



Smita Tewari Jassal, *Unearthing Gender: Folksongs of North India*

Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012. 320 pages. 30 photographs, 2 maps, notes, glossary, bibliographical references, index. Paperback, \$24.95. ISBN 978-0-8223-5130-6.

IN THIS well-crafted text, Smita Tewari Jassal examines the function of singing in rural, North Indian women's lives. Drawing on several genres of song orally recorded in multiple locales and contexts, Jassal stipulates that women's folksongs constitute "the very hum of life" (2) and demonstrates that such songs constitute vehicles for articulating and enacting gender (in relation to caste and class), expressing and shaping emotion, and responding in a complex manner to social constraint as well as socioeconomic change.

According to Jassal, the research on which the book is based was conducted over multiple field visits to communities in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar over a five-year period. I found myself wondering about the length and nature of these visits, but given her clear depth of cultural familiarity and capacity to translate the songs (which she notes were selected in part based on her ability to translate them more readily than others), this is not a significant concern. Jassal examines several genres of song: those accompanying women's domestic and field work, those sung at weddings, songs about Sita's life, a particular ballad sung by men, and those drawing on women's songs from the carnivalesque festival of Holi but reworked and produced on cassette by men.

Songs, Jassal asserts, "constitute the spaces wherein the collective voice of women may be said to have evolved" (6). Her aim is to "unearth" rural-, middle-, and lower-caste women's gendered perspectives on North Indian gender order. Jassal's project is one of plumbing her subjects' "subaltern" consciousness and also of developing her own analysis of that order. Given the otherwise (and still interpretively) elusive nature of subaltern perspectives/lives to researchers, Jassal expresses a sense of urgency in attending to North Indian women's oral traditions, as they are increasingly eclipsed by mechanized forms of song circulation.

The book finds kinship with a number of earlier published volumes, notably RAHEJA and GOLD (1994), FLUECKIGER (1996), and NARAYAN (1997), and the recently-published volume by DAVIS (2014). What they have in common is a feminist ethnographic approach to South Asian women's expressive practices as a window into their perspectives on their own lives and the worlds they inhabit. What makes Jassal's book stand out are its particular analytical foci, especially the attention to labor and emotion (and emotional labor). Her theoretical ruminations on questions of agency and resistance are also significant, although at this point her conclusion that agency is culturally/structurally constrained and resistance interlaced with accommodation is not new.

While Jassal is focused on a creative, expressive cultural form and practice of song, she is also deeply concerned with structural questions to do with patriarchy (familial, societal), labor, migration, and caste mobility. Indeed, she describes how

she came to the study of women's song as a result of her research on gendered agricultural labor practices (hence the metaphor "unearthing") and the political/economic struggle over women's land rights. In that research, Jassal explains, she found women reluctant to volunteer information on such contested issues. And yet, she noticed that many of the "issues on which women were otherwise reluctant or unable to voice an opinion were in fact explored in the various song genres" (19). Here in the community of other women and under the guise of anonymity provided by the "folk" and ephemeral nature of singing, women express the "loose, jagged edges of reality" (154), including complex perspectives on their deeply layered worlds. For instance, regarding women's labor conditions, Jassal concludes that the changing division of labor, especially the fact that men's victories in labor organization are leaving women even more tied to their unattractive work conditions. Jassal demonstrates that women view this situation critically and find it, and men's absence due to work abroad, emotionally distressing.

In numerous moments in the book, Jassal discusses what North Indian songs *do*, that is, their function; she notes, "[r]ural Indians have long articulated the human condition by aligning with the messages and moods of folksongs, their own scripts of reference" (2). Songs are "existing cultural codes of approved behavior and norms.... These codes appear to equip women to maneuver and negotiate conditions that are often inherently disempowering ... singing imparts psychological strength" (8). Songs also function as a historical record in a context in which "women's involvement in agricultural production remains largely undocumented and unacknowledged as it is presumed to be either marginal or merely supplemental to the male income" (98). Jassal further describes songs as resources for emotional survival and expression, a vehicle for instruction and preparation for (gendered) adulthood, a medium of social critique and exposition of inequalities, a vehicle for the establishment of solidarities among women, and a form of entertainment.

Of particular interest in Jassal's text is her attention to the colonial, historical process of the cloistering and silencing of women and the subsequent efforts by middle and lower caste communities to gain upward mobility by following suit. Jassal demonstrates the relevance of this history to field laboring songs; bawdy, teasing songs performed at weddings; and the appropriation of women's Holi festival songs by men. Another highlight of Jassal's text is her comparison of women's song genres (especially their gendered nature) to masculine expressive traditions —both oral/performative and recorded/commercialized. Such inclusion may at first strike one as an intrusion in a text otherwise about women's perspectives and practices; but in fact, the attention to masculine practices highlights the distinctiveness of their feminine counterparts, and contributes to Jassal's point about the endangered nature of women's oral song and consequent urgency of recording and attending to it. Jassal succinctly concludes, "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" (250).

Unearthing Gender offers a number of analytical gems. It shows that North Indian women entertain a significant array of "alternative" femininities and that even their portrayals of well-known figures such as Sita entail surprisingly subversive narratives

not found in masculinist versions (whether oral or written) of this central and long-standing (and long-suffering) of South Asian heroines. The text also includes a discussion of the politics of daughters' moveable wealth, parents' emotional perspectives on marrying daughters, the role of humor and ritual setting in making social critique palatable, and women's perspectives on conjugal relationships, to name just several.

Jassal's consistently accessible text benefits from feminist anthropologists who laid the groundwork for an anthropology of emotion (ABU-LUGHOD and LUTZ 1990), and indeed Jassal's work stands as a shining example of just how much can be learned—psychologically, sociologically, and politically, from attending to structures of feeling. (One only wishes her focus on emotion in the chapter on wedding songs was as keen in chapters centered on other song genres and contexts.) In addition to this contribution to an anthropology of emotion, *Unearthing Gender* provides a particularly cogent example of how much is to be gained by attending simultaneously to the structural and expressive aspects of culture and to the subtle and complex ways subversion and reinforcement can harmonize and create dissonance in the very same tune.

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Coralynn V. Davis
Bucknell University