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Himachali women sing as they prepare for a feast

Women's Songs, Women's Lives

A View from Kangra

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When women gather for a celebration or to share work, in many parts of India, they sing. Whether village women working in rice fields.relatives gathering for a marriage, activists riding a bus for a demonstration, the practice of singing has the powerful effect of binding singers together. Joined "in one voice" singers create a sense of shared identification, even as the mingling of melodies, rhythms and words eases the passing of time.

Kangra valley lies between the Shivalik hills and the sweeping Dhauladhar "white bearing" moun-tains: it is a place of wide views, ter-raced fields, and scattered villages. Kangra is known mostly to the outside world for its many Goddess temples that draw pilgrims, for the exquisite miniatures painted here in the seven-teenth and eighteenth centuries that now adorn museums worldwide, and for the presence of the Nobel Peace Prize winning Dalai Lama. For people born and raised in Kangra, the outside world is primarily a means of income. For several hundred years, men have migrated in search of employment elsewhere (service in armies was par-ticularly emphasized in the past). The growing disparity between land base and population has only heightened the trend of men seeking employment elsewhere, for long or short periods. Often their wives are left behind in the joint family.

In Kangra, the important women's genres associated with rituals include *hansnu khelnu,* "laughing and play-ing" birth songs for a boy's birth or birthday, *sahere* "crown" and *ghori,* "mare" songs for the groom; suhag "auspicious married life" and *badhoa* "farewell" songs for the bride. In ad-dition to these songs is an intriguing genre called *pakharu* which can be sung in any of these settings, once the requisite songs are out of the way. "What is *ttiispakharuT'* askedan M.A. educated young Brahman bride who returned to her natal home to find her female relatives engaged in an im-promptu singing session for my tape-recorder. "For any occasion, you sing two or four of the songs that you're supposed to," explained her older sister-in-law, "then you can move on *to pakharu."*

Pakharu are about married life: of women's split identifications between their families of birth and their fami-lies of marriage; of mistreatment by in-laws in a joint family; and most centrally, of relations with a husband who may be physically or emotionally absent.

Perhaps it is because women's folksongs are a collective activity pre-scribed for ritual events that scholars in India have tended to ignore the views of actual singers, preferring to focus on folksong texts as unproblematic representations of a generic (albeit sometimes caste-specific) Woman's perspective in a particular regional context. For example, a Bengali women's song might be seen as expressing the experiences of the monolithic Bengali Woman, with-out scholars usually probing any fur-ther to ask "Which woman? When? What did she mean when she sang this?" So ironically, though scholars' attention to a collective woman's voice in songs has located women on the map of anthropological and folkloris-tic theory, it has actually served to silence the views of the actual women who sing. Furthermore, this bias to-wards the collectivity has contributed to the notion that *all* women in a region will be equally engaged in the same sorts of cultural production, so by-passing divisions along the lines not just of caste, but also of class, genera-tion, education, andipersonal predilection.

Songs are both public property,

and deeply personal texts drawn out from a woman's heart, an artefact of her memory and aesthetic pleasure. In performance, one or two women who know a particular song usually lead the singing while the others follow along. Before plunging into a song, singers often confer in mutters and fragments of melody to plot out the words, the verse order, and the tune, thus negotiating the different variants they bring with them. Lines of text are usually repeated twice, and the melody is always repetitive. This means that even a woman hearing the song for the first time is able to join in, making performance truly open to all.

Prescriptions for Service

In Kangra, as in most of India, a woman's destiny is largely assumed to be tied up with marriage. As a good wife, she must perform service *(sevd)* for her husband and his relatives in many ways. Most immediately, she should serve through domestic labor -sweeping, cooking, cleaning, fetching water and firewood. She should also serve through looking after the live-stock (cutting fodder for cows, bul-locks and buffaloes seemed to be mostly women's work), and through farmwork, if the family has land and allows its women to work on it. She should serve by directing her sexual-ity towards her husband alone to pro-duce and raise children, preferably sons. Finally, she should serve the Gods, through daily worship and the ritual calendar, thus ensuring protec-tion for her male relatives, particularly her husband. Women in Kangra used the words "service" *(seva)* or "work" *(karri)* for both the physical labour they undertook as well as their ritual undertaking to please a variety of household, village, or pan-Indian dei-ties. Singing auspicious songs came under the category of ritual work.

