

## ✧ Taking Liberties

If Hindu culture puts a premium on the unassertiveness of women, on Holi the reverse is entirely appropriate. Likewise, if Hindu culture ordinarily proscribes open displays of sexuality, on Holi, sexuality is one of the dominant and most obvious motifs of the day.

JOYCE BURKHALTER FLUECKIGER, *GENDER AND GENRE  
IN THE FOLKLORE OF MIDDLE INDIA*, 51

During my travels by public transport through north India in the weeks before the Holi festival, I heard a specific genre of song exploding and spilling out of public spaces, markets, buses, and auto-rickshaws. Described as *phūhar* (sloppy) and *ashlīl* (obscene), this genre of Bhojpuri songs emerges on audiocassettes each year in great abundance around Holi, the spring festival characterized by a temporary suspension of gender and caste hierarchies. Publicly characterized as obscene, or more appropriately transgressive, the dominant motif in these recordings is the joking relationship between a woman and her younger brother-in-law. This chapter explores how themes and forms characteristic of folk traditions change with their means of communication. The cassette recordings hint at the existence of women's spaces within the culture of Holi. However, the appropriation

of a genre that originally served as a space for rural women's innovation and improvisation has modified women's song traditions and commercialized them in such a way that monetary rewards accrue to the appropriators while the women remain silent objects of the male gaze. The recordings allow us to inquire into issues of culture and social change, gender constructs, kinship norms, lower-caste assertions of identity, and a range of other caste, class, and gender concerns.

This chapter utilizes Holi cassette music as the source material for an inquiry into a range of issues of interest to scholars of contemporary social change and public culture. Of particular interest are the linkages between rural- and urbanscapes and the transitions and transformations that occur when forms and ideas travel between rural and urban milieus. As traditional forms, such as festival songs expressing kin and caste sensibilities, including classificatory kinship terminologies, are appropriated for the fashioning of popular culture, taste, and consciousness, the sociological relevance of these categories in both their old and new contexts becomes significant. This chapter seeks to further our understanding of the gendered impact of technological advancements through which oral traditions are reinterpreted and reworked to address contemporary caste, class, and gender concerns. Issues of patronage and consumership, as well as how these affect the content of an existing genre, are significant lines of inquiry these recordings open up (see also Blackburn and Ramanujan 1986, 29).

In recent years, scholars of gender have re-examined the field of folklore to understand the devices available to nonliterate societies for transmitting dominant values over generations, including the social construction of gender. The analysis of oral traditions and of women's speech genres and knowledge systems has proved a fertile field of investigation in unearthing women's consciousness. For instance, Lila Abu-Lughod shows how women's strategies of defiance were excluded from commercial recordings of Bedouin culture (Abu-Lughod 1990b, 24). In his path-breaking book, *Cassette Culture*, Peter Manuel (1993) has explored the contradictions and challenges posed by the introduction of new cassette technologies in India and the revitalization of local subcultures and community values due to the decentralization of cassette production. Where possibilities of multiple interpretations exist and where traditions are rich and varied—but also continually being reworked, as in the Bhojpuri-

speaking region—the challenge is to understand how, why, by whom, and in whose interest existing genres are being appropriated and the purposes served by the appropriation.

#### THEMES AND MOTIFS IN CASSETTE RECORDINGS

This chapter singles out one such folk genre, Holi songs, to reflect on those features that lend themselves to adaptation and the logic by which traditional genres are transformed. The popular and mass appeal of these recordings, including the messages they contain, within the sociopolitical milieu of contemporary Uttar Pradesh and Bihar complements our understanding of political and social change in the region. This appeal is thus eminently worthy of sociological attention.

The supposed incestuous ties between a woman and her husband's younger brother is a recurring motif of these recordings and one of the puzzles I seek to solve in this chapter. The dyad of a woman and her younger brother-in-law is utilized to express a range of emotions, from separation and longing to the explicitly erotic, from veiled innuendoes to the recounting of overt sexual encounters. Is this just an extension of the age-old joking relationship or is the relationship undergoing dramatic change?

Occasionally melodious, often haunting, but for the most part aggressive, abrasive, flippant, bawdy, and offensive in their insistence, especially when heard in public spaces, these recordings enable an interrogation of the realm of familial ties and the changes therein; the reassertion of patriarchal values that appear threatened by the obvious visibility of women in public spaces; and contemporary processes of cultural production. Deriving inspiration from folk genres, though not quite from traditional folk music, the songs are reframed and reinvented in accordance with contemporary tastes and markets.

If tacking new urban lyrics onto a familiar, though primarily rural, folk song genre is about reinventing tradition or reframing the traditional, then what those lyrics say throws new light on contemporary concerns in north Indian society. The chapter thus echoes Blackburn's and Ramanujan's concerns with investigating how themes and forms characteristic of folk and classical traditions change when the means of communication change (Blackburn and Ramanujan 1986, 25).

Today Bhojpuri popular prerecorded cassette music (of which the Holi songs are an important example) competes with Hindi film music, contributing to the peculiarly cacophonous quality and chaotic character of north Indian mofussil towns and semirural- and urbanscapes. In contrast to the film songs that constitute popular culture all over the country, Bhojpuri song genres are regionally specific, inspired by the folk melodies and songs of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The heavy truck traffic on the Grand Trunk Road, the major highway connecting the mofussil towns of these large and populous states, is the channel for this music, transmitted largely through truckers, its primary consumers.

Undoubtedly composed and recorded by men, and mostly sung by men even when a women's point of view is being portrayed, these songs are obscene to the extent that, taken out of context, they attempt to titillate and usurp spaces traditionally available to women. Interestingly, Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger (1996, 50) has observed that within the ritual context of Holi celebrations among unmarried girls in central India, songs that had been taken out of context were considered bad. In much the same spirit, when, during fieldwork one winter in Barsara village, Jaunpur, I asked one of my favorite singers, Munraji, to sing a *kajli* the song of the rainy season explored in chapter 2, she replied that it would be "embarrassing" to do so, out of season.

In varying degrees the adoption of brash, lewd, carefree, permissive, and licentious tones adds to the heavy sexual and erotic content of these recordings, which has resulted in their being uniformly branded as *ashli* or obscene. However, it might be more appropriate to describe the genre as transgressive. The relationship that is being transgressed, however, is not just one of the traditional gender hierarchy, but also one of caste hierarchy. Much depends on the social context in which this joke is expressed (see Douglas 1968).

#### HOLI AND JOCLAR SONGS

Finally comes the indecency which is a distinct element in the observance [of Holi]. There seems to be reason to believe that promiscuous intercourse was regarded as a necessary part of the rite. CROOKE, *AN INTRODUCTION TO THE POPULAR RELIGION AND FOLK-LORE OF NORTHERN INDIA*, 392

*Phāgun mein Bābā devar lāge.*

In the month of Phāgun, even an old man may seem like one's younger  
brother-in-law.

*Are holiyo me āja bāur bhail ba tamanvā sajanvā ho  
Kab le khepī hoī baiganavā sajanvā ho*

Oh! Return in the Holi season, crazy one, that's my wish.

How long will you stay this time, my uncaring love.

HOLI SONGS AND SAYINGS, FIELDNOTES, JAUNPUR, 1999–2002

Holi is celebrated all over north India on the full harvest moon, exactly a month after the spring festival of Basant Pancamī. The festival evokes a joyous mood of color and camaraderie. The celebrations involve a carnivalesque subversion of established hierarchies of status, caste, and gender—enabling society, after each such release, to go back to its original functioning through the restoration of order. H. Bergson's (1956) metaphor of the safety valve for releasing pressure in a way that is nonthreatening to the system is an apt description of the festival and its strong cathartic component. Further, as Bergson suggests, only those who share common norms and values weep or laugh together, and only those who have a claim to group belongingness may partake of the humor. The more rigid, complex, and layered the social inequalities and hierarchies, the more the need for ritual festive release and role reversal.

