

Each is invariably memorable, a perfectly worked-out expression of skilled composition, though often disarmingly simple. These *catus* have appealed to, and shaped, the taste of generations of people. . . . They bring to mind, in addition to aesthetic judgement, a host of literary, political, and cultural contexts, indeed, a whole world view.

VELCHERU NARAYANA RAO AND DAVID SHULMAN,
A POEM AT THE RIGHT MOMENT, 4

The songs presented in this book are complex poetic forms through which their singers convey “provocative interpretations of themselves and their society” (Briggs 1988). As vital oral resources that reinforce the existence of competing statements in any context, these songs impact listeners and singers in diverse ways. While the songs analyzed in these pages could be seen primarily as a source of pleasure, they also lend themselves to new contexts and are remembered and recalled to recreate and imagine older contexts (Rao and Shulman 1998, 3). Thus, in addition to offering endless amusement and critiquing male dominance, they also serve to induce feelings of solidarity, to develop and nurture the skills of interrogation, and to sharpen women’s powers of negotiation.

In village settings, therefore, the singers with the most varied and extensive repertoires were respected in their communities, who regarded them as the village memory or conscience keepers. These singers set the tone for ceremonies, work, and informal gatherings and enriched each of these contexts by teasing out and bringing to the surface emotions appropriate and desirable to the collective. Such abilities might be said to parallel the expertise of those ritual specialists who instinctively know when to chant the most appropriate Sanskrit mantra required for a Hindu ritual, for instance. In this sense, the singers attempted to interpret the traditions and social settings they engaged, that both might be transformed during the performance. Since different singers remembered different songs their community had collectively produced, each of their song collections was integral to their particular community's overall repertoire. It is no wonder that interested singers were keen to enlarge their repertoires and that collecting and swapping songs through oral circulation remains a pleasurable pastime for many.

The manner of such oral transmission suggests a profound awareness of the grammar of poetics. If it is the meter of a song that facilitates its remembrance, then those songs most widely circulated reflect the community's acceptance and endorsement of their enormous appeal. In turn, the songs' poetic qualities further shape their audience's sensibilities. Hence, what Rao and Shulman concluded in regard to the Telugu verses holds true for our songs as well: "Through the domain of desire, social commentary, the articulation of cultural values, and critical taste, these interlocking stanzas embody an entire education, an expressive vision of life and poetry" (Rao and Shulman 1998, 250).

The songs of the preceding chapters confronted and grappled with a gamut of women's emotions and experience. As emotions are cultural artifacts and culturally embedded phenomena, these songs offered a point of entry into the ethnographic analysis of emotions, allowing the fullest exploration even of those emotions that must remain suppressed in the interest of familial life. Competing voices and dialogues between daughters and fathers, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, sisters and brothers, husbands and wives, sets of sisters-in-law, upper-caste women and lower-caste lovers all enrich our understanding of multivocal and contrasting perspectives.

As discourses of emotions, the songs also offered complex and nuanced

insights into “the multiple, shifting, and contested meanings possible in emotional utterances and interchanges” (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990, 11). Through focusing on both the practices and the meanings of collective singing, I was able to investigate how emotions as forms of social action are informed by cultural values as well as how they affect the realm of the social as idioms of communication. The songs demonstrated that emotional talk is not only about internal psychological states but also about social life and power relations. Hence, chapters 2 and 3 in particular charted how emotional discourses are shaped by the political economies in which they arise. Songs sung on the occasion of marriage, for instance, provide an outlet for the intensely contradictory emotions relating to the departure of a daughter that can scarcely be articulated in ordinary speech. At wedding ceremonies, as women remember and relive their own departures, the songs serve as tearjerkers, thereby effecting the public displays necessary to induce the appropriate emotions. It was possible to retrace the affective emotions of at least some of the songs, especially those that move people to tears and are, in this sense, also experienced bodily.

The ability to choose the most appropriate song for any given context, much like the ability to choose a “poem at the right moment” (see Rao and Shulman 1998), had the potential to enhance the drama and significance of that moment, elevating it from the mundane to the memorable. Moreover, since the songs also evoked associations and cultural interconnections in singers and listeners alike, each of this volume’s chapters sought to highlight their importance as means of effective social communication among those who share common bodies of knowledge and value systems. In this regard, the intertextual resonance allowed us to hear the competing voices that, over time, have imbued the songs with their layered nuances. Far from treating each song individually or in isolation, therefore, I have attempted to highlight the interconnections between the songs and genres. As each song echoes others, each is best appreciated as part of the whole and as integral to the totality of the oral tradition.