These ideas about the necessity of women's service were hegemonic in that they were so well-accepted to be common sense. From this standpoint, alternatives become bizzarre and practically unthinkable. For example, when I outlined the idea of men and women sharing household work to Vidhya Sharma, my old friend turned bemused research assistant, she shook her head, saying in Hindi, "A man is a man, after all, he *must* be served!" *(admi to admi hi hai, unki seva karne to parhegi).* Some women observed my rounds between villages with the tape-recorder, observing that since I wasn't married, I was" absolutely free" *(bilkul phree)* to come and go with my own concerns. While many women repeatedly asked when I would get married, BrindaDevi Sud wisely shook her head. "If you were married," she said, "you would be always bringing your husband tea. Youcouldn'tdo the sort of work you do, because when-ever you sat to write, you would have to get up to take him his tea. How would you be able to fix your mind on what you were writing?"

To portray the idea of service to-wards a husband as a living deity *(patidev),* I now briefly quote from a song I taped at a women's gathering in honour of a 12-year-old boy's birthday one chill December evening in 1990. Women had assembled late because in many households they had been watching the television pro-gramme *Chhaya Geet* which features song and dance clips from Hindi films. This song was led by 70-year-old Lavdu Devi, as she squatted in a circle of women warming themselves in the play of shadows beside a hearth. Though the assembled women spoke the hill dialect, Pahari or Kangri, among themselves, this song was largely in Punjabi, the language of the adjoining state of which Kangra had once been a part. I make this point to emphasise that Hindi cultural flows emanating from the government sponsored television stand on a con-tinuum with older cross-regional flows which have made Kangra folksong traditions indissolubly hybrid. Studying traditional songs in Kangra— and I suspect elsewhere— cannot involve a quest for regional authenticity since the songs them-selves point outwards, towards other cultural influences.

The following song was identi-fied to me as a devotional song *(bhajan).* The central deity honoured here is a husband as a living God,

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Women singing *barsati* songs in the rice fields

who the wife is instructed to unwaveringly serve.

pati hove garib bichara
Whether a husband is poor or pitiable,
usda nal karo gujara
stick to your livelihood at his side.
usda hukm suno karara
Listen to his orders most strictly,
sharm de nal deviyo
with modesty, oh Goddesses, (refrain:)

hove dhahne da bera bonne par
He's the boat of righteousness that will bear you across.
karo seva pati di prem nal deviyo
Serve your husband with love, oh Goddesses.

pati hove annna kana
Whether a husband is blind or squinting,
kitna siyana
or however old,
us val changiya ho kejana
Make yourself good and go to him,
prem nal deviyo
with love, oh Goddesses.

pati hove rogi hove
Even if a husband is ailing
kitna bijogi hove
or withdrawn from the world,
usda hukm suno karara
Listen to his orders most strictly,
sharm de nal deviyo
With modesty, oh Goddesses.

The song goes on to enumerate heroines from Hindu mythology— Sita, Draupadi, Sulochana and oth-ers— who served their husbands and so achieved lasting glory. Its address-ing of women as "goddesses" rather than the usual "sisters" led me to sus-pect that perhaps it was originally a didactic composition by a man. Lavdu Devi could give me no clues on the provenance of this song for she simply did not remember when it had joined her vast repertoire. Later, one of her neighbours told me that she was a member of the Radha Soami Satsang, and perhaps this was something she had learned at religious gatherings. However, withoutknowing where this song was from, I can nonetheless be sure that it has taken local root in that when Lavdu Devi sang, other women of the village sang along.