Many scholars have investigated how role reversal reinforces hierarchy and the authority of rural elites. M. N. Srinivas's (1952) and Ranajit Guha's (1983) accounts are particularly insightful. Srinivas found that among the Coorgs, an oracle from the Banna caste, considered highly polluting, conducts the ceremony of ancestor worship. This grants him the license of speech. However, it is the temporary and ritual character of the role that not only underlines but also perpetuates existing structural cleavages. The impure caste of Poleyas are similarly compensated for their normative exploitation by the momentarily prominent place they are afforded in certain Coorg festivals. When they revert to their position in Coorg society as the most disenfranchised of its members, the rituals serve to reinforce the distance between upper and lower castes (Srinivas 1952).

Ranajit Guha emphasizes the element of predictability in calendrical

festivals like Holi, which serve to affirm, rather than overthrow, rhythm, order, and hierarchy: “The saturnalia, the systematic violation of structural distances between castes and classes, the defiance of rules governing interpersonal relationships between members of the family and community, the blatant undermining of private and public morality, all of which feature in this ceremony, add up not to a disruption of the political and social order in the village, but to its reinforcement” (Guha 1983, 34).

However, even if these inversions do not threaten existing relations of domination and subordination within society, they do offer a space that, though momentary, is nevertheless crucial to those involved for the ritual enactment of release and subversion. While in some regions the aggression is physical—as in Barsaana in western Uttar Pradesh, near the birthplace of Krishna, where women wield clubs against men—in the Bhojpuri-speaking belt, women’s aggression is verbal and takes the form of cathartic abuse. Licensed speech, sayings, songs, and prescriptive rebellions serve as insurance against the genuine article (Guha 1983, 45).

In villages across Uttar Pradesh, as in Rajasthan, men, often led by a crowned jester and accompanied by drumming, conduct a noisy procession through the streets, indulging in mocking, ironic, and violent horseplay (see also Gold 2000, 219). Such processions of folk clowns are a recurrent motif in folk festivals in other parts of the country as well. Shulman (1985, 201) argues that the clowns at the Mariamman festival in Tamil Nadu draw inauspicious forces (such as the evil eye or *drsti*) upon themselves, thereby deflecting these forces from others. In the Mariamman festival, the clowns bring into play creative energies that normally lie dormant, or are subdued or excluded, thus challenging the ordered domain of social life. In exactly this sense, clowning imparts a crucial dynamism to Holi, and the element of slapstick may be seen as expressing the “immediate liberation of suppressed forces” (201).

There are other interpretations of Holi, too. With some regional variation, the Holi myth also narrates the burning of a demoness, Holika, and the saving of the infant Prahlad, the symbol of truth and virtue. From Ann Grodzins Gold’s description of the festival, we learn that in Rajasthan, exactly a month before the festival, a dead tree branch symbolizing the demoness who is to be burned on Holi eve is planted in the ground. This marks the beginning of a month-long taboo on the move-

ment of women between their natal and marital homes (Gold 2000, 213). While in popular understanding the taboo serves to protect women from the rowdy atmosphere of Holi, Gold alerts us to the element of ritual danger involved, especially in rituals where female power is recognized as demonic and therefore, both dangerous and divine. In Holi celebrations in Rajasthan, for instance, women effectively claim for themselves the role of rescuers and life-givers, highlighting female worth and community, while also diffusing the divine/demonic, benevolent/dangerous dichotomies of male-authored discourses.

Based on the observations I made during my intermittent fieldwork in Jaunpur district in Uttar Pradesh between 1999 and 2002, the preferred norm in this region appears to be that, at the onset of the month of *Phāgun*, characterized by the singing of *phāg* or *phaguā*, families send any visiting daughters back to their marital homes, just in time for the Holi celebrations in which both genders have contrasting roles to perform. In enacting the Holi myth, “men will beat down the demonic female whereas it is woman’s part to rescue the child with all its potentiality” (Gold 2000, 217). The taboo also appears to have much to do with the agricultural cycle, since the month preceding Holi is the time for harvesting the *rabī* crop. Unlike *khariḥ*, the time available for harvesting *rabī* is very short, and the crop must be harvested quickly. The restriction on women’s movement during this period ensures minimum disturbance to the labor process.

Characterizing the mood of this month is the *phāg* musical tradition, associated with lush green fields, flower-scented breezes, the excitement of ripening mangoes, the sap-dripping, intoxicating *mahuā* trees, and the melodious songs of the *koel* (cuckoo). *Phāg* melodies primarily evoke the mood of *shringār* (love) and are resplendent with desire, teasing, aggression, and unrequited love. In familial contexts, *phāg* lyrics explore themes like the resistance of newlywed brides to leaving their natal homes for their marital ones; new brides’ wedding night nuptial anxieties; women’s desire for jewelry and ornamentation; and so on.

At the start of Holi festivities, it is customary to strike a spiritual note by singing of the deities Rama, Krishna, or even the ascetic Shiva engaged in the play of Holi, such as the following easily recognized lyrics sung all over north India in the *phāg* melodic style, as popularized through Bollywood films:

*Hori khelein Raghuwira Awadh mein, Hori Khelein Raghuwira  
Kekre hānthe kanak Pichkārī  
Kekre hānthe abirā  
Hai, kekre hānthe abirā Awadh mein.*

Rama, (of the Raghu dynasty) plays Holi in Awadh  
Who holds in his hands the golden water-squirter  
In whose hands the rose-powder  
Oh, whose hands are filled with rose-powder in Awadh

However, the mood steadily shifts to more earthy and physical realms, and the songs and melodies keep pace with the shifts. In rural contexts, the easy transition to and deployment of imagery and symbols common to both agricultural and human fertility is startling. D. D. Kosambi's (1970) insight that Holi rites were designed to promote and encourage procreation are borne out effectively in the following song, which also evokes the regeneration of the earth, a return to the womb, and a celebration of the seed, of contained energies, and of creation in its pristine stage (Jassal 2006, 309).

*Kohiyā aibo bhaiyā ho, agutāil bīyā bhaujī  
Lāgol hāvā phāgun ke, paniyāil bīyā bhaujī  
Pahile rāva chuā he se rahe barā harkat  
Ab to bīyā pāni le kar apāne se dharkat  
Kākohi hamrā se lasiyāil bīyā bhaujī  
Lāgol hāvā phāgun ke, paniyīl bīyā bhaujī  
Pablo gavnā taunā ghare rahe dudha danvā ho  
Bākir ab cuāil bāte colī ke khajanvā ho  
Ab ke ihe dehiyā se pakthāil bīyā bhaujī  
Lāgol havā phāgun ke, paniyāil bīyā bhaujī  
Gudu ho bujhatā garmāil bīyā bhaujī  
Lāgol hāvā phāgun ke paniyāil bīyā bhaujī  
Kohiyā aibo bhaiyā ho agutāil bīyā bhaujī.*

When will brother return? The seed has ripened sister-in-law,  
With the winds of the Phāgun season, the seed laden with sap  
At first, just a touch was a big deal,  
Now the ripened seed tumbles with its own weight  
Shall I say I made it even juicier, sister-in-law



With the winds of Phāgun, the seed laden with sap?  
 First there's marriage, only then milk and grain in the home,  
 But this time, the bounty within the blouse drips!  
 This time the seed ripened within the body  
 With the winds of Phāgun, the seed laden with sap  
 Maybe a baby boy, the warmed up seed, sister-in-law  
 With the winds of Phāgun, the seed laden with sap  
 When will brother return? The seed has ripened, sister-in-law.