Moreover, the music to which these songs were set served to induce the appropriate moods, and the melodic variations ranged from the dirge-like quality of the grinding songs and their grim messages to the upbeat, flirtatious banter of the *kajlī*. Some melodies oozed sexuality and playfulness, while others conveyed innocence or injustice. In songs that raised

questions about existing power relations, the harmonies appeared to serve as the background for the interrogation or protest we were about to hear. Thus, like clues embedded in the performance, the formal structures that framed the songs were almost as meaningful and important to my analysis as the content and the words.

Songs also lend themselves to different interpretations as a function of context. Thus, as texts, their meaning is by no means fixed but is constantly evolving and shifting, as are the interpretations they make available. It is the meaning that the singers themselves attach to their songs that gives these songs their enormous fluidity and allows for a range of interpretations to be made. Taken together, the songs reveal just how audience sensibilities have been shaped by the insights, wisdom, and sheer poetry of the songs. From cautionary advice and social commentary to reflections on cultural values, bargaining, negotiation, interrogation, and insights into the realm of desire and intimacy, the songs offer a vividly expressive and integrated vision of life. Above all, the songs reflect women's interdependence and cooperation, in the spheres of both work and ritual.

While themes and language occasionally offered clues about the historical origins of a particular song or genre, as in the case of the migration songs, this aspect proved elusive. Despite the disconcerting sense these songs provide of the social milieu's coherence and homogeneity, the fact that they are used to illustrate ongoing social processes confirms their historicity, making these texts a "constellation or conjuncture of both past and present" (Niranjana 1993, 321). As source material for the anthropologist, then, the songs' timeless or static quality may be attributed to the process of transcription or translation that appears to fix them in time. Rather, since songs work like social commentary, most singers attempt to invoke or remember songs appropriate to an occasion precisely to express a particular interest or viewpoint.

For instance, Sita songs, while making sense of the present also reflect the dynamism and vitality of the past, thereby providing a bridge between shared textual traditions and the uniqueness of the present. In this sense, far from merely repeating timeworn traditions, my fieldwork experiences demonstrated how songs also help to create and sustain communities. These songs showed how "linguistic form, cultural significance, textual tradition and social interaction become one in performance" (Briggs

1988, xvi). Instead of offering clues about origins, then, the songs offer insights into richly complex, heterogeneous, and densely textured, gendered worlds. They afford one a glimpse into how women's cultural traditions are continually being invented, constructed, and improvised (Niranjana et al. 1993, 6). If, in a reflexive manner, performances comment on the situations in which they emerged, the very interpretative exercise this book undertakes implicates us equally in the process of producing meaning.

One aspect of life that remains considerably under-researched is that of conjugality. As this volume demonstrates, however, women's songs have effectively unearthed this dimension. Many songs appear to reinforce dominant values and reiterate the auspiciousness and prosperity of the family. Familial life emerged as the site for both worldly and spiritual fulfillment, so that women's aspirations appeared circumscribed by such concerns. Often, the nurturing aspects of the songs and the human bonds, relationships, and sense of community they underscore appear to cancel out the problematic aspects of the gender stereotypes they transmit (Katyāl and Chanda 1998, 178). Sita songs, ranging from the intensely private to those that knit together small collectivities of women, offer rich commentaries on the social condition of women in the countryside. I found that these songs' appeal to women's potentialities resonated deeply among peasant women and also across caste and class. Thus, "women's affinity with Sita may be in response to her enormous tragedy yet it is widely believed that the raw deal meted out to her in the Ramāyanā has the power to move not just women, but everyone 'to the depths of one's being'" (Iyengar in Hess 1988, 24).

While self-effacing devotion is Sita's hallmark, her capacity to also inspire awe and reverence prompts women to try to shape themselves in her mold, so that even if they are ill-treated, they will ultimately hold enormous clout and power over their husbands and families (Kishwar 1999). Moreover, as some of the grinding songs showed, women appear to understand that the only way they are likely to get relatives to act in their favor is by seeming to be above reproach. However, despite the numerous images of conformity in Sita songs, they also provide a space for alternate voices and visions.

In this context, the question that needs addressing is, do the songs have an alternative or oppositional relation to dominant culture? For instance,

songs that catalogue the ways in which women retain close ties with their brothers, thus defying the expectations of the marital home, could be interpreted as expressions of opposition to normative ideals. As women are the most disadvantaged by and stand to gain the least from the system as it is currently structured, it is hardly surprising that women's songs are so diverse in range and genre. The songs therefore reveal women as sometimes conforming, often interrogative, but also occasionally defiant and subversive.

