncompensated, contributions, the work songs examined in this chapter suggest how women might try to make their work conditions less onerous. Yet, the strategies that women adopt to advance their own interests, their "bargains with patriarchy," often end up reproducing prevailing gender ideologies and structures (Kandiyoti 1988). As gender orders involve mutually binding constraints, Deniz Kandiyoti argues that women must strategize within a set of concrete constraints. Since the inner workings of gender arrangements vary across societal contexts, contestation is "always circumscribed by the limits of the culturally conceivable" (147). Moreover, as the household is the locus of competing interests, rights, obligations, and resources, where members are often involved in negotiation and conflict (Moore 1994, 87), patriarchal bargains influence how women's gendered subjectivities are shaped. This chapter investigates how songs might offer clues about how this gender asymmetry is created and

reproduced and, sometimes, contested. In addition, this chapter moves beyond the household to explore the economic, social, and political milieu in which households are embedded.

A significant question this chapter takes up is how the “voice” of song might be different from that of speech. Beginning in the 1990s, ethnographers, particularly Ann Grodzins Gold and Gloria Goodwin Raheja, who, in their pathbreaking study of Rajasthan, sought to overturn prevailing assumptions about the purported subordination and passivity of rural women, have provided us with important new understandings of women’s voice. Through women’s expressive traditions and through the “hidden transcripts” within speech and song, we learn about women’s own self-imaginings, quite often contrary to the construction of women in much of the prescriptive literature on gender, sexuality, and kinship. Capturing the fun, ribaldry, and irony of the songs, Raheja and Gold argue that Rajasthani women’s genres were highly effective at momentarily subverting patriarchal ideology, even if what constituted this subversion or resistance remained undertheorized. This chapter goes beyond Raheja and Gold’s theorization of the management of women’s kinship bonds and the negotiations between conjugal and kinship networks to index, instead, the diversity and multivocality of women’s voices and to highlight the multiple viewpoints and layers of interpretations possible in each musical rendering, which in turn prompt us to refine and complicate the so-called limitedness, in these contexts, of notions such as resistance. Moreover, as work songs are intrinsic to women’s agrarian production, I seek, as I indicated above, to illuminate the processes of production within which these songs emerged.

The chapter also examines the extent to which work songs allow us to move beyond the conceptualization of women’s agency, per the contributions of Laura Ahearn (2000; 2001) and Saba Mahmood (2005), as the sociocultural capacity to act within the existing power relations that in turn impact structures of subordination. I depart from the purported antinomy between subversion, on the one hand, and the reproduction of power structures, on the other, and in so doing follow Kirin Narayan’s recommendation to stop seeing songs merely as texts to mine for so-called folk points of view and to focus instead on contexts within which each performer might creatively assign new meanings to the songs (Narayan 1995).

A characteristic feature of the songs in this chapter is their spirit of abandon; carefree in mood, they also express an unrestrained sexuality, especially when at a safe distance from the controlling patriarchal gaze. Prem Chowdhry's following observation about women's songs in Har-yana is relevant to the kajlī genre: "Occupying an almost autonomous space outside the male presence, most of them are not to be heard or viewed by men. Yet often they are sung addressing the men and in close proximity to them. The lurking presence of men in the periphery is not obvious or acknowledged by either of them. This ambiguity in relationship to the male presence, or rather private-public space allows a full and frank expression of women's desires and I would venture to suggest perhaps affords them greater pleasure" (Chowdhry 2005, 113).

Despite its association with agricultural tasks, kajlī possesses as its outstanding feature a light-hearted quality that likens the genre to play. It is perhaps an overarching contempt for manual labor that causes the genre's connections with the labor processes representing the collective voice of laboring women today to be effaced and lead to its sanitized understanding as a genre of songs representative merely of the spirit of a particular season. Do laughter, play, jokes, and humor—themes associated with the kajlī genre in particular—help us to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of women's agency? Again, as Raheja and Gold have pointed out, jokes and laughter disrupt the stereotypes of female subjectivity based in an unrelieved victimhood. On the other hand, if women must negotiate cultural restrictions to gain the opportunity to play, a state presumably free of such restrictions, how is play to be theorized? Here, it is worth revisiting J. Huizinga's characterization of play as an activity outside of ordinary life that is not serious despite the player's intense involvement, that takes place in a delimited area or space where non-players are kept at a distance, that has its own time and duration, and that serves as a mechanism for forging social groupings (Huizinga 1955, 13). This conceptualization of play emphasizes the temporary suspension of ordinary life, which is also a feature of the women's songs examined in the last chapter.

I heard most of the songs in this chapter while conducting fieldwork on women's labor conditions in agriculture in the villages of Atara, Barsara, Pilkicha, and Sauraiyan in the heart of Jaunpur district. As I pointed out in the introduction, Atara and Barsara are large multicaste villages,

while in Sauraiyan more than half of the population is Dalit and the rest is multicaſte. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Bharatiya Jan Sewa Aſhram has been active in Sauraiyan, and as a reſult the Dalit population has been ſteadily educated about its rights. Much of the reſearch on laboring women in Jaunpur that I reference in this chapter was facilitated through my contact with this NGO and through my participation in the activities of the Abhiyān Samitī for Land Reforms and Labor Rights in the late 90s. I recorded the ſongs in Sadiapur, on the other hand, in 2003, as part of a ſeparate inquiry on marginalization processes along the Ganga. Here the focus of my fieldwork was entirely on the challenges faced by communities that derive their livelihoods from the Ganges, particularly the river-faring caſte of Mallah.

This chapter is divided into five ſections. The firſt ſection addresses ſongs that reveal the nature of the peasant household, the ſite of women’s productivity. The ſecond ſhifts its focus to the context within which I made my recordings and to the kinds of iſſues that ſurfaced. The third ſection takes up women’s involvement in agricultural production and examines problems ſuch as unequal wages. In ſection four, I examine the importance in this region of ſongs of migration. Finally, in the fifth ſection I diſcuſs ſongs in which negotiation and bargaining predominate, including the implications of women’s negotiation to play.

THE PEASANT HOUSEHOLD

The taſk of ſafeguarding food, averting danger, and, in a broad ſenſe, attending to the grammatical rules which govern the relational idiom of food, falls upon women.

DUBE, *ANTHROPOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS IN GENDER*, 159

In this ſection, I focus on the functioning of the household as an economic unit, expoſing, where that unit is the extended household, many kinds of tensions, both ſocial and cultural. As women of upper-caſte households are not involved in laboring in the fields, the household remains their center of exiſtence, ſo it ſeems entirely appropriate to begin here. While it is often impoſſible to ſeparate ſongs by caſte and claſs, as moſt of them conſtitute the common heritage of the people, I nevertheless found it ſomething of a ſurpriſe that the women of the relatively proſperous households of upper caſtes in Atara village ſang ſo many ſongs

about scarcity and the management of scarce resources. These recordings, then, force us to reflect on the issue of persistent gender inequalities in nutritional allocations and on the overall unequal distribution of resources even in relatively prosperous households. Such discrepancies must include basic necessities such as health care, education, access to property, resources, earnings, and so on across caste and class divides. Development studies over the past decades have dealt with the implications of these assumptions for women at length, especially where the household was seen as an undifferentiated unit (Agarwal 1995; Jassal 2001). The songs then serve to flesh out in concrete terms what the sharing of scarce resources might entail. Such songs are indicative of the rich qualitative data that could be collected to supplement dry statistics on agrarian class structure.

I

Pahile pahile gavanvā āinī, apāne sasurvā āinī ho
Saiyān samjhāvain lāge, Dhan māi ke jinke au
Ki māi mor garvā se jor bāti ho,
Eik cammac bhar cāvar dihin, cammac bhar ke dāl dihin,
Cammac bhar ke ātā dihin, sutuhī bhar ke namak dihin, eik the gohariyā
dihleen ho
Bahuvā itanai rasanvā hamre bātai, banāi ke khiyāi dihu ho
Sorah the manseru bāte, satrah the mehrāru bāten
Bīs the larikvā bāten, Kukur, bilariyā bāten
Gaunvā caravahā bāten ho, Bahuvā, itnā pariniyā hamre bāten
Banāi ke khavāi dihu ho

When I just came to my marital home, to my marital home,
 My love began advising me that Mother is very powerful and proud.
 She measured out just a spoonful of rice, just a spoonful of lentils she measured
 out.

A spoonful of flour, just a pinch of salt, she handed me and one shout she gave,
 “Daughter-in-law, this is the ration we have, prepare and feed them all.”