CASSETTE RECORDING BY GUDDU RANGEELA, "BHATAAR HOLI," T-SERIES, 2000

Women's dependence on their brothers-in-law, namely, the *devar-bhābhī* bond and the other dominant motif in the song, is explored in a later section. Over the month of Phāgun, the mood builds and reaches a crescendo on the morning of the festival, when the splashing and drenching of everyone in sight with colored water is the norm. Intoxicants are freely consumed, and dancing, singing, drumming, celebratory eating, and the exchange of sweets infuses the mood with revelry, merriment, and magnanimity. The melodies switch to the more boisterous *dhamār* style, and the bonhomie extends to embracing members of other castes such that the element of physicality is very pronounced and in your face. This physicality is always combined with plenty of teasing, tricking, and playfulness and the breaking of caste-based commensality taboos. Aggressively competitive verbal exchanges between the sexes in the *jogīra* melodic style add a punch to the festivities.

Gold has persuasively argued that practices involving sexuality and female power and the associated jokes and rituals are, in fact, a response to mortality. Based on her fieldwork in the Rajasthan countryside among a "population who cared obsessively about getting children by means of processes divine and organic," Gold argues that the dances, jokes, and worshipful stories suggest "a life-affirming sexuality on the part of women offered a bountiful replenishing of the human community faced with death's losses" (Gold 1988, 304). Gold concludes that "just as cyclical natality and mortality underlie other concepts of death, so the fertility motif in village religion, with its playful and serious, bawdy and esoteric expressions, seems to penetrate most aspects of religious life" (Gold 1988, 306).

Of significance to the issues discussed here is the fact that traditionally women used the occasion to indulge in ritual and spontaneous verbal

abuse and developed fairly elaborate songs and sayings to channel and vent their resentment. The potential to improvise in abusive songs is particularly great for those so inclined. During fieldwork in village Ramnagar, Jaunpur, for instance, I found that there were always a few talented female singers who appeared to compose the rhymes and ditties on the spot and lead the rest of the group. Their singing was accompanied by the often-hysterical mirth of others, who joined enthusiastically in the chorus. Gold cites the following verse as an example of the genre sung in Rajasthan villages, particularly during the days preceding Holi: “The potter woman’s vagina’s like a broken jug’s rim: a rolling mouth, all that’s left is the hole” (Gold 1988, 130). In addition to the secluded Rajput women, Gold observed women from Brahmin and Mahajan castes mingling with those of peasant and artisan castes, all of them singing such songs together. In a footnote, Gold explains that these songs “include barbs at numerous castes (in terms of their sexual attributes) but are sung communally by mixed-caste groups of women with great *esprit de corps*. They display a sexual imagination that is little credited to South Asian peasant women and evoke an eroticism that is explicitly linked to fertility, if also to infidelity” (Gold 1988).

Among the agricultural castes of Ramnagar village, Jaunpur district, including Telis (oil-pressers), Mallahs (fishers and river-farers), and the numerically preponderant Yadavas (cultivators and middle-peasants), I found considerable social interaction around Holi. Among the various intermediate castes in the village, the teasing songs are sung within earshot of the men and are meant to be mildly embarrassing but not outright offensive; and, of course, in keeping with the spirit of the festival, to take liberties or “get your own back” and thus subvert the system is socially sanctioned. As the joking consists of playing with meaning, attempts to alter meaning in unexpected ways are common (Zijderveld 1983, 7). The jocular element is foregrounded, and to take offence would be simply ridiculous. The only option is to retaliate in kind, but during fieldwork, I found that men were mostly silent. Sheepish spectators, they were forced to hear myriad variations of such songs several times, over several days, leading up to the festival. In this context, therefore, Susan Gal’s insights about women’s special verbal skills as strategic responses to their positions of relative powerlessness are especially relevant (Gal 1991, 182).

Traditionally, therefore, Holi songs offered a realm of gender inter-

action wherein women got the chance to reverse roles and to experience a sense of empowerment, if only momentarily. My presence in the field during part of the festival confirmed my hunch that the jovial and good-humored possibilities these songs offered helped to release pent-up tensions and to defuse resentment and animosities, as well as allowed for the rejuvenation of collectivities and cathartic healing. Women always appeared to be strengthened by the festivities and celebrations and in better form during and after them. Women's careful attention to grooming and their attire the day after Holi further emphasizes the mood of freshness and newness heralded by the festival.

The next section contextualizes some concrete examples of cassette recordings in circulation in the Holi season during my fieldwork between 1999 and 2002 in the Bhojpuri-speaking region.

#### HOLI SONGS AND THE PRERECORDED CASSETTE INDUSTRY

The popularity of the songs and their ubiquitous presence in the form of recordings need to be contextualized not only within a burgeoning music industry but also within an urban folk tradition of avid musical consumption. The technological breakthroughs that made the production and circulation of music on a large scale possible over the past twenty years also greatly revolutionized musical consumption, accessibility, and tastes. The variety and range of recorded music in shops and bazaars, lanes and markets small and big, all over the towns of north India, and the ever-increasing demand for it, is itself a phenomenon worthy of sociological investigation.

The region boasts of a range of musical specialists, practitioners, balladeers, and epic singers, both professional and part-time or seasonal. Research on the astounding range of folklore traditions alive and thriving today in the Bhojpuri-speaking belt confirms the musical sensibility of the region (Marcus 1989; Servan-Schreiber 2001). Like the *gāthā* or folk ballads that reflect the vitality, strength, and specificity of the urban cultures from which they emerged (Servan-Schreiber 2001), these recordings are undoubtedly an urban phenomenon.

It is against this thriving backdrop that the popularity of the recordings must be contextualized. While the music is produced and recorded in studios in Delhi under the brand name *T-Series*, it is heard mostly on

the highways of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in north India. The recordings are sold from small stalls at bus terminals and found especially in market towns dotted along the Grand Trunk Road. However, the cultural practice of playing music loudly in public places ensures that the recordings are heard by all commuters, and as such they do not remain the sole possession of the purchaser but instead reach the entire spectrum of castes and classes in north India.

The vast population of town dwellers, shopkeepers, service providers, migrant workers and laborers, semiskilled workers in industries, and those engaged in the transportation of goods and people are the most visible consumers of the recordings, which can be heard all the way from Delhi eastward to Gorakhpur, Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, and Patna and beyond to hundreds of small towns in Bihar. As such, there are unmistakable parallels between the consumers of these recordings and those of the *gāthās*, oral epics of an earlier era, whom Servan-Schreiber identifies as “rickshaw-*vālās*, coolies, boatmen, Baniyas, cattle-sellers, themselves wandering and moving people, listening to wandering and moving singers” (Servan-Schreiber 2001, 45).

The songs also closely resemble the genre known as *gārī* or *gālīs* (abusive songs) (Raheja and Gold 1994; Gupta 2001; Marcus 1989) explored in chapter 3, a form of legitimized ritual abuse sung by the wife-givers at the conclusion of the wedding ceremony to embarrass the wife-takers. This ritual precedes the departure of the groom’s party from the wife’s natal home with the new bride. Through the *gālīs*, the significant relationships within the patrilineage are ridiculed and among these, the tensions at the core of the *devar-bhābhī* bond are particularly exposed. In this sense, too, the Holi songs evoke the mood of the *gālīs*.

The Holi song genre is also closely associated, both in narrative and in musical style, with the folk genre known as *birahā* (separation) discussed in the previous chapter. Where literacy is low and the thirst for information and knowledge high, the prerecorded *birahā* cassettes have come to occupy a significant niche. The theme recurs in a range of folk songs gathered under the generic term *birahā*. The *birahā* genre lends itself most effectively to the transmission of news-based information and sensational narratives of contemporary relevance and interest (Marcus 1989). The versatility of the genre became evident in recent times, when, only a few weeks after the murder of the famous Bandit Queen, Phoolan Devi, a

cassette narrating in song and verse the tragic life of the runaway child bride-turned-dacoit-turned-Member of Parliament hit the market. Several other versions followed in quick succession, surfacing in bazaars all over north India. Likewise, cassettes telling the story of Princess Diana's life and the dramatic circumstances of her death were immensely popular.