I heard the song as blatant propa-ganda in its instructions that a woman unquestioningly serve the man pro-vided for her in an arranged marriage. The line "stick to your livelihood at his side" reminded me that most married women in this village setting lacked any economic clout to take action if their marital situation had shortcom-ings. Yet, the song acquired a poi-gnant dimension when I visited Lavdu Devi in her own home. The instructions that a woman continue to serve a man evenifheisold,blind,squinting,orill, took on a new meaning when I spoke to her in her kitchen as her bedridden husband lay downstairs, moaning in pain, then shouting aloud when he was helped outside to relieve himself. As her daughters-in-law busied them-selves with clearing up after the meal, Lavdu Devi'scommentedon the song: "To look after a husband is *dharma* (righteous action). Also to look after children, to look after your in-laws. This is all *dharma.* The results of good actions are good, and the results of bad action are bad."

Women's Feelings

Women serve then, partly because they internalise this as their moyal calling and a form of meritorious ac-tion. Yet as the following songs of the *pakharu* genre show, when men do not appreciate women's efforts, the ideal of a passive, long-suffering, ungrudgingly serving wife does not hold up. Women in these songs are depicted as continuing to have their own feelings, wills, and desires. If severely crossed, not only may the woman constructed through songs retaliate by violence against herself, but she may go so far as to request divine intervention against her husband, and to set a curse on his household.

I taped the first text in a Rajput household, where women had gath-ered from neighboring houses to help out with preparations for a boy's up-coming sacred thread ceremony. I ar-rived to find a cluster of women sitting out on an upstairs balcony, cleaning and pounding spices for the planned feast. I sat down and picked the stones from coriander seeds as one of the visiting neighbors issued ethnographic instructions: "What you should write about is how hard women here work. They know housework, they know work in the fields, they know how to look after animals, they know how to stitch clothes and knit sweaters and make pretty things from crochet. Men may be off working for months, even years, and women keep a house and farm running. If you are going to tell people ahout women in Kangra, tell them about how expert they are at so many kinds of work."

Yet another woman, who I will call Sona, arrived to help. She was immediately directed towards my re-corder, for Sona's beautiful and strong voice was widely admired in the village. A woman of the blacksmith caste, Sona was also unique among women in this village as she had walked out on an alcoholic and abusive husband to return with two young sons to her parent's home. Somewhat to her brother's chagrin, she took advantage of the Hindu Succeskm Law which entitled her to a share in the ancestral land. Now a woman in her early 40s, she was slim and quick-moving, with huge eyes and jaws that gave the im-pression of being perpetually clenched. She made a living

as a village seam-stress, or helping with odd jobs at large communal events. Sona sang with bustling activity all around her, her melancholy voice piercing the February air:

barah bariye
After twelve years,
kand ghare aya
husband has come home, *mangda soya da sag*
he asks for fennel greens. *kand pardesiya*
Foreigner husband.
sasu te chori hun
Stealing away now from mother-in-law
nanana diye sogi and sister-in-law too, *chali gai malie de bag* I went to the gardener's garden, *kand pardesiya* Foreigner husband.
malie da ladka
The gardener's son
puchhnajo laga
began to ask
tu kajo ai mere bag
"Why have you come to my garden?"
kand pardesiya
Foreigner husband.

barah bariye
After twelve years,
kand ghare aya
husband has come home,
mangda soya da sag
he asks for fennel greens.
kand pardesiya
Foreigner husband.

puriya pakandi ji
I fry puris,
thaliya pandi
and serve them on a plate,
upar soya da sag
topped with fennel greens.
kand pardesiya
Foreigner husband.

lata di bai
With a kick of the foot
kande thali satai
husband knocked over the plate

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Girls try out sitting in a doli that carries a wife to her husband's home

o piya soya sag
there topple the fennel greens.
kand pardesiya
Foreigner husband.

na sukh saureyaji
Without happiness with my in-laws,
na sukh mapeya
without happiness with my parents,
phut gae mere bhag
My destiny has splintered.
kand pardesiya
Foreigner husband.

bhariya katora gorie
Filling a bowl, the Beautiful One
jaire da pita ji
drinks poison.
sai gai hoi bakhiyan de bahar
She's off beyond the limits.
kand pardesiya
Foreigner husband.

"Finished," she said when done. "So in this, a man comes after 12 years," I began, knowing by now that in songs absences always spanned the formula of 12 years. I was troubled by the violence in the song and wanted her to explain. "And then?"