Sixteen men, there are here, seventeen women

Twenty children there are, and dogs and cats,

There are the village ploughmen. “Daughter-in-law, so many people are there.

Prepare, and feed them all!”

SHANTI TEWARI AND FRIENDS, ATARA JAUNPUR

Shanti, a Brahmin woman from Atara village and one of the singers, drew my attention to the contrast between the powerless inmarrying bride and her controlling, though stingy, mother-in-law. She marveled at women's skills in food preparation and distribution, given the scarce resources available. Shanti explained that while upper-caste households in this area are generally well off, the distribution of household resources is a concern for all households in the countryside. Inmarrying wives, therefore, must be socialized into preserving and maintaining the family's food traditions, especially those regarding prescriptions and proscriptions about various foods. The song presents a scenario in which both the senior and junior woman of the household are involved in an exchange with each other, allowing us to imagine the gradual progression from the extreme disempowerment of the youngest brides to their increasing responsibilities, which over time lead to their transformation into powerful matriarchs who have significant clout in household decisions. The next song continues the motif of scarcity, but introduces other elements relating to the distribution of both resources and power within the household.

2

Ser bhar gehuān e Ram sāsu jove dihilī nu re ki

Kuch pisanvā e Ram kuch herāil nu re ki

Pīsī a pīsī e Ram rotiā pakval nu re ki

Sāsu mānge rotiā e Ram nanadiyā garaivali nu re ki

Urakh purukhvāiye e Ram, dīn khoje bāsī nu re ki

Sāsu dukh sahab e Ram nanadiyā gāri sahab nu re ki

Sāmī ke irkhve e Ram, jamunavā dhansi jāib nu re ki

Just a handful of wheat, mother-in-law gave to grind.

Some was ground into flour, the rest was lost.

First I ground and then I baked the bread.

Mother-in-law demanded bread and sister-in-law just abused.

All day long I search for some leftover crumbs.

I'll bear mother-in-law's oppression and sister-in-law's abuse.

But for husband's wrath, into the Yamuna I'll throw myself.

Where female members of the groom's family, such as unmarried sisters, mothers-in-law, and other inmarrying brides, are also present in the household, new brides are kept under constant surveillance, their actions

carefully scrutinized and reported. Inadequate nutrition, abuse by their female relatives, and, worse, a husband's indifference combine to produce the explosive mix described here, themes I explore more fully in the next chapter. The depiction of scarce food resources also highlights how the interests of the female relatives are in conflict with those of the new bride, leaving her chances of integration to hinge on her careful cultivation of a persona above reproach. In spite of this, such integration is never easy and meets with much resistance, and it could take several years and many children before a woman is integrated into the environment that is her marital home.

The process of integration may be described in terms of working one's way up the social ladder. The song makes sense against a cultural backdrop wherein repetitive tasks are assigned to the in-coming bride, until either a sufficient number of years have elapsed or there is another new entrant in the form of a young bride of a husband's younger brother. In other words, the recognition of seniority by age confers benefits and rewards upon senior inmarrying brides, including the easing of their work burdens or their gradual movement into positions of greater responsibility within the household. One such gain might be the taking over of the task of food distribution rather than its preparation, since this task offers greater control over household resources and decisions about who gets to eat what. Time-consuming tasks such as grinding, cutting—the preparation of ingredients—might be relegated to the lower-status junior bride, while the actual cooking, a more prestigious task, is performed by the senior one. The following song elaborates on these concerns to reflect on how a new bride is likely to adjust to her marital home.

3

Apane ghar me kaisan, kaisan bahinī dīdī

Tu rahiū bahinī dīdī

Apane ghar me aisan ham rabe bahinī dīdī, ham rabe bahinī dīdī

Sasuru morā aisan kī taisan bahinī dīdī

Nau hasiyā khet me kāti bahinī dīdī

Tabahun kaben ham ghar me baithī bahinī dīdī

Ham baithī bahinī dīdī

Jeth morā aisan kī taisan bahinī dīdī

Sorha hāth ke lehangā lāye, nau hāth ke ghunghat kārhe

Tabahun kaben ham bahu dekhin, dekhin bahinī dīdī

Devar morā aisan ki taisan bahinī dīdī

Solah roti gin ke khāyen tabahun kaben eik phulki, eik phulki bahinī dīdī

Apane ghar mein aisan ki taisan bahinī dīdī

In your home how do you fare, how do you, sister?

How do you fare, sister?

In my home I fare this way and that, sister, just fare, sister.

My father-in-law is like this, so like that, sister.

Nine sheaves I cut in the fields, sister.

Still says I sat at home, sister.

Just sat, sister.

Elder brother-in-law is like this, so like that, sister.

Wore a sixteen width skirt, nine lengths of face covering.

Yet, he says saw me, saw the bride, sister.

Younger brother-in-law is like this, so like that, sister.

Eats sixteen loaves to the count, still says a single loaf, just a loaf, sister.

In my home, I fare just this way and that, sister.

SHANTI'S COURTYARD, ATARA, JAUNPUR

This ironic song supports Shanti's observation that it was "common-place for the new bride to be subject to intense scrutiny and criticism" by her in-laws. The song evokes the mood of galīs, abusive wedding songs, which I take up in chapter 3, in which the new relatives in the conjugal home are paid back for their critical appraisal of the bride. The song spells out just how hurtful and difficult this scrutiny can be. The complaints voiced in the song suggest the practice of heavy veiling before elder male in-laws, a largely upper-caste norm, as well as the labor of reaping in the fields, a lower-caste one. While this suggests that upper-caste practices are adopted by all castes, especially the upwardly mobile, its universal message of complaint enhances its appeal for all castes. In a surprisingly reflective and self-critical way, Shanti added, "the criticism of the new relatives often serves to break the bride's morale so that she ends up being even more submissive and subservient."

For the purposes of this chapter it is useful to remember that the equitable sharing of resources among genders within households, a key assumption of the development paradigms dating to the 1950s, was overturned by later research. Studies conducted in the 1970s and 80s



16 Wives of prosperous Brahmin (center) and Rajput (left) landlords in Barsara, Jaunpur.



17 Near the granary of Brahmin landlords in Atara, home of Shanti Tewari.

demonstrated that far from the egalitarian sharing of resources within households, the division of resources, especially of scarce food resources, was differentiated by gender, with women being the most deprived. Women in the field affirmed that males receive the best and most wholesome diets. Many conceded that this was often to the detriment of women and girls, though they noted that this inequality was changing rapidly. Sarah Lamb's observations from Bengal hold true for other parts of north India: "Women are expected first to serve others in the households as young wives and daughters-in-law and then to be served as older mothers and mothers-in-law" (2000, 74).

In these villages, in contrast to the house-bound upper-caste women whose songs are cited above, women of the intermediate peasant castes, such as Yadavas (dairy producers), Telis (oil-pressers), Kumhars (potters), and Kahars (water-carriers), were usually circumscribed by duties that included work both in the fields and in the home. In peak agricultural seasons such as harvest time, the responsibilities of women of these castes included such a range of tasks that younger women rarely had time to rest. During the fieldwork I conducted in the villages of Jaunpur district, I found that women of peasant households rise two hours before the men and go to bed at least one or even two hours after the men have retired. Tasks such as washing up, watering the cattle, and putting the children to bed continued well after the men had called it a day. Peasant culture in the region appeared to endorse these discrepancies, with the care of cattle and children, the fetching of firewood, and the collection, cooking, and processing of food—rendered even more exhausting where women must walk miles to procure food, water, or fodder—all falling to women.

In Barsara village, I found that newly married brides were the earliest to rise. Amraoti of the Teli (oil-pressers) caste, my young-bride informant, explained: "To be caught asleep after daybreak as a new bride invites hostility, social sanction and gossip from extended kin and even neighbors. This can be very hard to combat. I couldn't bear the loss of face, especially since the values and training received from the natal home are called into question. Mothers of brides are always careful to impart this training."

Amraoti's explanation supports the well-known fact that a bride's work culture, productivity, sense of responsibility, duty, and industrious nature would be judged through her work as well as her sleeping and waking

practices. The song below provides insight into the hierarchies within the household, once again subverting received wisdom about the household as a site of equitable sharing.