A brief detour through the production of cassette recordings and their widespread dissemination would not be out of place here. During my years of fieldwork, the Bhojpuri folksong market was dominated by T-Series, a company known for film music as well as thousands of recordings in every imaginable genre and Indian language. T-Series, established nearly twenty years ago, is now a diversified group with a US\$90 million core business of consumer electronics, CDs, and audio-video magnetic tapes and cassettes. With an ultramodern recording studio and laboratories in the New Okhla Industrial Development Authority (NOIDA) in Delhi, the company has rights to over 2,000 video and 18,000 audio titles comprising over 24,000 hours of music software. The company claims to have built the first music bank in the country and scouts for talent in lyrics, voice, music composition, and artistic creation through its website. While the scale of the company's operations suggests that it relies on a widespread sourcing network for songs, it is also instrumental in shaping tastes and musical trends.

The recordings I examine below point to the women's spaces that existed within the culture of Holi and that have now been appropriated for purposes far removed from those originally intended. Derived from and inspired by the folksong genres, the recordings in their modified form merely hint at the rich and vibrant tradition of verbal exchanges between sexes that form the core of the Holi festivities. While it would be useful to study how these recordings are consumed within the original setting from which they derive, I have not been able to perform the kind of extended participant observation required for such a study. Instead, I have investigated other sets of concerns and the possible ways in which themes, frames, and content are reworked in the commercial process.

My sample consists mainly of Holi songs adapted to the easily recognizable *phāg* and *dhamār* melodies. One obvious and puzzling feature of these recordings is the predominance of male voices articulating women's defiance of sexual mores. This in itself is suggestive of male anxieties within patriarchy. Musical exchanges in the form of clever verbal feats by

teams of men and women in the *jogīra* style also show up on different cassettes, but these are rehearsed and orchestrated with the voices remaining predominantly male. However, as Manuel suggests, quoting Kakar, “the parallel for the adoption of female persona by males already exists within the Bhakti tradition where the human soul is feminine in relation to the divine. Bhakti is preeminently feminine in its orientation, and the erotic love for Krishna (or Shiva, as the case may be) is envisioned entirely from the woman’s viewpoint, or at least from her position as imagined by the man” (Manuel 1993, 205).

While I found several songs that were based on familiar film tunes, the ones I present here are by far the most representative and reflect the themes and melodies most characteristic of the genre. The openly assertive sexuality is of course the most striking feature of the genre, but a closer listen reveals other common distinguishing traits. Songs like the one below definitively embody the male gaze.

*Man kare gorī tahār jobanā nihār ke, Ja jhār ke*

*Rang lagaitī ughār ke, ja jhār ke*

*Dehn sughratī bhari ekvār ke.*

I wish I could stare at your bosom, go dust off the color  
Smear your naked body with color, go shake it off  
To envelop you in a tight embrace!

CASSETTE RECORDING BY GUDDU RANGEELA, “CHATKAAR HOLI,” T-SERIES, 2004

The following song, an exploration of women’s consciousness within patriarchy as well as male anxieties about women’s fidelity, is more complex. The assertive female sexuality suggested here is startling to find within a dominant patriarchal culture that prescribes strict monogamy and, indeed, enforces it. The brash, carefree, and upbeat mood of abandon that the song cultivates stands in stark contrast to the reality of segregation between the sexes and the ideal of limited, visible social interaction between men and women, especially in public spaces. Here again the voice is distinctly male:

*Kolo kolo bhatār badlaiya sakhī*

*Kolo kolo bhatār badlaiyā*

*Na cāhe aincā na cāhe paincā,*

*Na cābi hamrā batohiyā*

*Kolo kolo bhatār badlaiyā sakhī*  
*Kolo kolo bhatār badlaiyā*  
*Na bahumat bā torā re, na bahumat hamār ho*  
*Āo banā lo eho sakhī, milī julī sarkār*  
*Majā leve ke ehi upaiyā*  
*Kolo kolo bhatār badlaiyā sakhī*  
*Kolo kolo bhatār badlaiyā*  
*Na culhā upās rahī*  
*Na Gudu ke ās rahī*  
*Mor mardā torā lāge*  
*Tor mardā morā pās rahī*  
*Hoi duno ke dāl faraiyā*  
*Kolo kolo bhatār badlaiyā sakhī*  
*Kolo kolo bhatār badlaiyā.*

Tomorrow let's swap husbands, friend.  
 Swap husbands.  
 I don't want this one, nor one like that.  
 Nor is it the traveler for me, let's swap husbands, friend.  
 Swap husbands.  
 Neither your views will take priority, nor mine.  
 We'll have a shared government this way.  
 A recipe for fun.  
 Swap husbands.  
 Neither cooking nor fasts.  
 No waiting for kids.  
 My husband will seem like yours.  
 And yours will be near me.  
 We'll cook their goose, both of them.  
 Let's swap husbands.

CASSETTE RECORDING BY GUDDU RANGILA AND SAPNA AWASTHI,  
 "KHARE KHARE LAGĀLAU," T-SERIES, 2003

Male preoccupation with women's sexual transgressions, albeit in parodying, jocular, and lighthearted tones, is reflected in diverse ways in the songs below. Their humorous twists reflect a need to manage these anxieties such that threats to the established gender hierarchy are channeled in other ways.

*Yār ke cūmā develū udhāi ke udhaniā*  
*Bhatrā ke tū garāvelū nathuniā*  
*Bhatrā ke tū carāvelū cuhaniā*  
*Yār khātir seb santarā sab re laganiyā*  
*Bhatrā ke delu sukhale sukhaniyā*  
*Yār aihen kām jable rahī tū dulhaniyā*  
*Bhatrā ji sab dīn ke vo thaganiyā.*

You're off to kiss your lover under draped covers;  
 For the husband, you fashioned a noose.  
 And sent him off to graze, the husband,  
 For the lover, servings of apples and oranges,  
 Just dried leavings for the husband.  
 The lover is of use as long as you're a bride;  
 The husband, a deceiver for all your days.

*Âr cāhe hokhi bhatrā se mār*  
*Bhabharī chikhaibo yār ke*  
*Âr patiyā pathāi ham libabo bulāi*  
*Âr ho jahiyā holiyā dhamār ho*  
*Bhabharī chikhaibo yār ke*  
*Âr dhansal ba karejvā mein ohi re suratiyā*  
*Bhabharī chikhaibo yār ke*  
*Âr cāhe hokhi bhatrā se mār*

Oh, so what if I'm in for a thrashing from husband dear?  
 I'll offer my lover the treat to taste.  
 Oh, I'll send him a letter to call him.  
 Oh, this Holi will be rollicking.  
 I'll offer my lover this treat to taste.  
 Oh, his image digs deep into my heart.  
 I'll give him the treat to taste.  
 Oh, so what if I'm in for a thrashing from husband dear?

CASSETTE RECORDINGS BY SUDARSHAN YADAV, "HOLI KE BOKHAR," T-SERIES, 2002

In keeping with the spirit of the Holi festival, the suspension of restrictions of all kinds, including those pertaining to the women's sexuality, predominates, but in jocular and ridiculing ways. The innovation, such as it is, lies in the lyrics, which can be very suggestive, while the melodic



structure remains recognizably consistent. Hence, it is not unusual to hear spiritual and uplifting pieces sung in the same melody as ashliī ones, serving to further emphasize the latter's transgressive nature.