"Then," Sona said with an air of resignation, "then she says, 'How can I serve him?' This is what she must have thought. She went to the garden tofetchsomesweetfennel. She brought it, and she began to serve her husband *(seva lagi).* Anger rose up in him be-cause she had gone out. She had gone in his service, but he misinterpreted it, 'I just came home and she went out.'" I nodded, thinking of many married women's lives around me as a con-stant stream of service, from early rising to make tea and fetch water, through a day filled with kitchen tasks, farm work, tending livestock, washing clothes, looking after children, to the late night massaging of a husband's or father-in-law's feet. Yet, as the song pointed out, men may neither acknowledge nor appreciate such service. (Later, another woman suggested that the husband was perhaps suspi-cious of

the wife going to meet the gardener, so emphasising that women's virtue was tied up with seclusion).

Sona continued, "She made the *puris,* she made greens, and she took it to her husband. 'Don't want! I don't want it!' OK then, he didn't want it though she brought it with such respect. So she felt pain, right? She said, 'No happiness at my in-law's place, no happiness at my parents' place, so my *karma* has splintered.' So this is what she did, she ate poison and slept. With pleasure!" Sona's laugh was loaded with irony. I was still reeling from the power of this song, thinking of how strongly it expressed women's split allegiances in a patriarchal sys-tem that overtly demanded incorpora-tion into her husband's family. Re-flecting on this song subsequently, it has struck me that other songs I have taped refer to a father of a bride as a "gardener" who sowed a garden— could this reference to the gardener's son represent the woman's brother who makes her unwelcome when she comes to fetch things from her home of birth? Also, the theme of suicide is more chilling in light of the fact that shop-keepers in the area often refuse to sell women rat poison after several cases where after family squabbles women drank this poison and died horrible deaths.

On that day, though, before I could frame more questions, Sona was al-ready standing up and halfway across the balcony. "OK, I'm going now. There's work at home." With these words, she was off. I saw her again several weeks later at the sacred thread ceremony, when she pointed darkly towards the locked door where men had disappeared with bottles of whisky. As she told me that liquor was a sort of poison, that it made men "get angryfor no reason" and abuse women, my mind flickered back to the song she had sung.

I taped this song in several vari-ants, each with a different opening line (called *dhak* or "root" in Pahari, for it is from this line that the song grows). One opening I taped in a Brahmin village creates an air of tender expec-tation that will soon be reversed: "on the branches of the mango tree, a nightingale sings, it sings sweet words, that husband is coming home." Yet another variant alludes to the stereo-typed longing of lovers in the mon-soon, again setting an ironic romantic prelude for what follows. 'The clouds shower rain, husband comes home, he requests fennel greens, pleasure loving husband." This song I taped at a Rajput groom' s ceremony, as a group of sing-ing women picked through bundles of mustard greens for a communal feast (perhaps the singer who started up the song was reminded of it through the action they were jointly undertaking). Here, the husband started out with the epithet "pleasure loving" *(sukkiniya* — related to the Hindi *shaukin)* once he kicked over the greens, he became "foreigner" *(pardesiya),* and finally, he was "treacherous" *(dagebajiya).*

Suicide is a common theme through these variants. As an ambiguous act that could mean a woman's taking control of her life, or of being pres-sured to desperation by social forces beyond her control, the meaning of suicide was difficult for me to decode. In the variant I taped at the Rajput wedding, though, the suicide clearly carries the slighted woman's intention to make her husband suffer andrepent. Here, she appears to have not only suffered the tossing aside of the food she prepared with care, but to have been beaten by her husband.

gusse di marie
Struck with anger,
gorie jahar je khada
the Beautiful one took poison,
jai suti picchvade
And went to sleep in the back-yard.
kand vo dagebajiya e
Treacherous husband.

hatha te lohaleji
Husband shook her hand,
kandh paira te lohalle
he shook her feet,
sijijanda reshrni rumal
His silk handkerchief is drenched.
kand vo dagebajiya e
Treacherous husband.

sukh mat karda ji
Don't ever be happy,
kanda char dhiyare
husband, for even four days.
ted merijan gavai
You misplaced my life.
kand vo dagebajiya e
Treacherous husband.

chanane katai kande
Cutting sandalwood,
chitta rachai
husband made a pyre
hatthe dah karvaya
With his right hand he lit it.
kand vo dagebajiya e
Treacherous husband.