4

Nimiyā lehar lehar kare pāti, māre bhavachāri ho nanadī
Rangmahal bīc sasurū sovain, māre bhavachāri ho nanadī
Jevanā uthā chalā ho jewain sasurū, māre bhavachāri re . . .
Rangmahal bīc jethvā sovain, māre. . . .
Rangmahal bīc devarū sovain. . . .
Rangmahal bīc sajanā sovain, māre . . .
Jevanā uthā chalā ho jewain saiyān

The neem branches sway, sprays of rain drench me, sister-in-law.
 In the center of the palace, father-in-law sleeps, rain lashes, sister-in-law.
 Rise, father-in-law, the meal is ready, lashes of drenching rain.
 In the center of the palace, elder brother-in-law sleeps, rain lashes, sister-in-law.
 Rise, brother-in-law, the meal is served, lashes of rain.
 In the center of the palace, husband sleeps.
 Rise, dear husband, for the meal is served, lashes the rain.

MUNRAJI, BARSARA, JAUNPUR

When Munraji, a woman of the Mallah (river-faring and fishing) caste sang the above song, she described it as “prescriptive,” showing women of all castes how they need to live in their marital homes, serving the elder males first in order of seniority: “See, how she (the song’s protagonist) cooked the meal and then one by one, woke up everyone and served them all, keeping in mind, proper respect for age and seniority. Going back and forth she is surely drenched in the rain. Then at last, she finally serves her husband too” (Munraji, Barsara, Jaunpur).

A number of women’s songs spell out the order of male relatives by age within the extended patriarchal household, thus reinforcing hierarchies and the appropriate deference owed to each member. The song is addressed to the sister-in-law, here the husband’s sister, and therefore the relative who could be both an ally, as seen in the grinding songs, as well as a potential enemy, owing to her prior claims on the affections of the husband. In this case, the song suggests camaraderie between these two women. Just as it was surprising to learn from the songs cited earlier in



18 View from Munraji's hut in Barsara village, Jaunpur.

this section that upper-caste women face food shortages, the lower-caste Munraji's reference to palatial living conditions appear equally to challenge the stereotypes and expectations we have about the subject matter of lower-caste women's songs. However, it must be stressed that the song is entirely in keeping with folk conventions of remarkable exaggeration, wherein humble peasant dwellings are invariably referred to as palaces endowed with the world's riches, including horses and elephants, gold and silver, and other trappings of wealth. The next section highlights the significance of the context in which the songs are performed.

THE PERFORMANCE CONTEXT

While many of the songs I heard in the field appeared to serve the purpose of keeping time during the execution of labor, other songs illuminated specific issues or opened the way for wide-ranging discussions. This section is based on my fieldwork in Sadiapur village on the outskirts of Allahabad, a district adjoining Jaunpur. It describes my participation in an evening session, when laboring women and Mallah caste women assemble after a day of hard work. The following recording illustrates forcefully the significance of the performance context. Some of the women

had returned after working as day laborers in neighboring fields, while others had spent the day hawking fish. A fairly routine exchange about the day's events, earnings, and familial preoccupations gave way to relaxed banter and jokes. The song below was a spontaneous and uproarious conclusion to the mutual recounting of everyday woes. While exchanging stories about their men's infidelities, the women collapsed with mirth as they sang out this song about a two-timing husband in which the wronged wife gets to enact her revenge on the other woman.

5

'Khāvo na more sāmī dāl bhāt rotiyā, kajarī khelan ham jābai re dūirāngī'
Kajarī khelat hoi gayi ādhi ratiyā, are ādhi ratiyā
Payi kaune bahāne ghar jāūn re dūirāngi
Hathavā me leu dhanī sāndī goithiyā aur kāndī goithiyā
Payi adhiyā bahāne ghar jāva re dūirāngi
'Kholau na more sāmī chananā kevariya aur bajrā kevariya
Payi hamai dhānā thāri akelā re dūirāngī'
'Kaise ke kholā dhānā cananā kevariya, bajrā kevariya
Payi more godī savatī tabarā re dūirāngī'
'Kholau na more sāmī cananā kevariya, bajrā kevariya
Payi dekhatiun savatiyā ke rūpā re dūirāngī'
'Tumhare ke dekhai dhāni savatī ke rupvā aur savatī ke rupvā
Payi candā sūrujvā ke jotā re dūirāngī'
'Tore lekai havai sāmī candā sūrujvā
More lekai mātīyā ke dhūla re dūirāngī'
'Tore lekai dhaniyā taravā ke dhurvā aur paiyā ke dhulvā
Payi more lekai mahakai kapūr re dūirāngī'
'Tore lekai sāmi mehakai kapūrva, mehakai kapūrva
Payi more lekai naliyā ke kīca re dūirāngi
Are dharaun silavā, ūparū dharaun lorhavā
Payi kūncatiun savatiyā ke gāl re dūirāngī.'

Eat, husband, the meal of lentils, rice and loaves, I'm off to play in the rains.

The games went on until past midnight.

With what excuse shall I go home, dear one?

Take some fuel and firewood in your hand.

Return home with the excuse of fetching fuel.

“Open, husband, the sandalwood door, the strong door.

Your wife stands alone outside.”

“But how can I open the sandalwood door, the strong door.

In my lap sits another woman, your other.”

“Do open the sandalwood door, the strong door.

Let me see how she looks, the other woman.”

“How can I show you, wife, her looks, how she looks.

She is the very light of the sun and moon.”

“Maybe for you, husband, she’s the moon and sun,

But for me she is just the dust of the earth.”

“Maybe for you, wife, she’s the dust of the feet.

For me she is as fragrant as camphor.”

“For you she may be camphor,

But for me, she’s the waste of drains.

On the grinding mortar, with the pestle above,

Her cheeks between, I’ll bash them in, you two-timer.”

SITARA MALLAH AND OTHERS, SADIAPUR, ALLAHABAD

Here, the opening lines about playing in the rains capture the spirit of the season in which it is sung. The loosening of restrictions and controls on women reveals the significance of the rainy season within the annual agricultural cycle. The song’s poetic imagination offers insights into the rainy season’s life-giving potential, providing release and relief from the scorching heat. Even the most secluded of women appear to have been encouraged to drench and frolic in the season’s first showers. The inner courtyards of upper-caste homes facilitate the conduction of women’s revelries uninterrupted and unseen by outsiders, but drenching in the rain is openly encouraged across caste and class divides. The medicinal properties of the first showers are widely perceived as an antidote for a host of heat-related skin disorders such as boils and prickly heat, to which even the most sheltered are subject. This remedial nature of the first rains accounts for women’s encouragement to play in the showers. However, like the warnings issued in grinding songs, a note of caution is sounded: too much sport and play may lead one to neglect husband and home. One may end up being locked outside and, what’s worse, having to deal with the other woman ensconced within! The repeated refrain of *duirāngi* (colorful one, also two-timer) adds to its ironic appeal.

The song generated considerable merriment, but the collective singing



19a Sitara Devi (center) with her singing companions in Sadiapur, Allahabad.



19b Mala Devi in Sadiapur.

also brought up issues related to women's financial anxieties, their everyday struggles, and their lack of support from their husbands. The women spontaneously recounted their personal stories. When Mala Devi said that her husband had died young, Sehdei ruefully interjected, "I, on the other hand, have a husband, but he has deserted me." Sitara spoke about not expecting financial support from men since opportunities for employment had been steadily decreasing for several years and men often traveled outside the village in search of work. Lower-caste women have always worked alongside their men, so it was clear that the women who sang the song above were by no means passive victims. The Sadiapur women expressed both sympathy and admiration for each other, and the session was marked by abundant goodwill and bonhomie. Between fits of explosive laughter, Sitara remarked, "In search of livelihoods we are forgetting to sing." Old Dhaniya replied, to shrieks of laughter, "Come, let's sing such a song so that if someone's youthfulness is on the wane, it can be revived," adding mischievously, "You wouldn't believe the excesses of my youth! It was simply explosive, like lighting a match."

In keeping with the buoyant mood, and as if in response to Dhaniya's challenge to revive their youth, the women zestfully concluded the session with the following song.