By thus parodying male anxieties and identifying them with the ritual subversion inherent in the Holi festival, the actors ensure that real transgressions that might threaten established gender equations will not occur. In fact the more outrageous and bawdy the content, the better it fulfils the traditional requirements of the festival celebrations:

*Satuā khā lo bhatār, satuā khā lo bhatār*  
*Dahī ceurā khoihen iyarau*  
*Holi ho, holi ho*  
*Bhūiyan sūto bhatār, bhūiyan sūto bhatār,*  
*Palang par suteihen iyarau*  
*Holi ho, holi ho*  
*Dālo upre bhatār, dālo upre bhatār*  
*Nichvān se daleihen iyarau*  
*Holi ho, holi ho*  
*Cumā le lo bhatār cumā le lo bhatār*  
*Bāki māja mareihen iyarau*

Eat the *satuā*<sup>1</sup> husband, eat satuā;  
 Curds and puffed rice for lover.  
 It's Holi, it's Holi!  
 Sleep on the floor, husband, sleep on the floor;  
 The bed is for loverboy.  
 It's Holi, it's Holi!  
 Lay it on top, husband, on top;  
 Lover will put it from below.  
 It's Holi, it's Holi!  
 Take a kiss, husband, just a kiss.  
 Everything else, loverboy will enjoy.

CASSETTE RECORDING BY GUDDU RANGEELA AND SAPNA AWASTHI,  
 "KHARE KHARE LAGĀLAU," T-SERIES, 2003

To the extent that the lyrics reflect the male gaze in their preoccupation with *jobanā* (breasts), male sexual imagery such as *mūsarvā* (pestle), *ajgar sāp* (huge snake), the physicality and double entendre of *rang dālo* (smear

color) and even the play and sport of Holi, women's voices are muffled, if not silenced outright. As in the *rasiyā* recordings Manuel analyzes, women are portrayed as "libidinous and potentially unfaithful," a portrayal that is then used to justify the harassment and heckling to which they are subjected (Manuel 1993, 204).

In sum, the subtexts of these songs underline and reinforce the assumption that women's sexuality, if left unchecked, would wreak havoc with the normative structure of patriarchy. While both these recorded songs and women's spontaneous songs in the traditional Holi context ultimately end up reinforcing and reaffirming patriarchy, they achieve this in quite different ways. The fact that the recorded songs, far from the fleeting expressions of women participating in personal rituals of festive release, are available to be played and replayed repeatedly removes them from any association with an authentic women's voice. Here again, Flueckiger's insights from central India parallel my findings:

"It is no longer an acceptable, empowering tradition of initiation for lower or adivasi-caste women but has shifted to reflect a male representation of women, whose sexuality must be bound; it is this representation that identifies the *dalkhāi gīt* as *burī* (bad or vulgar)" (Flueckiger 1996, 75).

Ironically, a genre that originally served as a space for rural women's expression has been appropriated for the commercial gains of men while the women derive no monetary or other advantages thereby. Like African American musical genres in the United States, the songs have been dissociated from their original contexts. As Perry Hall notes, "as the innovations become dissociated from the experiential context in which they arise, they begin to lose their functions as statements of affirmation and humanity relative to those contexts" (Hall 1997, 49).

#### HOLI SONGS AND THE DEVAR-BHĀBHĪ BOND

The central and most striking motif in this genre of recorded Holi songs is the relationship between a woman and her younger brother-in-law, namely, the *devar-bhābhī* bond. In fact, the recurrence of this motif suggests that it is only through this relationship that it is possible to give voice to erotic themes.

*Gori jobanvā bilāve parāpāri*  
*Devarā bhatār mein karāve mārā māri.*

The fair one shakes her fulsome breasts  
 Igniting a war between husband and his younger brother.

CASSETTE RECORDING BY GUDDU RANGEELA, "CHATKAAR HOLI," T-SERIES, 2004

*E Bhaujī, e Bhaujī āi hai holiyā bahār, cunariyā tohrī sarke*  
*Rang debe coliyā tohār kevariya bandh kaike*  
*Bāraho mahinvā ham lālsa puraibe*  
*Manvā ka tohre piyasvā bujhāibe*  
*E bhaujī ! rang debe coliyā tohār kevariya bandh kaike*  
*E devar ! rang jaihen coliyā hamār sajanvā jehiyā aihen*  
*Ā jehiyen holiyā bahār sajanvā jehiyā aihen.*

"O sister-in-law, Holi is here, your stole is slipping  
 Slipping, sliding, revealing.  
 I'll color your bodice, locking the door.  
 Quench your desires of the entire twelve months.  
 Slake the thirst of your heart.  
 O sister-in-law, I'll color your bodice with the door locked."  
 "O brother-in-law, my bodice will be colored when my husband returns."  
 The gusts of Holi will be felt when he returns.

CASSETTE RECORDING BY VIJAY LAL YADAV AND ANITA RAJ,  
 "RANG DEBE CHOLIYA TOHAAR," T-SERIES, 2003

*Jaldī se chuttī leke āja more Rajā*  
*Holi mein jobanā garam bhail bā*  
*Jaldi se chuttī leke āja more Raja*  
*Devarā barā besaram bhail bā.*

Hurry up, take leave and come, my love  
 In Holi my breast is warmed up  
 Hurry up, take leave and come, my love  
 Younger brother-in-law is acting shamelessly.

CASSETTE RECORDING BY GUDDU RANGEELA, "CHATKAAR HOLI," T-SERIES

The ubiquitous deployment of the devar-bhābhī joking relationship to explore women's sexuality and consciousness within patriarchy as well

as to express sexual abandon, unrestrained by everyday gender and caste hierarchies, is the most striking feature of this song genre. Moreover, in the rural context, one might speculate that as a kinship category, the term *bhābhī*, as well as its synonym often used in the songs, “*bhaujī*” can be applied to any woman of a certain generation without causing undue offence, by virtue of the fact that it establishes the woman’s husband as one’s elder brother. At least in the region where I conducted my fieldwork, the term *devar* could be appropriately applied to all bachelors in a woman’s marital village. The rationale for the easy familiarity that lies at the heart of this bond, so explicitly stated in the song below, is worth exploring:

*Devarā ki cāl hamrā lāge barā būra ho bālam*  
*Dāle rang uthāke phurhūra ho bālam*  
*Kobo hātho colīye me dāl deitā pūra ho bālam*  
*Dāle rang uthāke phurhūra ho bālam.*

Brother-in-law’s ways I find most annoying, beloved.  
 He tosses handfuls of color and then disappears, beloved.  
 Sometimes he puts his hand right into my blouse  
 Tosses handfuls of color and just disappears, beloved.

CASSETTE RECORDING BY GUDDU RANGEELA, “BHATAAR HOLI,” T-SERIES, 2000

The *devar*-*bhābhī* bond traditionally contained all the ingredients of a typical joking relationship, which A. R. Radcliffe-Brown in his classic essay “On Joking Relationships” characterized as relations between persons in which one party is entitled to take liberties toward the other, who must, in turn, tolerate and bear it (Radcliffe-Brown 1959). In contrast to wives’ avoidance relations with their *jeth*, their husband’s elder brother, who as the senior member of the patrilineal clan is second only to the father-in-law in degrees of avoidance (see chapter 1), a woman’s relationship with her *devar* (her husband’s younger brother) is less restrictive, much more congenial and familiar, and requires no symbolic avoidance such as veiling. Faced with a hierarchical and sometimes hostile environment in their new marital homes, women looked to their *devar* as an ally in times of need. In return for the support he provided, a man’s younger brother could expect to take liberties and enjoy favors from his elder brother’s wife. The element of teasing and jesting thus disguised a mu-

tually advantageous bond—one that eased the difficult transition for a woman into her marital home through the bestowing of affection and indulgences on her husband’s younger brother. On the other hand, this bond meant that the incoming bride of the devar would encounter a potentially difficult situation fraught with jealousy, owing to the already present rival for her groom’s affection—the bhābhī, the elder brother’s wife. The suggestive overtones of the commercially recorded songs, the hints of favors and familiarity, obscure the pragmatism involved in cultivating an ally within the husband’s clan and reduce the alliance to a merely sexual relationship.