Some months afterwards, I came across some further verses that elaborated on the curse.

Bimla Pandit, a young Brahman woman in her 30s had just sung the version opening with the nightingale on the branches of the mango tree announcing that the husband was on his way home. Simla's voice was so measured and sweet that sometimes, particularly if myrecorder was around, her female relatives would stop sing-ing along so they could enjoy her voice, nodding their heads in appreciation. When Bimla finished, her mother-in-law's paternal aunt (who lived in the same village and had helped arrange the mother-in-law's marriage some 35years earlier), added a verse which no one else knew. The

old woman sang about how when the wife dies the husband finally repents, weeping "till his five garments are drenched."

Simla's mother-in-law, Durga Pandit, a plump, fair woman in her 50s, was fussing with grains set out to dry. Sometime after we had finished taping, I overheard Durga Pandit sing-ing under her breath. These were two verses that I definitely hadn't heard before. I squatted beside her and asked that she repeat the words slowly, so I could write them down.

iki ta chhari
Having abandoned one,
ath bhi byahiyan
even if you marry eight others,
sukh mat karda ghariya char
May you not have happiness for four moments
ki kanda dagebajia e
oh Treacherous Husband.
amma de desji
In my mother's country,
champa je phuleya
may fragrant flowers bloom.
sauhre da des akh datura
In my in-law's country, weeds and
intoxicants,
ki kanda dagebajia e
oh Treacherous Husband.

"Weeds and intoxicants," she ex-plained "means that nobody lives there. It's become a desolate place." Later, transcribing the text, I noticed that by juxtaposing the place of the "mother" with that of "in-laws" *(sauhre)* tied especially with the fa-ther-in-law *(sauhra),* the song was not just contrasting ties established by birth and through marriage, but also emphasising a female line of con-nection. Having taped her remi-niscences earlier, I saw these verses in the light of her own past, a con-nection she herself had perhaps not intended. When Durga was a child, her father had walked out on his wife and two daughters to start a second family with a pretty 16-year-old. The abandoned family suffered hard times, and did not see him or meet the step-siblings for many years. Her mother began to have severe psy-chological problems that remain with her today. The mother had just vis-ited, a long-faced woman with yellowed teeth, mouth drooling, a stench of urine rising from her clothes. I wondered whether perhaps Durga Pandit was identifying with her mother's plight when she added the lines about "abandoning one" to marry others.

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As this example shows, women who have married in from different places or who are of different genera-tions may know slightly dif-ferent ver-sions of the same songs. Because of the variation in singing, women who would not ordinarily meet each other because they were from different villages and castes were often extremely curious to hear what others had sung. Playing back tapes (with the permis-sion of sing-ers), I too became an infor-mal conduit for the transmission of songs and variants.

For example, several weeks later, I was visiting two sisters of the Sud trading caste in a different village. They had asked to hear what I had taped in my rounds. They listened appreciatively to "Foreigner Hus-band" as sung by Bina Pandit, nodding their heads and repeating the words. The song reminded them of another they called "Sumba" (a poetic word for husband) which they offered to tape for me. The connect-ing link between the two songs is serving a man fennel greens after a long absence, and his lack of appre-ciation. Brinda Devi, a woman in her 50s, led this song as her younger sis-ter, Sudha, in her 40s, followed along.

sumba sumba akhiye
Call him Husband, Husband,
ni bhaliye
good woman,
sumba giya pardes
Husband went abroad.

barah barie sumba aya
After twelve years, husband came home,
sumba aya ni bhalie
He came home, good woman,
aya khara darvar
and stood at the door.
mini kutti chulah ghada

I ground up earth and made a hearth,
chulah ghadan ni bhaliye
Made a hearth, good woman
kunkue. de sa paraula
and smeared it with red powder.

jhinjhaniya kutti bhat rina
I husked fine grains and cooked up rice
bhat rina ni bhaliye
Cooked up rice, good woman,
hariya mungadi hai dal
with green moong lentils.