6

Hamrā bālam eik diliyā ke naukar, diliyā ke cākar
Diliyā se ākar cale jāye re sakhī re, Āye, cale jāye re sakhī re
Jab calā āve, pahariyā mai dakālun
Dāntava se kātālun janjīr mor sakhī re
Ab bal hatt kar dagariyā nāhin dūbe, Dagariyā nāhin dūbe
Thar thar kāpat hai sarīr mor sakhī re
Mai bahiniyā ke cithiyā jab bhejat, caupatiyā jab bhejat
Raniyā ke bhejat-a birog mor sakhī re
Dhaniyā ke bhejat a birog mor sakhī re
Māi bahiniyā ke cunarī jab bhejat
Raniyā ke bhejat hai darpaniyā mor sakhī re,
Dhaniyā ke bhejat hai darpaniyā mor sakhī re
Māi bahiniyā ke pīyarī jab bhejat
Dhaniyā ke bhejat dūi rumāl mor sakhī re
Dūi rumāl mor sakhī re

Are, rovelā ponchaikē dui rumāl mor sakhī re
Māi bahiniyā ke cunārī jāb bhejat
Raniyā ke bhejat hai virog, mor sakhī re

My lover is the servant of his will, heart's slave, he comes, then goes back,
 my friend.

Comes and goes but when he does come,

I could jump across the highest mountains.

With my teeth, bite off the chains, my friend.

Now, hope his return path will not be blocked, his path does not disintegrate.

Oh! my body trembles and quivers, my friend.

To his mother-sister when he sends letters and missives,

For his queen just separation, my friend.

For his wife he wishes separation and sorrow, my friend.

To his mother and sister, when he sends festive sarees,

To his queen he sends words of separation, my friend.

To his mother and sister when he sends auspicious sarees,

To his wife two little handkerchiefs, my friend.

Oh, just to wipe away all those tears, my friend.

SITARA NISHAD AND MALLAH WOMEN, SADIAPUR, ALLAHABAD

The masculinity described in this song fully conforms with patriarchal norms, which prioritize mothers and sisters over wives. The husband of the song readily accepts the condition of separation and is equally nonchalant about the strains these periods of prolonged absence induce in the conjugal bond. This song also hints at work cultures wherein men are likely to be away for long spells and women, perforce, must be strong and assertive. When I asked the singers to explain the meaning the song held for them, Mala Devi underlined the plight of women who receive words of anger from their absent husbands instead of precious gifts, which men reserve for their sisters and mothers. These words appeared to describe Mala Devi's own reality, and, without a hint of self-pity, she added:

“See, our men don't provide anything for us.”

“We have no support from men,” underlined another woman in the group, matter-of-factly.

“Why two handkerchiefs?” I persisted.

Sitara laughed. “So that when the first one gets completely drenched with tears, the other one can be used.”

At this, everyone was in splits again.

“Just keep crying and wiping away the tears, crying and wiping,” added Sehdei.

Collapsing with mirth, Mala Devi added, “Now you see, how necessary the second one is?”

This sparkling sense of women’s community appeared to be strengthened and reinforced by the singing session. Perhaps as noteworthy as the song texts themselves were the nature and quality of the women’s interaction. Such fragments of women’s everyday conversation are valuable for the insights they offer into group interactions and, thereby, the construction of gender. Through the predominant note of playfulness and making light of some of their harsher experiences, the women also effectively underlined their strength as a collective. Further, by reacting, responding to, engaging with, and creatively building upon the texts of the songs, they demonstrated how they carry forward and further develop the discourses these songs present. In this sense, resistance and subversion scarcely capture the range of possibilities inherent in the songs, in women’s singing practices, and in the ensuing interactions. Nevertheless, one could argue that it was the amusing personas and playful and rather irreverent stance that the Sadiapur women adopted that allowed them to critique the male world represented by their husbands and employers or landlords. Since playfulness and spontaneity are two components of the creative process with the potential to transform and redefine work or to imbue it with positive energy, women, by making time for song and discussion, were at once fulfilling their emotional, aesthetic, and psychic needs. As we will see in the third section, the spirit of this session is in stark contrast to the grimness of the everyday reality within which these women labor. In what ways, then, are women’s songs and singing practices shaped by this grim reality?

WOMEN'S "UNFREEDOM"

The songs above, as well as my exchanges with Sitara and her friends in Sadiapur that I have recounted, contextualize the mood I encountered in the countryside, namely, a stoic acceptance of the fact that laboring women must continue to labor because their families and households are dependent on them for the security of their livelihood. This work ethic is typified in a song from another Jaunpur village that serves as a classic example of the genre's bittersweet, though largely upbeat, mood.

8

Rimi jhimi barase la paniyā, āvā cali dhān ropai dhaniyā
Sonavā ki thaliyā me jevanā banaulī, āvā cali dhān ropai dhaniyā
Jevanā na jevai mor balamuā, āvā cali dhān ropai dhaniyā
Gage geruvā me gangājal paniyā, āvā cali dhān ropai dhaniyā
Geruvā na ghotai mor balamuā, āvā cali dhān ropai dhaniyā
Lavang-ilaicī ke birvā sajalū, āvā cali dhān ropai dhaniyā
Birvā na kunce mor balamuā, āvā cali
Phulvā mai cuni cuni sejiyā banaulī, sejiyā na sovai mor balamuā

It's raining, let's go transplant paddy.

In a golden plate I served the meal, he refuses to eat, my beloved.

In a glowing pot, I offered the purest water but he refused a sip.

Arranged a fine betel leaf with cardamom and cloves but he refused a bite.

With handpicked flowers, arranged the bed but he refused to lie on it.

Let's go transplant paddy.

BHAGIRATHI DEVI AND URMILA MAURYA, CHACHAKPUR, JAUNPUR

It was very common to come across songs like this one in the villages in which I conducted my fieldwork. Strikingly, the song's deceptively simple, gritty message provides no indication of women's ongoing struggles. While such songs might lead one to speculate about women's disappointments in love, the struggles they faced were often of an altogether different kind. Issues related to wages and the gender division of labor in the countryside came up for discussion several times during my fieldwork in the Jaunpur villages. People from Barsara explained, for instance, that women and children form a relatively high proportion of the labor force, because their labor is economical for the employer and also because men

from these areas seek employment outside of agriculture. They complained that now that the harvester is fast replacing the agricultural laborer in areas of mechanized cultivation, it is the women laborers who are being left with almost no alternative sources of income. They lamented the low wages paid to agricultural laborers and bemoaned the fact that, on average, no more than forty days of continuous wage work per season is available within agriculture. They spoke of migrant labor from Bihar that served to keep their wages low.

Through women's song and discussion sessions, I learned that while men seek employment in industry and the service sector, women remain dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. In the villages where I conducted fieldwork, the shrinking agrarian labor market had closed a significant avenue of wage earnings for both men and women in the village economy, but its impact was particularly devastating for women of landless families who were unable to travel outside the village to seek wages as laborers in brick kilns and so on. The decreasing bargaining power of labor and the related decline in job security made it impossible for many men to earn a family wage. On the other hand, deep-rooted cultural beliefs continue to associate masculinity with the role of provider and femininity with reproduction and nurturing.

The women of Barsara observed that their wages were at least 20 percent below those of men. On average, where men receive Rs.50 for a day's work, women get little more than Rs.30 for the same work. The women explained that in many villages the custom of *lehanā*, whereby the laborer is allowed to take home the amount of harvested grain they are able to carry with both hands, was still in operation. This custom was often simply a verbal agreement made between landlords and their agricultural labor. Thus, an able-bodied wage laborer could carry home 10–20 kilograms or one headload of grain at the end of the day. Naturally, women felt shortchanged when they were unable to pick up as much grain from the threshing floor as the men.

During my years of fieldwork in Jaunpur, landless laborers resisted low wages for ploughing and irrigation tasks, as well as the “beck and call” arrangements that had traditionally existed between upper-caste landlords and their lower-caste, landless laborers (see also Lerche 1997, 14). In the Jaunpur villages, despite occasional threats from village landlords, women found themselves unable to give up working for them altogether.



20 Women labor
in Barsara village,
Jaunpur.



21 Intermediate-caste
women in Atara
village, Jaunpur.



22 Intermediate-caste
women in Atara
who have leased land
from landlords for
cultivation.

It was clear that the brunt of laborers' resistance was invariably borne by the women of the laboring households who chose to stay behind in the village rather than accompany their husbands in their search for work.

The songs make more sense when heard in the context of the gendered division of labor within the laboring household. The weeding of landlords' fields and the carrying out of other tasks for landlords during the slack seasons, sometimes without any direct payment, fell to the women while allowing men to migrate in search of more remunerative employment. Thus, women's maintenance of goodwill relations with their landlords ensured employment in the peak seasons for both men and women of the laboring household, besides access to fodder for cattle, grass, and credit, in times of need. Clearly, women ended up paying the price for their men's freedom to seek better work opportunities (Lerche 1997, 19). In Barsara, Mallah women also relied on cordial relations with landlords to obtain at cheap rates on the *sarpāt* grass used for rope making, an important source of alternate livelihood security for this caste. The lands bordering the Gomti River, though rich in *sarpāt* grass, are owned by Brahmin landlords, and Mallah women could therefore not afford to incur the displeasure of their landlords, even when their wages were abysmally low (Jassal 2005, 269).