In parts of north India and among certain intermediate and agricultural castes, which in principle permitted widows to remarry, the bond extended to an unstated understanding that, should the woman face early widowhood, the younger brother-in-law would marry her (Chowdhury 1990, 259–74). In this sense, as Prem Chowdhury has argued, among non-Brahmin castes, levirate marriage provided an alternative to the ideology of sati or self-immolation at the husband’s funeral pyre. In other words, widow remarriage was clearly prohibited only among Brahmins and the martial Rajputs. Recent research on women’s rights to land has confirmed that in Punjab, this custom, called *karevā*, preempted the potential threat to the unity of the patriclan posed by the subdivision of patrilineal property—if, for example, the widow remarried outside of the clan—and ensured that the patrilineage would remain intact (Agarwal 1995; Jassal 2001). The possibility of a widow’s remarriage, which threatened the property of patrilineages, could only be contained by ensuring that the widow would not move out of the clan.

The same cultural logic promoted the varying degrees of easy familiarity between these two relatives as the accepted societal norm in other parts of north India, too. In any event, a woman’s friendship with her younger brother-in-law was accepted, legitimized, and encouraged, in some cases to the extent that the former was expected to replace or fill in for the husband in contexts where the latter was likely to be absent. This is precisely the dimension of the relationship that has contributed to the joking, teasing, and sexual undercurrents as seen in the last line of this song:

*Holi mein lutai da lahār, bhaujī rang dāle dau*  
*Pore pore bhaujī tohār carhal ba javānī*

*Dekhi tohe muhvā se giratāve pāni*  
*Māre joban upkār bhaujī rang dāle dau*  
*Holi me lūte da lahār bhaujī rang dāle da*  
*Upar nīce sagaro dāle da bhaujī rangavā*  
*Colī, dorhī, rāl na corve kauno angavā*  
*Āju ho būjhi la bhatār bhaujī rang dāle dau.*

Let me abandon myself to the Holi mood, sister-in-law, let me color you,  
 Every bit of you, bursting with the abundance and glow of youth.  
 Just to look at you is mouth-watering.  
 Youth is so kind to you, sister-in-law, let me color you.  
 Let me abandon myself to the Holi revelry, let me color you,  
 Your blouse and knees, leaving no part,  
 Today, consider me your husband; let me color you.

CASSETTE RECORDING BY GUDDU RANGEELA, "CHATKAAR HOLI," T-SERIES, 2004

#### BROTHER-IN-LAW DEPENDENCE AND MALE OUTMIGRATION

I now turn to a song I heard performed by a group of women of the Mallah (fishers and river-farers) caste during my fieldwork in the Jaunpur village of Barsara. It is a classic of the jocular genre. The song belongs to the *kahrauā* genre of songs sung by the caste of Kahars or water-carriers. Here women's reliance on their brothers-in-law for assistance in running errands and for keeping women's secrets, and the rewards expected in return, are significant motifs that allow it to capture the essence of the devar-bhābhī bond. The song clearly suggests that Holi was by no means the only context within which such songs were sung. Rather, the easy familiarity found here, by no means caste-specific, could find expression in a range of contexts. It is, however, not surprising that the theme is so boldly articulated by women of the Kahar caste, who are known to have enjoyed fewer restrictions since their caste functions of fetching water and laboring in the fields allowed them relative freedom of mobility. Kahars are considered a "clean" servicing caste, traditionally allowed entry into the inner courtyards of upper-caste homes, where they assisted upper-caste women in household chores, including washing dishes.

*Mandavā dhovan gaye bābā ke sagarvā*  
*Morā tīkavā ho girelā manjhedār*

*Morā devarvā ho mor tikavā girelā manjhedār*  
*Hāth torā jorūn devarā gor tobre lāgun*  
*Mor devarvā ho Ganga me bovāide mahājāl*  
*Eik daiyān dāle bhaujī dūsar daiyān dāle,*  
*More bhaujiā ho tīsre me ghonghiyā sevār*  
*Hāth tora jorūn . . .*  
*Morā devarvā ho pheri se bovāide mahājāl*  
*Eik daiyān dāre bhaujī dūi daiyān dāre*  
*Morī bhaujiyā ho tīsare mein tikavā tohār*  
*Hāth tore*  
*Morā devarvā ho bhuiyān se tikavā la uthāi*  
*Bhuiyān se tikavā bhaujī le uthāi*  
*Hamarā ke debau kau dān*  
*More devarvā ho lāhurī nanadiyā toharā dān*

“Took my washing to Baba’s lake,  
 My forehead ornament fell into mid-stream.  
 Dear brother-in-law, my ornament is in mid-stream  
 I plead with you, brother-in-law, cast the big net into the river.”  
 “Sister-in-law, I cast the net once, then the second time,  
 The third time nothing but snails and small fish.”  
 “I plead with you, brother-in-law, cast the big net again.”  
 “Sister-in-law, the first time, then the second  
 The third time, sister-in-law, your ornament appears.”  
 “I plead with you, brother-in-law, pick up the ornament from the ground.”  
 “For picking it up, sister-in-law  
 What will be my reward?”  
 “Dear brother-in-law, your own younger sister, that will be your reward.”

SUBHAVATI, BARSARA, JAUNPUR

This song may be understood simply as one of jokes between the devar-  
 bhābhī dyad, but since it is so loaded with sexual innuendoes and hints at  
 the horror of incest in the last line, it is also suggestive of sexual transgres-  
 sions between the two relatives and the sexually charged ties underlying  
 the bond. In folksongs, where the loss of ornaments such as earrings, toe-  
 rings, and the forehead ornament, all symbols of matrimony, signify loss  
 of chastity, the recovery of the ornament by the brother-in-law leaves no  
 doubt about where this chastity might have been lost, especially since a

reward in the form of a bribe is expected. Historically, the region most likely to have fuelled the pragmatism of this relationship and kept it alive is the setting of my fieldwork, the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. As explored in chapter 2, over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the region witnessed male outmigration on an unprecedented scale. Beginning in 1834, as liberated slaves refused to work on sugar plantations, the resulting labor shortage fuelled the large-scale colonial recruitment drives for indentured labor to Mauritius, British Guyana, Trinidad, and Jamaica (Kumar 2001, 53). Areas where long spells of drought and famine had pauperized agriculturists and were driving peasants out of villages in search for work proved to be the ideal recruiting grounds for indentured laborers. Between 1845 and 1917, about 143,900 Indians were brought to Trinidad (with a total of over 500,000 to the Caribbean) (Niranjana 1998, 114). Ninety percent of those migrating to the Caribbean hailed from the Ganges plain, that is, the United Provinces, Central Provinces, Oudh, Orissa, and Bihar (Niranjana 1998, 115). Prabhu Mohapatra (1995) has argued that the importation of labor peaked in the 1870s and 1880s and that most of the recruits in the prime age group of between twenty and thirty years were drawn largely from the United Provinces and western Bihar.

The colonial planters' reluctance to permit the migrants to establish a permanent community made for a gender imbalance, such that only 23 percent of the emigrants were women (Mohapatra 1995, 231). Hence, for over two centuries, the migration of older male siblings, either to the shores of Calcutta to seek their fortunes in the sugar colonies or into Calcutta's emerging industrial centers, meant that the countryside was systematically depleted of young able-bodied males.