Yet, despite such variations and multivocality, how are we to read the songs' overarching theme of gender discrimination? During fieldwork I often heard that having a son was necessary for the appropriate performance of rituals, and yet ironically parents reported enjoying their closest emotional bonds with their daughters, not their sons. If the preference for sons arises from the belief that sons will provide their parents with security in their old age, I found this belief repeatedly belied by the evidence in the field. Disputes brought before caste *pancāyats* (caste councils) for adjudication were good indicators of the tensions caused from the current costs of living, chronic job insecurities, and societal expectations.

For instance, in 2003 in Sadiapur village, which borders the town of Allahabad, when the father of Mahesh and Naresh Nishad died, the brothers sought the intervention of the Nishad caste's *pancāyat*, asking him to divide their father's assets equitably between them. The caste council divided the assets, but at the end of the proceedings, its flamboyant headman, Avinash Choudhary, made a caustic remark that created a stir. Choudhary suggested to the brothers that as their biggest asset had still not been divided, this also should be done. Pointing to their mother, he said, "after all, your mother is also alive, why not cut her up and also share her fifty-fifty?" Choudhary explained that he intended his remark "to bring home the point that while the entire wealth should have gone to the widow, the brothers had hastily dispossessed her and delinked her from it." After first embarrassing them publicly, the caste *pancāyat* delineated which of the brothers would be responsible for her shelter, food, and clothing and which would arrange for her medical treatment.

In a similar case, a woman approached her caste *pancāyat* with the grievance that while she had four sons, she was herself on the verge of starvation and destitution. The *pancāyat* convened to rebuke the sons and passed the decision that since they were all earning their livelihoods,

they would have to either agree upon a pooling of resources for her monthly upkeep or take turns in shouldering this responsibility. Avinash Choudhary describes how the *pancāyat* staged a dramatic and public showdown in order to drive his point home: “The *pancāyat* decided, let’s take a large sheet and collect alms. Let’s put out this sheet in front of her dead husband’s home and let’s put up a board asking for alms, a paisa or so for the widow’s upkeep. This proved embarrassing enough for the sons and they accepted the *pancāyat*’s decision about their shared responsibility for the widow’s maintenance” (fieldnotes, Sadiapur 2003).

Such accounts, which I heard in many of the villages where I conducted my fieldwork, suggest that sons do not always provide security to parents in their old age, and the situation is worse for widowed mothers. Examples of destitute widows who had been abandoned by their adult sons were commonplace and never failed to expose the hollowness of the ideology that assumed sons would provide eldercare. Among my singers for instance, Munraji of village Barsara, handicapped by blindness and the mother of two adult sons, lived independently, largely because she was made to feel a burden by her married sons. Some widows, whose songs are cited in the preceding pages, even asked me to intervene on their behalf and ask the government pension office to release the *vridhbā* (widow) pension to which they were entitled. It is no wonder that women’s songs not only reflected this reality of gender disparity but also enabled women to imagine the limits of their conditions as well as the tensions of working within the constraints posed by complex patriarchal arrangements.

Through the songs in this book, I have sought to provide a key to unlocking the many layers constituting this gendered social universe, wherein such paradoxes are part of the complex everyday reality. In the process of shining light on how daily concerns are articulated and expressed in song, then, I managed to unearth the social construction of gender.

The cautionary tales of the *jatsār* of chapter 1, for instance, while issuing their notes of warning and setting out the limits of transgression also appeared to celebrate women’s ingenuity. The ambivalence in the messages of these songs came through clearly. Hence, while seeming to endorse the trial by fire, the same songs also spelled out the attractions, even the irresistibility, of lower-caste men, thus exposing the conceit of upper-caste masculinities. While the work songs of chapter 2 questioned the

social order more directly, their predominant notes being ones of negotiation and bargaining for greater freedoms within this order's confines, they invariably did so in ways that combined this questioning with acquiescence and conformity. In chapter 3, songs as discourses of emotion facilitated the unearthing of myriad emotions and anxieties at the core of women's transitions from natal to conjugal homes, both at the level of the collective and of the individual. It is in the Sita songs of chapter 4 that the varied experiences, voices, approaches, solutions, and messages covered the vastest spectrum, as Sita herself became a potent figure through which to discuss peasant women's own struggles. Chapter 5's inquiry into the gender dimensions of the Lorikāyan made it possible to trace how the passivity signified by Sita's upper-caste persona came to be valorized. In this masculine ballad, the role women played in forging of caste identities was fleshed out. The chapter traced the decline in values of independence and ingenuity as women's submissiveness and passivity were endorsed. The multiple renditions of Holi songs presented in chapter 6 reveal how technologies contributed to the transformation of women's songs and the ongoing displacement of women's voices as a consequence of modernity. Fighting the eclipse of traditional forms, then, is not the only reason to document the songs.