soya chiri sag kara
I chopped fennel leaves and made greens.
sag kara ni bhalie
Made greens, good woman
hariya mungadi e dal
with green moong dal.
[Their eldest sister, visiting some months later, amended this verse:

soya chiri sag rina
I chopped fennel leaves and simmered
greens.
sag rina ni bhalie
Simmered greens, good woman
elaichie de liyar
sprinkled with cardamom.]

khadi piti nisi giya
After eating and drinking he got angry
rusi giya ni bhalie
Got angry, good woman,
jai suta pichhvar
and went off to sleep in the backyard.

kalie dholie badalie Black and white clouds, *badalie ni bhalie* Oh clouds, good woman, *baraseya aj kanne rat* pour rain tonight.

kalie dholie sach kita
The black and white clouds made this come true.
sach kita ni bhaliye
Made this come true, good woman,
baraseya aj kanne rat
and it rained tonight.

ukhale sari bundpai
The mortar is flooded with raindrops
bund pai ni bhalie
Flooded with raindrops, good woman,
mule barabar dhar
that pound like a pestle.

hath kandolu kach manja
With a mattress in hand, bed under the
arm,
kach manja ni bhalie
Bed under the arm, good woman,
diteya bhitan ugad
he tries to open the door.

hathe mahendi paire mahendi
"There's henna on my hands, henna on my feet,
paire mahendi ni bhaliya
Henna on my feet, good man,
chaviya rahiya pathar

and the key's in the trunk."
nakhara thathara chhori dena
"Abandon these airs, *chhori dena ni bhalie* Abandon them, good woman, *chhori deni e majaj* and abandon your pride."
nakhara thathara kiya chhora

"Why should I abandon my airs?
kiya chhora ni bhaliya
Why abandon them, good man
bannani teri majaj
when your pride must be broken?"

"He had gone somewhere and came back after 12 years," explained Brinda Devi. "She was really happy that he'd gone home after so many years. So she ground up mud and made a really beautiful hearth. Then she took *kumkum* (auspicious red vermillion)— what Purohits put on the forehead [in blessing]—and decorated the hearth. She was so happy. Then after she'd smeared the hearth with vermillion, she pounded and husked *jhinjhan,* which is fine rice. Very quickly and efficiently, she pounded the rice. Then she got some greens and made green moong *dal.* She cooked all this deli-cious food and fedit to him. She wanted to feed him because he'd come after 12 years."

Brinda Devi continued, "He ate and drank, then he had some problem. He took his cot and put it down to sleep somewhere. In the backyard. She was really upset. 'Just look at this! I am so happy, and he just has gone off to sleep.' Enormous anger rose in her mind. Then she went out and looked at him sleeping in the backyard and said, 'Oh Bhagavan, pour down rain. Pour down such rain...' "

" 'That the drops should be like hammers, like pestles,'" put in S udha, who was a primary school teacher and spoke English. She grinned, white teeth flashing.

"Very long drops," said Brinda Devi, "Heavy ones. Then Bhagavan did just this. These days too, it might crackle once or twice and then rain begins to pour. In this way, it began to pour. Then he got up with the cot, with the thin mattress and the sheet. Under his arm."

"Under the arm," Sudha demon-strated with a tuck of her elbow. "Then he came and began

rattling the door."

"He rattled on it," Brinda Devi continued, "But she was stubborn. She said, 'I've put henna on my hands, henna on my feet, and the key is up in the trunk.'"

Sudha clapped her hands and we all laughed. *"Look,* at the excuse!" said Sudha. Hennaed hands are especially associated with brides, but here the symbol of drying henna is appropri-ated to stand in for the woman's resis-tance to obeying her husband when he has insulted her. Switching to English, Sudha explained, "She's also making pretend."

" 'If you were peeved, then take this! *(tu bhi rusi gaya ta lai bhala),'* " continued Brinda Devi. "He said, 'Don't put on these airs *(nakhra).* It's pouring outside. Open the door. I want to come in!' " Brinda Devi gasped, like a desperate drenched man, and we all laughed again.

"She says, 'Why shouldn't I carry on like this? This was your problem and you must experience it. Did you call it putting on airs when you went and slept out there? You have to pay for carrying on in this way: get drenched!"