In the context of absentee or migratory husbands, who were sometimes gone for years at a stretch, the role a younger brother might have been expected to perform, as well as the duties and responsibilities he might have been expected to shoulder, can only be imagined. The existing *devar-bhābhī* bond sanctioned by folk and patriarchal traditions would have thus developed greater complexity and evolved other multi-layered dimensions in response to rising demands and expectations. Grounded in patriarchal anxieties about young women left behind and societal anxieties about the monumental changes migration triggered, there emerged an enormously rich repertoire of traditional folk songs



dealing with the devar-bhābhī theme in the context of the husband's absence (Jassal 2006, 306–11).

While the repertoire of yearning songs that hint at the relationship between devar and bhābhī reflects the history and continuation of migration from the region, it was the Holi festival that provided the space within which the jocular element and the taking of liberties was justified, legitimized, verbalized, and given full-blown expression. Even within the commercial reframing of the folk song traditions, this motif remains a recurring one:

*Are kaute phāgūnā bitī goile re, porodesiyā na auilen*  
*Are desiyā na auilen, porodesiyā na auilen*  
*Are gabānā tīkhāla me goroile re, porodesiyā na auilen*  
*Bhūtere bhūtere bhaujī ranī haī gāch ho*  
*Piyā sange rangavā khelā mohā chahāt ho*  
*Are māja kīrākīrā kari koile re porodesiyā na auilen*  
*Are kaute phāgūnā bitī goile re, porodesiyā na auilen*  
*Are jethe jīke dekhe ho ā gaile marad*  
*Are dekhī dekhī dilvā me hotā hamrā dorad*  
*Are pāpi hamrā dāya tubūn kaile re, porodesiyā na auilen*  
*Are lāgato ki khisī lauīke cithiyō re bochale*  
*Are Motiya ke betvā re domī ito kochale*  
*Are kauno sauvatī bāre koile re, porodesiyā na auilen*  
*Are kause phāgūnā bitī goile re, porodesiyā na auilen*  
*Are Gudu khātīr sālo bhar se asrā lagāi ke*  
*Are rākhelā ranīha chati Vipin se lukāi ke*  
*Are kohiyā le khātīr rakhī dhoile re, porodesiyā na auilen*  
*Are saute phagūnā bitī goile re, porodesiyā na auilen*

Oh how many Phāgun seasons passed, since the dweller in foreign lands  
 returned?

Oh the traveler never returned.

My jewelry remained locked within the cupboard and the traveler didn't return.

Deep inside my breast, I nurse a huge wound.

My heart desires to frolic with my husband in Holi.

Oh he spoilt all the fun—the traveler, he didn't return.

Oh how many seasons since he returned?

Oh, the elder brother-in-law did return.  
 Seeing this my heart is pained.  
 Have mercy on me, sinner, my husband did not return.  
 Sometimes I think, just out of spite I'll send off a letter.  
 That Moti's son is pressing his attentions on me.  
 If he has a new mistress who is she? The traveler did not return.  
 For the sake of Gudu, I've been in wait for a whole year,  
 Shielded my modesty from the gaze of Vipin.  
 Tell me, for whom did I guard all this? The traveler never came  
 How many Phāguns has it been?

CASSETTE RECORDING BY GUDDU RANGEELA, "CHATKAAR HOLI," T-SERIES, 2004

In this region, women's songs of separation have become synonymous with phāg renderings. The songs also explore a gamut of conflicts and contradictions that acknowledge both the normative gender hierarchy between men and women and relationships that are more egalitarian in nature, even those wherein married women are either sexually more experienced or older than the bachelors in question, such as their younger or other classificatory brothers-in-law:

*Naram bā anganā cūṭī ho rang*  
*Jan sagarī dālou ho devarā*  
*Dāle ke dālo na bichvā me*  
*Eik kagarī dālo ho devarā*  
*Noikhe māno rangavā se sāra angavā būr dau*  
*Ihe nihorā ba eiko alangavā bhaiyā khatir chor dau*  
*Māro pickārī bhale dhorhī me satā ke*  
*Ūpar māja le lo bhītari bacā ke*  
*Colī uthāke na hātho lagāke na ragarī dālo na devarā*  
*Dāle ke bāto na bicavā me eik kagorī dālo na devarā.*

The courtyard is soft, dripping color.  
 Don't put the whole of it, brother-in law;  
 If you must put it somewhere, then place it in the center.  
 I wish my entire body to be drenched in color.  
 Leave aside this part, saved up for your brother.  
 Squirt the colored water, up close by all means.  
 Enjoy the externalities, save the secret parts.

Raising my blouse, paint on the color with your hands, brother-in-law  
 And if you must, place it in the center.

CASSETTE RECORDING BY GUDDU RANGEELA, "CHATKAAR HOLI," T-SERIES, 2004

The multiple expressions and interpretations the genre affords add to its immense appeal for listeners and audiences. Suggestive, veiled, and ambiguous as well as blatantly forthright, the layered quality of the texts adds to the nonelitist nature of the recordings. Although continuously evolving, the recordings nevertheless maintain some continuity with the earlier forms, especially in terms of theme, melody and style. Their popularity appears to be on the rise, and as Peter Manuel suggests in the case of *rasiyas* or songs based on the motif of yearning between Radha and Krishna,<sup>2</sup> these recordings, too, might have a role to play in reconstituting the boundaries between private and public musical life (Manuel 1993, 218).

To conclude this section, I turn to the popularity of folk forms known as "chutney" brought to Trinidad by indentured laborers from rural north India, especially of genres performed largely by women in prewedding ceremonies. The movement of these songs, with their explicitly sexual and humorous themes, from the secluded private sphere of the home to public venues has become a bone of contention for the Indian community's leaders in Trinidad, who see these cultural forms as degraded or vulgar. These concerns parallel earlier anxieties about rural Creole women's sexual and economic independence. In the Carnival in Trinidad in 1996, the surprise hit sung by Sonny Mann was a Bhojपुरi chutney song, "Lotay La," about a man seducing his sister-in-law (Niranjana 1998, 127). The complex mix of ethnic, cultural, racial, and gender issues in new sites of modernity occasioned by geographical displacements is an important theme for future research but one that cannot be explored here.

#### HOLI SONGS AND CASTE MOBILITY

By the twentieth century, the Indian elites themselves trained their attention on the sexuality of lower castes and classes as detrimental to the health and well-being of the nation. MARY JOHN AND JANAKI NAIR, INTRODUCTION TO A *QUESTION OF SILENCE?*, 19

It comes as no surprise that the reform movements of the last century targeted the singing of folk songs as obscene and unworthy of chaste

women. For instance, the soiling of the *cunarī* or bosom cloth, in folk-songs a metaphor for an illicit relationship, acquired commonplace usage. For social reformers of the nineteenth century, it was lower-caste women's sexuality and the failure of lower-caste men to control it that was deemed to be partially the cause of the lower castes' impurity (Rege 1995, 33). As Gupta (2001, 26) points out, social reformers conflated chastity with upper-caste practices. Both the Arya Samaj and the Sanatan Dharma movements were against the "bad customs" of women singing obscene songs and participating in Holi celebrations. Gupta demonstrates that owing both to colonial perceptions and to the efforts of social reform movements, the air of obscenity linked to Holi revelries became associated in public consciousness with lower-caste practices or at least with Hindu degeneracy (Gupta 2001).