During my fieldwork in Barsara, I witnessed on many occasions the clout the Brahmin village landlords had. One of the wealthiest landlords, members of whose extended family own several acres of land in the village, observed a practice that provides a telling commentary on the nature of landlord-labor relations. From early morning until sunset, this landlord would sit on a chair at the far edge of the field under a makeshift umbrella to keep an eye on his hired labor. At the end of the day, by means of the *jarīb*, a long wooden measuring scale, he and his staff would measure the distance each of the hired laborers had covered for weeding, planting, or other specific tasks. Men and women hired for the day worked in teams in separate parts of the fields. While the women occasionally sang or conversed among themselves as they worked in their respective rows, any interruption in the work itself would have adversely affected their daily wages. Hence, the prudence of our collective decision to record their work songs only after the day's work was done.

Despite the fact that the structure of landholding in this district has changed substantially since Independence and that large landholdings



23 Jarib in Barsara.



24 Powerful Brahmin landlord in Barsara. A Mallah leader stands behind him with B. D. Upadhyaya, a fieldwork assistant, seated.

have given way to smaller ones, most comprising no more than five bighas, where a bigha is approximately one third of an acre, pockets of traditional privilege nevertheless remain. In such pockets laboring women still experience a range of vulnerabilities. As late as 1998, an incident from the neighboring village Dehiyan served to revive a collective memory about the feudal past and to create a furor in surrounding villages as well as within the Jaunpur administration. An upper-caste landholder's attempt to sexually violate a Dalit woman laborer was met with severe outrage and concerted resistance with the support of the local NGO, the Bharatiya Jan Sewa Ashram at Badlapur. The village Dalits moved the courts, the offending member of the former Brahmin village elite remained in police custody for several days, and the entire neighborhood of Dalits boycotted work on the Brahmins' fields, forcing the Brahmins to hire laborers from neighboring villages at higher wages. Thus, a struggle that had begun as an effort to restore the Dalits' *izzat* (dignity) ended as a powerful movement for Dalit and laboring class solidarity. Protest against this incident of sexual violence in fact served to increase wages in the region, and, since it was the women who had organized in opposition to landlords, it also served to collapse wage differentials between men and women for the same kinds of work (fieldnotes, Sauraiyan village, 1998). Once a minimum wage had been enforced and gender discrimination in wages had ended, women initiated another protest against the persistent issue of forced labor.

In my years of fieldwork, I heard many versions of this episode from villagers in Dehiyan and Sauraiyan. For them, it appeared to constitute a watershed in the changing agrarian scene. In recent years, under the Mayawati-led Bharatiya Samajwadi Party (BSP) government, many villages have been declared by the state as "Ambedkar" villages, making them eligible to state-sponsored development schemes targeted specifically at improving the conditions of Dalits. Since male migration was a major preoccupation of the women of rural Jaunpur and since it remains a recurring motif in their oral traditions, I turn next to the migration motif in women's work songs.

PROTESTING MALE MIGRATION

The scale and histories of migrations from the subcontinent since the mid-nineteenth century leave no doubt about the profound impact upon the “more intimate relationships within households” and ways in which gender relations are destabilized through migration, a theme that has received only marginal attention in the social sciences. F. OSELLA AND K. GARDNER, *MIGRATION, MODERNITY, AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN SOUTH ASIA*, XVI

The singers I introduced in the previous section that hinted at migration from this region to neighboring towns, as well as to the service and transport sectors in Delhi, the industrial centers in Mumbai, and the rural belt in the Punjab, make the phenomenon an immediate reality rather than one consigned to a distant past when men migrated largely to the port city of Calcutta and, thence, to the sugar colonies of the Caribbean. Since the region has experienced male migration since the nineteenth century, it comes as no surprise that the migration motif suffuses its song culture. *Kajli* is an important source for reconstructing that history, though other genres, such as the songs I explore in chapter 6, also feature the theme of migration. The repertoires of both men and women² feature the migration theme, the history of which is kept alive in the collective consciousness through this song culture. The continuing phenomenon of migration in contemporary times makes the theme even more relevant. Women’s experiences during industrialization in colonial India show that the industrial working class was reproduced through the intensification of women’s and children’s labor in the rural economy, as urban employers depended on a steady supply of male workers from the countryside (Sen 1999, 3). Samita Sen’s research points to the importance of examining the continued linkages between the shifting gender equations in the countryside and the emergence of the urban working class. The laborers in the jute mills of Bengal, for instance—almost exclusively single, male, and temporary—were migrants hailing first from Orissa and Bihar and later from the United Provinces and Andhra Pradesh, which not only changed the contours of Calcutta’s labor market but also revived the casual nature of the labor force (26, 48).

It was the earnings and labor of women in the rural economy that enabled male workers to return home periodically, largely in accordance

with the mill's requirements. Thus, mills passed on the entire cost of migration, as well as the costs of maintaining and reproducing the rural household, to the workers, whose wages were already insufficient and sometimes even subsidized by the rural household (Sen 1999, 51). For small and marginal peasant households, however, it was remittances from the city that provided the essential source of cash for servicing their debts (69). The redefinition of gender roles arising from the new expectations of the women left behind, and the intensification of women's direct involvement in agrarian production, were necessary outcomes of male migration. However, women's involvement in agricultural production remains largely undocumented and unacknowledged as it is presumed to be either marginal or merely supplemental to the male income (76).

9

*Are haraiyā ban jariga**Hamre bālam pardesvā nikariga**Are hamke naiharvā mein tajga**Are sejiyā na sove haraiyā ban jariga**Are pānc rupaiyā sāmī tohrī naukariyā**Das hambin gharhi me debai na**Rakbbain ankhīyā ke sāmanvā**Piyā ke jāye debe na**Cithiyā na bhejai caupatiyā na bhejai**Apane jiyarā ka bavalvā sāmī likhi bhejai na**Cithiyā pe cithiyā likhai mehraniyā**Apani chori ke naukariyā ghar calā na autā na**Cithiyā pe cithiyā likhai mahrajvā**Ghar kabahu na aubā na, apani chori ke naukariyā**Ghar kabahun na aubā na*

Oh the green woods are scorched.

My love left for foreign lands.

Oh, abandoned me in my natal home.

The bed holds no charm, the green woods, burnt up.

O beloved, your service worth just five rupees.

Ten, I could give you in my own home.

And keep you before my eyes

Not let you go, beloved.

No letters, not a four-liner did he send,
 About the state of his heart, he didn't write.
 Letter upon letter sends the Meherin,³
 "Return home!
 Leave service and return home."
 Letter upon letter sends the Maharaj,
 "I shall not return home,
 Giving up my job,
 I shall never return home."

TENGRA KAHARIN, ATARA, JAUNPUR

In this song a woman proclaims that she will raise the paltry sum her husband earns abroad, provided that he remains at home. The song effectively captures the angst of abandoned women, who sometimes spent their entire lives waiting for news from their migrant husbands. The *Maharaj*, or lord and master of the song, categorically refuses to give up his job and return home. While the reasons for male migration may have changed over time, the conditions of existence for the women left behind continue much the same. Thus while the songs shed light on the economic factors that prompted the migration, they are also good sources for understanding the current economic imperatives that burden peasant households today (Kumar 2001; Sen 1999).

The mood of protest and defiance in these songs is such that the threats could be taken as ironic, funny, or serious. In one powerful song of protest against gender inequalities, a wife threatens to get rid of the signs of her matrimony. She announces that she will wash the vermilion from her hair part in the river, smash her glass bangles, and rip off her velvet sarī (*lorhvā uthaike curiyā phor naibe ho; golvā uthaike sariyā phār naibe ho, piyā jaibe bidesvā*) if her husband migrates in search of work. What stands out in these songs is the desperation of the women, since male migration usually consigned women to lives filled with loneliness and long periods of separation from their husbands. The song below plays on the myriad anxieties of women abandoned by migrating men.