"So then he stays outside?" I asked.

Brinda Devi considered. "No, then she must have let him in," she said.

"This is where the song ends," Sudha said.

"This sort of situation must hap-pen a lot here," I observed after a few moments, "That a woman really serves a man with a lot of care, and a man doesn't pay any attention at all."

Both Brinda Devi and Sudha had been vigorously nodding and cluck-ing. "Not at all!" said Brinda Devi. "Huh! This happens a lot!"

"Mostly in the past," said Sudha.

"So this doesn't happen now?" I asked.

"Even now women really are at-tentive," Brinda Devi said, "But men, there is some real pride in them. They don't give a damn *(nahi marde prabhav).* Then that irritation burns inside a woman as rage. But what else can she do? She can't do anything about it."

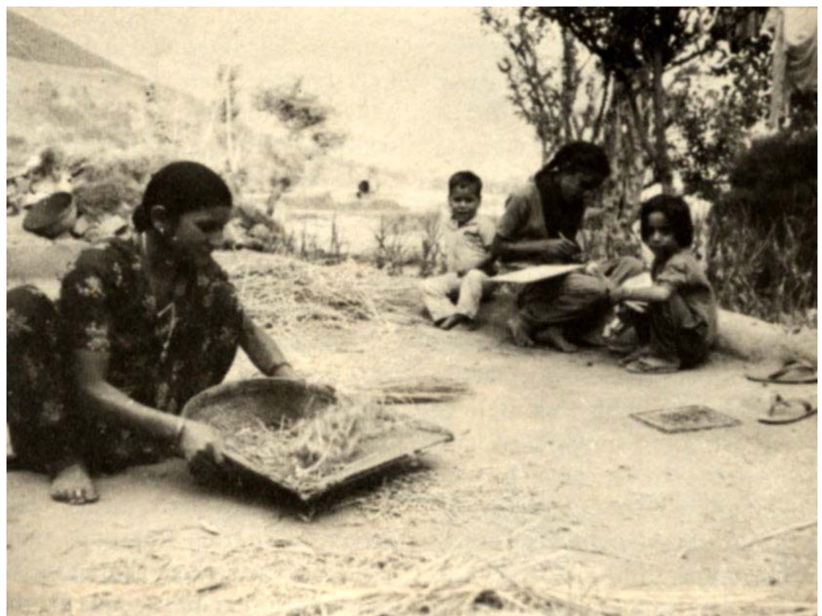
What can she do? Again andagain, women telling me of painful moments in their lives would rhetorically ask, "What to do?" *(Kya karna?).* Making such statements, they were acknowl-edging their own powerlessness in situations out of their control. Yet, having a forum like songs in which to at least symbolically control the contraints that hemmed in their lives led the singers I spoke to to value their songs.

When I dropped by with a Devanagri transcription to check whether I had got the words of the Sumba song right, Brinda Devi com-mented, laughing a little, "She won, he lost! If you pray with a true heart, it will come true." The song seemed to say that by forming a direct relationship with Bhagavan through service, the woman could request in-tervention against a husband who did not appreciate the loving service issued to him.

Songs in the Lives of Singers

With a shared artistic form like folksongs, one is easily tempted into viewing songs as belonging equally to all "the folk." Yet as these ex-amples have shown, all women do not know the same songs. Further, all women are not singers. Literate Vidhya Sharma, for example, prided herself on not knowing any of the "old" songs, prefering Hindi film songs. Educated women like her of-ten rejected old songs, using this rejection to define a plane of difference between themselves and older, illiterate women. Folksongs *likepakharu* thus appear to be a symbolic resource that some, but not all women are drawn to.