In the preceding chapters, I have enumerated the range of restrictions that caste reformers spelled out for women, perceiving women's social and economic behavior as the sphere through which to effect change with a view to elevating the status of the entire caste (Jassal 2001, 48–63). Sanskritization, as a strategy embraced by a range of upwardly mobile caste groups throughout the first half of the last century, meant the adoption of restrictive social codes for women. In addition to proscribing women's rights to participate in *melās* (fairs), attend the theatre, and bathe semi-nude at public *ghāts*, other culturally popular practices such as the singing of ritual songs (*gālīs*) at weddings and at Holi were severely condemned. The implications of Sanskritization varied for men and women.

In this context, it may be fruitful to analyze the resilience and popularity of the Holi song genre, an expression of lower-caste femininities that is today being replaced by the assertion of lower-caste masculinities in defiance against Sanskritization norms, as well as to note the continuing relevance of its structural logic. To further probe questions of caste, class, and gender in contemporary north India, I reference two encounters I had in the field, both of which throw into sharp relief the importance of "Negotiating the Serious Import of Humor," the title of Joan Emerson's essay (Emerson 1969), and of women's inability to reclaim their voice once the genre has been appropriated by men and appears in the public domain.

In the first encounter, I observed a woman request to change a par-

ticularly sexually suggestive music cassette, which was playing in a public space. Her request was refused on the plea that it was “only a joke” and, as such, an integral part of the seasonal festive mood. The situation confirmed Gal’s insight about the function of irony to allow men to “disclaim the intent if it results in challenge or threat” (Gal 1991, 183). In the second encounter, a less offensive cassette was interrupted midway, ejected, and swiftly replaced by an obscene Holi cassette, just as a group of middle-class women entered the public space. In both cases, the women present were the intended targets of the lyrics, the women’s obvious discomfort only enhancing the men’s voyeurism, a mild form of harassment understood in the contemporary Indian context by the euphemism “eve-teasing.”

These encounters resemble Peter Lyman’s account of masculinities, in particular, the role of sexist jokes in forging male group ties and the channel joking provides for men’s anger (Lyman 1987, 148–63). Lyman suggests that where aggressive conduct is valued, it must be in accordance with the power hierarchy and must serve authority, not challenge it. The very fact that the aggression is channeled through music mutes its edge. Further, the cultural legitimacy the *devar-bhābhī* bond provides frees it from individual aggression and turns it into a form of group solidarity. Similarly, Lyman has argued that male bonding requires an “eros of aggression,” wherein, for example, collective obscene talk that might be witnessed by unfamiliar women produces a high level of excitement and arousal.

In his analysis of the contradictions and vulnerabilities young men feel about their relationships with women and their responsibilities at work, Lyman focuses on three elements of joking relationships: the content of the jokes, the eroticism of the rule-breaking, and the projected image of strength and being “cool,” all of which are pitted against their dependence on both women and work (Lyman 1987, 157). Thus, even while individual men may recognize the songs as vulgar, they serve the purpose of strengthening male bonding.

One possible explanation for the phenomenon discussed above is the increasing polarization of upper and lower castes and the place of gender in these processes. The space that lower castes occupy within a hierarchical structured order is similar to that occupied by women within patriarchy, and hence the lower castes’ experience of powerlessness might be

compared to women's lack of power. Women, perceived as being closer to nature, represent the chaotic elements over which patriarchy must impose order and structure. At the same time, patriarchy draws from these elements, which it first structures. If the space occupied by lower castes in this structured universe is the same as that occupied by women, then the appropriation of this genre by lower-caste males must be understood as "an attack on the social order" and their chance to subvert it. In this sense, it also parallels and echoes women's subversive role in the Holi festivals described earlier. Hence the lower caste or class appropriation of the genre and the visible and public assertion of this appropriation can be likened to attempts to relax the rigidities and thus feminize the masculinity represented by the hierarchical caste order.

The images of women these songs evoke also hint at the unease and hostility that exist between upper-caste women and lower-caste men. In no small measure, the middle-class women's movement, on the rise in towns since the 1980s, and the growth of NGOs committed to women's empowerment have contributed to the visibility of women's issues and their aspirations for gender inequality. Images of powerful and educated women on national television in recent decades may, in turn, have contributed to the assertion of masculinities.

Since the control of women's sexuality has always been a significant concern of caste patriarchies, intercaste relations in the north Indian countryside lie at the heart of the changes we are discussing. Music's inherent ability to transform and synthesize is precisely what contributes to its effectiveness. It fuses ideas together, serving as a nonviolent means of communication and of breaking down walls and hierarchies. Because of its association with femininity, hyperpatriarchal structures fear this form of expression; hence the banning of music by regimes such as the Taliban. Black and protest music has shown that when hierarchies cut too deep, music has the potential to heal the wounds.

In north India, the widening economic gulf between the upper and lower classes and the lower castes' thirst for political enfranchisement provides a fertile ground for the synthesizing work of music. The use of song at a public festival to critique and parody a behavioral norm so fundamental to patriarchal and caste order is tantamount to a mild form of consensual social protest on behalf of the disenfranchised. While the Holi songs parody the social order on one level, on another they reinforce

the very order they seek to subvert. Indeed, as Michele Mitchell shows in another context, the “longing of black men to seize the prerogatives of manhood denied them by the larger society could and did stultify black women’s own desires” (1999, 17).

This chapter analyzes the gendered impact of technological change by focusing on the genre of song recordings associated with the Holi festival. By focusing on recordings specific to this spring festival, I was able to explore a gamut of interlinked phenomena, ranging from the questioning of gender hierarchies to what constitutes the erotic and the purpose it serves in upholding the social order.

As Holi represents a liminal state that exists in time rather than in space, the application of fluid new rules offers breathing space and a release from society’s corrosive and destructive elements. In allowing the social body to be reborn and rejuvenated, the festival serves a similar role to that of collective sacrifice in ancient civilizations, where the integral violence had a purpose. In challenging the existing hierarchy and exploring the many dimensions of gender relations, the recordings hint at widening cleavages and gulfs and point to all that is simmering under the surface, urgently seeking resolution.

Equally, however, the recordings serve to reinforce established hierarchies and gender stereotypes. Yet, while the traditional Holi song genre was nonthreatening to the social order, the recordings tend to usurp the space that was traditionally available to women for engaging in role reversals and spontaneous expressions of their discontent.

The songs illustrate how ideas and messages travel between rural- and urbanscapes. In the commercialization of Holi songs today, and in their ready availability and accessibility in the form of music cassettes, we find the sensibility of Holi, the elements that constituted its inner logic, and its purpose as a means of release considerably altered. Now, it is not the women who articulate and direct their insults toward men, but the men who sing what were once women’s songs; as such, the element of role reversal so empowering and crucial to women’s spontaneous song sessions is lost. In this attempt to evoke the mood of bawdy revelry characteristic of Holi, it is the feminine gender that becomes the butt of sexual jokes.

Further, the *devar-bhābhī* bond, already an easily identified cultural space where men can take liberties with and tease women, appears to lend

itself most readily to the message of bawdy licentiousness today's new cultural entrepreneurs seek to promote. And since the new songwriters are men aiming to appeal to an audience at a bazaar, the new songs tend to contain stereotypically demeaning images of women, wearing the jocular guise of the *bhābhī* (sister-in-law). In the name of meeting public demand, the new cultural entrepreneurs create their own definitions of public need and taste. While the songs focus on the licentiousness of the *devar-bhābhī* relationship in particular, the fact that the presence of a younger brother-in-law is axiomatic for married women across caste and class lines means that the songs ultimately conflate all women with those who are permissive or who occupy degrading roles.

In short, the commercially recorded songs simultaneously transgress established gender norms, appropriate women's autonomous spaces, recast women as objects of the male gaze, and express lower-caste masculine resistance to Sanskritization. All this is accomplished through the opening *Holi* provides, even as the genre ultimately reinforces the existing order. Nevertheless, the song texts are available to multiple readings, which accounts for the recordings' immense popular appeal.