10

Sakhiyā so Rama Madhuban, ke kaise ham jiyabe ho Ram
Are are kāli badariyā tī, hai mori bahinī ho,
Bahinī rimik jhimkī, Deva barisau rainī,

*Rama barse ho Ram, Rama jab carhlen naiyā par
 Âdhe Gangā gailen ho Ram, are ohi pār se kewatā pukāre
 Navariyā tohrī dūbal ho Ram
 Sanjhavahi badrī ghamāsal, masi rāti barsahī ho
 Rama chhatvā lagai ke harī gailen rainī, nāhi bāsain ho
 Ohi pār se kewat pukāre, sunahun Raja Dasrath ho
 Apane biyahī k dhara manāvahu, navariyā tohri dūbai ho Ram
 Kāu ham dhara manāvahu, sunhu bhaiyā Kevat ho
 Apane biyahī k kiyahu apmān, navariyā hamarī dūbai ho*

Friend, my love goes to Madhuban but how am I to live, O Ram!

O dark cloud, my sister, just rain, sister.

It rained and rained, Rama, it rained, Rama when he stepped onto the boat

Half way across the Ganga, that's when the boatman called out,

“The boat sinks, O Ram.”

Since the evening clouds gathered, into the night it rained and rained.

But holding an umbrella he had left, and did not stay back.

That's when the boatman called, “Hey Raja Dashrath!

Call upon your wife's good fortune to save you, your boat sinks!”

“How shall I invoke her fortune to save me? Listen, boatman.

I heeded her not, but insulted her, alas, now my boat sinks!”

SHANTI'S COURTYARD ATARA, JAUNPUR

When Shanti and her friends sang this song, I thought of the so-called karmic connection it draws between the husband's misfortune and his arousal of his wife's displeasure. About the motif in this song Shanti says, “Women are auspicious and bringers of good fortune, so the spurned woman of the song reminds listeners about the importance of women's roles for the continued good fortune in the life of a married couple.”

The song is a powerful articulation of the way in which women might perceive their contribution to the harmony of the universe. It also evokes the qualities of female power (*sat*) described in the previous chapter, whereby chaste wives are able to accumulate and exercise spiritual power for the benefit of their families. Like the grinding songs, this song evokes the potency of the superhuman feminine strength to be derived from women's purity, a strength that usually remains latent but continues to bestow good fortune. However, if tampered with, this latent strength also has the potential to wreak havoc.

While the song might be interpreted as providing a glimpse of men's fear of feminine power and the need to appease their women for their own wellbeing, ordinary women, making no claims to any of the inflated ideals of chastity, use the song to assert and underline the need for men to recognize the importance of their perspectives. The song makes a powerful argument that men ignore women's needs and desires at their own peril. Here, when a husband, in defiance of his wife's entreaties, sets off in the rain armed only with his umbrella, leaving his wife disconsolate, misfortune strikes and his boat capsizes. At this point, the boatman's words suggest that it is only a wife's accumulated merit, righteous power and good fortune that can save her husband and prevent her from becoming a widow. It is in this line that we learn that the errant husband is none other than the mythical and just King Dashrath of Ayodhya, a man of his word and the father of Rama (see chapter 4).

The striking parallels between this song and one that Narayan cites from the Sumba genre, especially their motifs of a punishing rainfall that brings an arrogant husband to his senses, suggest the extraordinary thematic commonalities that exist across regions (Narayan 1995, 248). Narayan's suggestions for using dialogue to elicit oral literary criticism about particular texts provided additional parallels between women's interpretations and their acknowledgment that such songs provide commentary on contemporary social relations (251). The songs below reinforce the notion that while agrarian production depends on the men and women of peasant households working as a team, the men remain the decision-makers and heads of these households.

NEGOTIATIONS FOR PLAY

Where the men and women of a household work together as a team, their labor and industry is evident in a mere glance at the fields. All over the Jaunpur countryside, it is easy to identify the fields that belong to the hereditary cultivating or peasant castes of Kurmis, Koeris, Yadavas, and Kahars; their fields are neat, manicured, weeded, and watered, largely because these castes enlist the labor of the women of their households. Where, on the other hand, the households are prosperous or upwardly mobile, as is the case with a large percentage of the Yadavas in the region, women are withdrawn from laboring in the fields in the interest of raising

their household's status, although senior women may still contribute in a supervisory capacity.⁴ The advantages peasant women's uncompensated labor offers peasant households, and the perceptions these women have about their own contributions as extensions of their duties as members of peasant households, are reflected in the bargaining tone of songs wherein women negotiate time off for leave, play, or recreation.

The fact that women negotiate to visit their natal homes precisely in the slack season hints at the importance of their labor and suggests the appropriateness of expressing this need at the juncture in the agricultural cycle when there are fewer demands on women's labor. While the need to negotiate and seek permission to visit one's natal home is romanticized and appealingly celebrated in this genre of song, the reality it disguises is troubling and one that I encountered repeatedly during my fieldwork. The songs endorse the findings of research conducted in the 1970s, namely, that women regarded much of their agricultural labor as an extension of their household duties and that this labor therefore remained unrecorded. It is the bargaining tone of these songs that allows us to see the extent to which women have internalized the ideology of women's agricultural tasks as an extension of their duties as wives. Against the understandings of patriarchal bargains, the songs below offer rich evidence of both accommodation and negotiation. The songs further reinforce the notion of women's work as essential, albeit subservient, to male productive activity.

In the agricultural cycle, the rainy season is when agricultural activity is at its slowest, making it the ideal time for wives to spend a couple of months with their natal families. Women's lack of autonomy emerges as key since this leave, more likely to be understood as "time for play," must be effectively and strategically negotiated, as demonstrated by the mood of coaxing and cajoling in these songs. In this section, I highlight two melodious and lively songs, both of which I heard while conducting fieldwork at the onset of the monsoon season, that capture the mood of such bargaining. As the women sung these songs while laboring, the question that came to my mind was how women are socialized into their roles as compliant laborers. The songs are light-hearted and deceptively simple but provide an unexpected window on the contexts within which women must negotiate their time away from work. They reveal hitherto lesser-known aspects of women's work cultures. Paradoxically, then, it is

in songs about women's negotiations for leisure time that we encounter rich perspectives on women's work cultures.

II

Āī re jījīyā kajariyā more sāmī, kajariyā more sāmī
Kajariyā khelei jāvai re nāiharavā, kajariyā khelei jāvai re
Jab tum raniyā kajariyā khelei jāyau, tikuliyā dhare jaye re sejarīyā
Nathuniyā dhare jaye re
Nathunī ke raiya chamākai ādhi ratiyā, gamakai ādhi ratiyā
janavale dhanā sovāi re sejarīyā, janavle dhanā sovāi re
Āī re beriyā kajariyā more sāmī, kajariyā khelei jāvai re naiharavā
Jab tum raniyā kajariyā khelei jāyau, kajariyā khelei jāyau
Pāyalīyā dhare jāyo re sejarīyā, bīchuiyā dhare jāyau re sejarīyā
Pāyal ke ghunghrū bājai re ādhi ratiyā, janavle dhanā sovāi re more lagavā
Kajariā khelai jāva re naiharavā
Jab tum raniyā kajariyā khelei jāyau, kardhaniyā dhare jāwau re sejarīyā
Kardhaniyā dhare jāyo re sejarīyā.

“It's the rainy season, love, the season of kajlī

To frolic in the rains I go to my natal home, to play kajrī I go.”

“When you go, my queen to play kajrī, be sure to leave your forehead
 ornament on the bed,

Your nose ring on the bed.

When the nose ring glistens at midnight, it will seem as if wife sleeps on the
 bed.”

“The season of rain is here, to frolic in the rain I go to my natal home.”

“My queen, when you go, be sure to leave your anklets on the bed, toe-rings on
 the bed.

When the anklets tinkle at midnight, it will seem as if my wife sleeps
 alongside.”

“I go to play kajrī at my natal home.”

“When you go to play, leave your waist-belt on the bed.”

SITARA NISHAD AND OTHERS, SADIAPUR, ALLAHABAD

Note how the song draws attention to items of jewelry, the significant markers of matrimony, as well as to items that represent women's submission to their husbands. As Gold has rightly pointed out, female coyness is often a pose, masking a superior power: “Female adornment is an ex-

PLICITLY acknowledged form of restriction, signifying women's submission to men (although women also celebrate their beauty as a form of power)" (Gold 1994, 36).