Kangra women themselves pointed out that singing was tied to women's social life in a village set-ting: women who lived in families with other women singers were likely to know more songs, and women who lived "outside", that is, with their husbands elsewhere, tended not to know any. I was told that a good voice *(gala)* and a good mind (*dimag*) were essential to singing and remembering songs. Further, many women



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acknowledged that adverse circumstances fed into large repertoires. As Sudha Sud explained after watching me go about my collection for almost a year. “Kirinji. The person who be-comes a singer or storyteller is one with a lot of pain. She wants a way to express the pain. There are some things that you can’t say directly, but you can say them in this form. Songs and stories become her form of so-lace.” Durga Pandit’s sister, a hunchbacked woman who had been married at 18 to be a co-wife for a man in his 40s, stated that with singing “agitation is banished. Through singing, strength (/or) comes to the heart. Strength.” Or, as Shakuntala Devi, in her 70s, said, “Everyone might sing, but it’s only those who’ ve suffered who will really understand a song.” It seems then, that though such songs are part of a corpus open to village women, it is individuals repositioned to new understandings through their life-experience drawn to them. The songs can become a source of beauty, solace, and the strength to go on without crushing bitterness.

Whenever I asked why women were required to sing at ritual func-tions, the answer I was given by men and women alike, was *“Khushi se*— from happiness.” Since songs are so often associated with male rites of passage, one might indeed surmise that singing is happy because it is a chorus of praise from female on-lookers at the margins of triumphant male lives. Yet, as a look at these *pakharu* texts reveal, songs— even those sung at happy occasions— may be painfully sad, depicting women’s fate as tragic and hopeless. Believ-ing that songs are sung out of hap-piness, men—who are never present during the singing *of pakharu* — are likely to dismiss singing as a pleas-ant, innocuous thing for women to do when they get together. Also, as anonymous creations shared among segregated groups of women, no particular singer can be pinpointed for subversive statements. In this context, women’s segregation ap-pears to provide a shelter for women’s folklore, in which social realities are revisioned around the concerns of their makers.

In Kangra—as no doubt elsewhere in village India— cultural flows borne in by modern mass-media appear to be displacing older traditions. The sing-ers I have described here all saw their songs in the regional language as en-dangered “old crones songs” *(jhabri de geef)* set in implicit opposition to Hindi film songs *(film geef)* deriving from male songwriters in urban centres. As a genre that is voluntary rather than prescribed in rituals *pakharu* are per-haps among the most vulnerable of songs. Even though there is a Pahari song programme on the radio each week, and even though local folklor-ists have collected some songs in books, and even though children at school are taught songs for perfor-mance on the stage, all of these at-tempts to define a regional culture seem to render songs as quaint frag-ments of the past, rather than as alive in the present. Simultaneously, younger, educated women are exposed to newspapers, magazines, radio and television programs that present them with the ideal of amiddle-class woman who serves her husband in an urban-ized setting; from the vantage of this ideal, traditional songs appear old-fashioned, unrefined and not entirely respectable in language or rhetoric.

Ironically, even as younger vil-lage women are rejecting subversive songs *like pakharu,* in the urban set-ting, similar ones are being reinvented within the context of women’s activist movements. These songs differ from folksongs trans-mitted in the village setting in that they have an explicit agenda to bring about social change, are usually in-vented by a named author, frequently appropriate popular tunes from films, and may be transmitted through print or cassette. Yet, such activist-based songs clearly stand on a continuum with the older threads of social cri-tique present in women’s folk tradi-tions. Apart from making individu-als aware that the shortcomings they face in their own lives are shared more broadly, such songs envision the possibility of different social ar-rangements, and bind together the women who sing.

One of the most eloquent women I knew was Sita Devi, a Rajput in her 70s who had been married at 12 and widowed at 14. One afternoon, she sang a bitter *pakharu* about a young widow, bound through *pativrata* ideals to remain inauspicious, celibate, and marginal all her life. Upon finishing, she mentioned that when she couldn’t sleep at night, she often recited such songs to herself. She then launched into the following testimony which poignantly captures how prescribed ritual service through singing may also translate into psychological service for women burdened with hardship and despair. Sita Devi’s freckled face was filled with intensity as she addressed me in Pahari: “Singing a song like this, you weep. You sing about the pain in your heart.

Then you get some solace *(tasalli)* in your heart that there have been times like this for others in the past. It’s good to sing songs about pain. They make you remember. Any matters of the past that you’ ve heard and that are good, you should keep passing these along. Take you and me: I should make you understand these things. How are you to know what sorts of things have occurred in the past? I should make these take a seat,in your heart. Then you too will have solace that these sorts of matters have happened.....” ❒