Nevertheless, my fieldwork did highlight the gradual decline of this rich oral tradition in the cultural milieu that once nourished and nurtured it. This decline, set in motion by increasing literacy and the primacy accorded to the written rather than the oral word in terms of authenticating factual information, has translated into the emergence of a significantly narrower and more restricted imagination of reality. Quite apart from the circulation of songs through the recordings discussed in chapter 6, the circulation of songs in print through chapbooks or journals further decreases community production and improvisation and, therefore, contributes to the gradual decline in the rich contextual variations. The community, instead of participating in the creation of the songs, as in the case of the Telugu catus, "is reduced to the role of their consumer" (Rao and Shulman 1998, 197). Even if some versions of the songs survive in print, they are now devoid of meter and melody. Further, rising literacy means the singing of songs is being supplanted by the reading of newspapers or the watching of television, activities increasingly antagonistic to

the genres we have been discussing. Nevertheless, the fact that new songs do get produced is a reflection of the resilience and flexibility of the oral tradition.

As I finished writing this book, the landmark Women's Reservation Bill, which called for reserving 33 percent of the seats in Parliament for women, was put to vote in Parliament. Even during the years of my fieldwork, however, the movement for women's representation at the local level, in the *pancāyats* and village councils, had inspired a number of songs in favor of women political leaders and village heads:

*Jab gaunvā ke mahilā pradhān hoyī,
Tab gaunvā ke hamro bikās hoyī*

When the women of our village become *pradhans*
That's when development will reach our village.

Here we see cultural forms in the making. With NGOs in the countryside recognizing the pedagogical power of folksongs, just as Sufi mystics or caste reformers such as Phule¹ had done, messages of development are constantly being expressed through existing forms, such as songs, to make the new models more accessible. Consider the song below, which couches the message of an NGO in a motif that recurs in a number of folksongs—that of the garden and the maiden tending it:

*Na bāte der bhaiyā na bāte der
Hamnī ki camkai ānganvā nū ho bhaiyā na bāte der
Ujaral bagiyā ki bilkhai maliniyā
Panapai me sāthi sapanvā nū bhaiyā na bāte der*

It won't be long, brother, not too long
Our courtyard will shine again, brother it won't be long.
In her uprooted garden, weeps the maiden who tends it.
But for the new dream to flower, friend, it won't be too long.

Or, this one, which I heard sung at the Jan Sewa Ashram, an NGO in Badalpur, Jaunpur, emphasizing education:

Shikshā ke leke roshaniyā, kalamiyā me diyā na jalaibo

With the flame of education, we'll ignite our pens.

This book has been concerned with the countryside and the rural milieu. However, among the growing middle classes in India's towns and cities, it is common to find at least one or two lead singers who bring out their notebooks of the family's song repertoires, at least for wedding celebrations. Perhaps with the shift to literacy and people's increasing distance from contexts wherein oral traditions might be reaffirmed, the maintenance of notebooks for preserving the songs of grandmothers is a natural progression. In Israel, for instance, in recent years Cochin women's songs are undergoing an important revival as women are reclaiming and actively remembering and performing Jewish Malayalam songs from the notebooks of their grandmothers who first made *aliya* (or immigration to Israel as a religious duty) in the 1950s soon after the Jewish state was formed. This revival in Israel has triggered similar revivals within Muslim, Christian, and Hindu communities in Kerala, India. Similar processes are evident in other parts of India where women, distanced from their rural roots, revive their family and community traditions and in the process recover the voices and celebrations of past generations, particularly those of weddings. It is also worth noting the phenomenal success of several Bollywood films that attempt to show how a middle-class wedding celebration *ought* to be carried out by blending traditional elements with the thoroughly modern concerns and consumerist aspirations of the upwardly mobile. Yet, despite such pockets of revival, the question remains, what creative ways of remembering will the changing, transforming communities of the future adopt?