In listening to the many layers in the song, one might argue that apart from reminding wives of their marital duties, the casting off of women's jewelry may also express a brief liberation from women's primary roles, which are characterized by subservience and duty. Or, as, Mala Devi suggested, "the husband of the song is simply expressing his protest and displeasure since she will not be with him in the days to come." Sitara pointed to the song's feel-good element, suggesting that the husband's requests "make women realize that their absence will be strongly felt."

In addition to the women's explanations, this ambivalently coded text could be interpreted as a classic of patriarchal bargaining. There are many possible ways to interpret the song, wherein the woman's jewelry is so intimately linked with her body that the former becomes metonymic of the latter. On first hearing, one might observe how the husband's authority is romanticized, and since the women sang the song with a touch of irony as well as with aplomb, the likeliness that the woman will consent to the husband's demands in the song becomes immediately apparent. One might even conclude that the husband, in his requests for his wife to remove her ornamentation before her departure, is demanding that the wife be desexualized when she travels beyond the physical confines of the home. Where women's entry into public spaces requires monitoring, especially over long journeys, it is possible that this may be achieved in as nonthreatening a way as possible through the erasure of women's sexuality. The construction of the "queen," even "goddess," within the household seems to erase woman's sexuality outside it. That no concessions are made, even if the movement is for the purpose of visiting the natal home, further underscores the stringency of the conditions. The coupling of the song's loaded upper-caste symbolism, with its references to strict controls and its use of jewelry as a marker of social status, with the fact that it is sung by poor laboring women adds to its irony. In spite of these possible readings, Sitara's interpretation struck me as the most convincing and appealing, especially given the harsh separations many married couples endure when husbands are compelled to migrate in search of work. Since women in the region dwell so intensely on the pain of separation, their

desire to be desperately missed by their lovers and husbands is poignantly captured here. In the next song, the ironic elements are further enhanced.

12

*Kajari bād aube soc mat man kar sāvan me bhajan kar na
 Sab sasure se sakhiyān aihen e jirva jhālariyā
 Ho tani bhent akvār hoi jaihen he jirva jhālariyā
 Eik sarī liyāya, jhamphar barhiyā khūb sīyāya
 Mor cijiyau ko chorāvai ka jatan kar sāvan me bhajan kar na
 Kajari bād aube soc mat
 Sab sakhiyā t karihen singaravā ho jirvā jhālariyā
 Jaihen bābā mor ho, jaihe bābā mor hamare sagarvā
 He jirvā jhālariyā
 Jhulbe jhulvā ka dār gaihen kajrī malhār
 Cār din saiyān culhā bartan kar sāvan me bhajan kar na
 Apane bahineu ke ho, apane bahineu ke le tū bulwāi
 Unahūn sasure me hoihen ūbiyāi, he jirvā jhālariyā
 Dekhihen ghare ka sab kām tohen ho jāye ārām, hamai jāyāi de
 Jina khan gan kar sāvan me bhajan kar na
 Eike samahje na tū maskhariyā, je jirvā jhālariyā
 Bhaiyā ānai āvat ba ātvariya
 Pandit tū catur hayā kāhe soch me bhayā
 Tani subah shām pūja kīrtan kar na, he bhajan kar na
 Kajari bād aube soch mat man kar sāvan me bhajan kar na*

When the rains end, I'll return, in the rains do not think, just sing songs of devotion.

The girlfriends will come from their marital homes, dear one.

Reunions and warm embraces there are going to be, for sure, dear.

Just get a sari and a top stitched for me to wear.

Get detached from my things, just try to sing devotional songs.

When the rains end I'll return, don't think in the rains, instead, sing songs of devotion.

My girlfriends will dress up of course, dear.

To visit their fathers, our own worlds, dear one.

Swinging on the swings how we'll sing, melodies of the rains to sing.

Just for four days, dear, take care of those kitchen chores for me.

Send for your sister, call her over here.
 By now she too must be bored at her in-laws, for sure.
 The housework she'll manage, then it's easy for you and I may leave.
 Just don't go grumbling, sing those devotional songs.
 This isn't a joke, don't scoff, dear, please.
 My brother will arrive to fetch me this very Sunday.
 Like a pandit, you're clever, but why silent like this?
 Morn and night say some prayers, sing some devotional songs.
 When the rains end, I'll return, remember not to think.
 It's the devotional songs you must sing, you must sing.

While, as Sitara illustrated, the first song in this section describes the ways in which permission is elicited, the second establishes and articulates the conditions under which it is grudgingly granted. Note the arrangements that must be made before the wife's departure. In such songs the request for permission to take leave is made on the flimsiest of pretexts. In a kajlī that I heard during a brief interlude of fieldwork in the neighboring district of Mirzapur, which, according to sources, is the birthplace of the kajlī genre, a woman asks that she be allowed to visit her natal home because a parrot flew off with her handkerchief and she needs to fetch a new one:

Rajkā rumāl ho suganvā leke urī gainā
Ihe hamare bābā ka bhariba dukān ho
Kahā t bālam calī jāin.

Such a little hand towel and the parrot flew off with it.
 But my father has a well-stocked shop.
 If you say, beloved, I could visit, if you say I could go.

These themes, all staples of kajlī, illustrate how women negotiate the fulfillment of their desires and seek permission from their real masters, their husbands. The songs endorse Sarkar's observation that "visits to the parental home were a rare pleasure, dependent upon the whim of the new authorities and mostly withheld, since the bride soon became the source of the hardest domestic labor within the household" (1997, 59).

Since natal visits involved the marital household's loss of the inmarrying women's labor, male resistance to such visits would appear to have structural roots. Hence, as Sarkar found in Bengal, "control over labor is a

concept that needs to be masked and mystified, whether in political or domestic economy. Control over the wife's sexuality, the other argument against long absences from the new home, on the other hand, was a more familiar one, securely grounded in sacred prescription, and therefore, possible to articulate more openly" (59).

In the context of the production of a labor force, the songs suggest that husbands are entitled to unconditional rights over the labor of their wives. Elsewhere, I have shown that in colonial times it was understood among the cultivating castes that the labor of the women of peasant households would be readily available in the fields (Jassal 2001, 65–86). During my fieldwork on the subject of concealed tenancy in the late 1990s, villagers who leased out their lands for cultivation revealed to me that occasionally what proved decisive in granting a tenant an oral lease was the knowledge that both the husband and the wife would be cultivating the land (fieldnotes, 1999–2000).

On the other hand, not all women were interested in securing time away to visit their natal homes. Nevertheless, these women would still need to negotiate so-called playtime, and on this level they too relate to the words and spirit of the songs, which articulate deeply felt structural tensions that require both assertion and resolution. These songs reveal a space open to women's negotiations and the context in which their requests might be legitimated and endorsed. It is the gendered nature of the distribution of power within households that emerges here. Women sweet-talk their need for a break from family and household responsibilities, without disturbing existing arrangements. These sung narratives appear to establish the parameters within which women's negotiations would not only be acceptable but also serve to impart the sense that the women have negotiated a deal for themselves. One could argue that by allowing women to take credit for such short-term negotiations, their husband's secure their wives conformity in the long run and keep real autonomy out of reach.

The songs in this section evoke Gopal Guru's important observation that Dalits had been systematically deprived of the right to their own space and time (Guru 2000). In the late 1990s, it was clear that the marginalized women who attended the Abhiyān Samitī meetings, held by a loose coalition of NGOs working on labor and land rights, had received permission to attend from their husbands or mothers-in-law, who were



25 Mallah women cultivators mind their crops near the Ganges, Allahabad.



26 Young Mallah sisters take a break from cultivation on their plot near Allahabad.



27 Islands of fertile cultivable land on the Ganges near Allahabad.

convinced that the interests of the family or society at large would be served. Had the sole purpose of the meetings been for play or entertainment, the women would likely have found it much harder to get away. On the whole, younger wives, who were still in the process of establishing themselves in their marital homes, were rarely present at meetings and workshops unless accompanied by a senior woman of the family, usually the mother-in-law, who was also participating. In these matters, the spadework the NGOs carried out was important in breaking down the resistance of the village patriarchal communities to the new ideas and initiatives the NGOs offered.

While the reputation of a particular organization for sustained and systematic grass-roots work counted toward whether a husband or mother-in-law would grant a woman permission to attend the NGO's meetings, the fact that women had to secure this permission before they could attend meant that women's bargaining skills were always being tested. For this reason, I usually preferred to meet individual women in their homes in the late afternoon. When, on the other hand, I initiated focus-group meetings, I invariably had to base our initial discussions around how the women would elicit permission to attend or how they would arrange for

dinner preparations or the efficient conclusion of a range of household tasks ahead of time in order to elicit this permission.

For instance, on one occasion during my fieldwork in Sauraiyan village, Meena Devi, a Dalit agricultural laborer, arrived panting and puffing well after the meeting had begun. Impeccably turned out in her best sari, she summed up her late arrival thus: “My mother-in-law was initially reluctant for me to go and until this morning she was adamant that I should not join the meeting. But I completed all the cooking and washing up before dawn and served everyone at home. Then, seeing that all the work had been done, my mother-in-law relented. She said, ‘why not go and see what that lady from Delhi has to say. After all, she’s also come all the way from Delhi.’”

Another woman, Susheela, proudly recounted her own boldly defiant stance: “When I was coming, my father-in-law said, ‘where are you going? There is no need to attend those meetings-pheetings. Go and work.’ But I said, ‘work goes on, today I shall not work, tomorrow I’ll do it.’ Earlier, it was my mother-in-law I used to have conflicts with.” Like Meena Devi and Susheela, women were constantly negotiating and making small adjustments in order to earn certain small freedoms for themselves. The opportunity to attend meetings and workshops proved to be one such gain. However, during my fieldwork I encountered numerous instances of women looking over their shoulders for fear of disapproval from their family members. Many such instances also underlined women’s lack of autonomy in decision-making and the strong patriarchal controls under which they operated.

Elsewhere, I have described my experience of conducting fieldwork among Mallah women in Madhubani district, who had formed a women’s collective to manage fishponds to raise and harvest fish for sale (Jassal 2003). Resistance to the formation of women’s cooperatives came first from the men of the Mallah community, as fishing is seen as typically male work. The women remember being subjected to varying degrees of hostility, suspicion, and jeers in those early days in the mid-1980s when the cooperatives were being formed. Women’s attendance at meetings was a new phenomenon, and during my fieldwork, the women of village Usrar in Andhrathari recalled that so threatening was the prospect of a women’s fishing cooperative that male relatives sneered at them, remarking that the women were “off to drink cups of tea and lounge around on



28 Members of a fishing cooperative in Madhubani, Bihar.

chairs.” While the remarks were often harmless, that they were remembered fifteen years later seems particularly poignant.

Some women conceded that initial hostility of male family and village members did eventually give way to support, and then to grudging admiration when, at last, the ponds were secured in the names of the women’s cooperatives and over time proved to be the pillar of economic prosperity that the women had promised they would be. The intervening stages of this unique experiment, however, were replete with hurdles and conflicts at every step: concerted struggles involving litigation, protests, and collective action; visits to the government offices for discussions with functionaries; hard labor to clean out and make the ponds functional; mastery of new technologies of fish production; the purchase of fish eggs and then round-the-clock vigils to guard the fish crop against theft and poisoning by disgruntled elements; the keeping of accounts and disbursal of profits; and so on (Jassal 2003).

In Pilkicha village of Jaunpur, Malti, a Mallah woman, who was otherwise very articulate and opinionated, once made it very clear to me that she would have to conclude our conversation because her husband had seen her conversing with me at length and was making angry eyes at her (*ānkh tarerat hain*). Just before, she had forcefully expressed her opinion

about the functioning of the Dalit *pradhān* (headman) with these words: “What does the headman do? Nothing. He struts about like a *navāb*. If he were to grant us a small patch of land from the uncultivated area in the village, we could also grow some greens, herbs, and garlic for sale in the market to improve our livelihood security.”

While Malti’s statement struck me as poignant for the very meagerness of her request for a small cultivable patch to keep herself financially afloat, even more surprising was the fact that her husband was keeping an eye on her from a distance. Compounding this irony was the fact that Malti was not only an extremely outspoken woman who vended fish but also a woman who was also otherwise economically independent and exuded confidence in her dealings with the outside world. However, her visibly increasing discomfort under the vigilant and disapproving gaze of her husband so close to her homestead spoke volumes about the nature of the restrictions under which she lived and the gender inequality within her household. Her husband’s reaction, on the other hand, was typical of the men who perceived the efforts of local NGOs striving to achieve greater gender parity in the countryside as a threat to male authority in the household as well.

This chapter examined how a culture may be heard and how we may listen to women who are rarely heard. It argued that laboring women’s musical practices and songs are an important source of information about women’s conditions of labor and about agrarian production as a whole. While women’s own perspectives on their songs were significant, the chapter also focused on the work songs’ value as sources for unearthing women’s labor conditions. For instance, songs about women’s negotiations to obtain leave from work offer insights into the nature of their involvement in labor processes, both as wives and as producers. In this sense, the chapter also rethinks the relationship between music and production, poetry and power.

The chapter emphasized the texts of the songs, women’s ideas about what they sing, and how and when they articulated these ideas. Particularly illuminating are the meanings women attach to these articulations and the ways in which they can be claimed and applied to specific situations. The songs show how women respond to structural constraints by creating systems of meaning that reconstitute the social structure (Hol-

land and Eisenhart 1990). My fieldwork suggested that what is important to bringing to light the nature of emotions in women's collectivities is not only the texts of songs but also their rhythms. Women's experience of working together under common conditions appeared to spill over into their discussions, allowing me a glimpse of the sparkling sense of community. My experience is in fact consonant with the Indian experience of music, wherein melodic structures are quite explicitly linked by convention to particular emotional contexts. The convergence of bodies in music and rhythms in shared work, creating the sense of shared space outlined by scholars of embodiment and music (Feld 1987; Stoller 1984), spilled over into women's camaraderie during their hours of relaxation. Facilitated precisely through such shared space, my fieldwork unearthed a range of viewpoints that might not otherwise receive an airing. Thus, women's solidarities arising from shared work experiences appeared to forge the emotional and public spaces within which women could constitute, express and affirm their sense of belonging.

Thus, it was possible to see in section two that as women came to terms with the strains and disappointments of their daily existence, they tended to use the songs as points of reference for further elaboration on their own conditions. The camaraderie they shared through work appeared to induce a relaxed and upbeat mood, rendering immediate difficulties somewhat bearable. This section drew attention to the commonalities of women's experiences, the fact that such experiences are rarely isolated but rather are shared by others, and, furthermore, that it is possible for women to delve into their oral traditions to find endorsement and affirmation for ongoing struggles.

The leads the songs provided opened a range of questions about women's changing roles within the agrarian economy. While some songs, especially those about the peasant household and migration, provided direct clues as to the conditions of labor, others, often ambivalently coded, were not quite as direct. Thus, many of the songs appeared to simultaneously uphold and challenge patriarchal ideologies. However, taken together, laboring women's songs provided a fruitful and unusual point of entry into learning about the processes of production. For instance, the changing division of labor, especially the fact that men's victories in labor organization are leaving women even more tied to their unattractive work conditions, was an important insight prompted, in part, by the song

material. Equally striking was my finding that in work settings involving one form of patriarchal arrangement under employer-landlords, women chose to sing about another kind of the patriarchal control—that wielded by their husbands.

As specific forms of women's bargaining, the song texts have wider implications for women's consciousness, struggles, and politicization, even as they caution against seeing all women's folklore as resistance (Narayan 1993, 181; Gold and Raheja 1994; Abu-Lughod 1990, 41–55). In this sense, the songs in this chapter also challenge us to rethink conventional understandings of the relationship between patriarchy and complicity. The songs and women's responses suggest that we must introduce greater diversity, even ambiguity, into our conceptualizations of agency, especially since, as we have seen, not only are women deeply involved in negotiations for both minor and major gains, but multilayered and competing interpretations about agency also appear to be equally valid and plausible. In their interpretations of the songs they sang and in the various contexts I have described, women affirmed their ability to transcend the limits of their particular conditions and hence demonstrated agency.

The direct association of the *kajli* genre, the subject of this chapter, with women's monsoon frolic and the immense opportunities it provides women to laugh, joke, and engage in humorous banter point to contexts where one might search for multilayered and complex evidence of agency. Those who have worked with rural laboring women in India will be familiar with the infectious nature of their jokes and laughter. In this chapter's concluding section, we saw how even the most pedagogical of NGO-sponsored projects and workshops offered women opportunities to have some fun, or, at the very least, to momentarily escape the tedium of their daily work schedules. The empirical evidence therefore points to the rich potential of theorizing the role of fun and laughter in constructions of rural women's subjectivities, a subject I could only peripherally address here. In the next chapter, I turn to the celebration of marriage and the genre of songs associated with this critical rite of passage in the lives of women.