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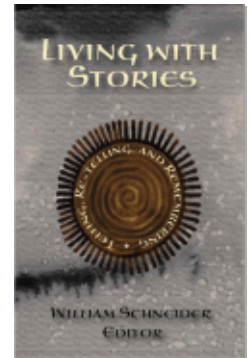
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Singing and Retelling the Past

Kirin Narayan

Kirin Narayan is professor of anthropology at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. She grew up in India and moved to the United States at sixteen. Her major research has been in India, where she has been interested in women's songs since 1980. In this essay, she describes how she reintroduced a traditional women's wedding song to a group of friends and how they responded to the recording that had been made years before. While some of the verses to the song were not familiar to them, others were, and this leads to a discussion of underlying meanings in the song. The women share in a common tradition and also in the cultural expectation that they will sing songs at celebrations. The song, the setting, and the kin who are gathered offer a chance to share versions and participate in the reconstruction of old verses and a common tradition.

"These old memories are very lovable, they exist in such good songs," remarked Bimla Pandit, an accomplished singer, to her circle of female in-laws as I sat with them on a verandah, sipping tea and checking through song transcriptions. This association between narrative songs in the local dialect and past ways of life confronted me often in my work on women's songs in the Himalayan foothills of Kangra, Northwest India. In this essay, I use ethnographic materials from Kangra to explore a few ways that sung and spoken

retellings of a folklore form can invoke the past: through linguistic terms; through the cultural logic of social practices; through chains of transmissions across generations and the conscious use of songs as teaching tools; and through marking an anthropologist's engagements across time. I focus my discussion around a woman's song about Krishna's encounter with the gorgeous cowherd woman, Chandravali.

Krishna Stories in Kangra Women's Songs

Krishna is the eighth avatar or incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu, Preserver of the Universe, who periodically takes form to rout evil. Krishna plays a central role in the epic *Mahabharata* (believed to have been composed somewhere between 300 B.C. and 300 A.D.) and in various Puranas. Episodes from Krishna's life are reread and retold in many languages, dialects, and genres across India. Among the most cherished stories are the miraculous events surrounding his birth; his childhood in a village, where he kills demons, gets into all kinds of mischief, and plays with other cowherd boys; his romantic relations with the *gopis*, the beautiful cowherd women; his elopement with Princess Rukmani just before her marriage to someone else; his overthrow of his wicked uncle King Kamsa; and the help he extends to the five Pandava brothers and their wife Draupadi, even serving as war charioteer for the second brother, Arjuna, and instructing him through the verses we know as the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Spreading out at the base of the towering Dhauladhar mountain range of the Western Himalayas, Kangra has long been linked with two deities associated throughout India with the mountains—the ascetic Shiva, who meditates in Himalayan snows, and Shiva's consort, Gaurja (or Parvati), daughter of the mountains, who is also the great Goddess. The spread of intense Krishna devotion through Kangra is more recent and appears to be linked to the reign of King Sansar Chand (1775–1823) when Kangra was a hill state. Sansar Chand was also instrumental in popularizing Krishna devotion through building temples to Krishna, painting murals, popularizing festivals like Janmashtami (Krishna's birthday), commissioning exquisite miniature paintings featuring the life and loves of Krishna, and patronizing performances relating to stories from Krishna's life (Archer 1973:286). William Moorcroft, a British traveler who visited Sansar Chand's court in 1820, noted that the king “in the evening hears music and frequently has Nachs [dance performances] in which the performers generally sing Brij Bhakha

songs generally reciting the adventures of Krishna and those of the Gopees” (Archer 1973:262, expanding on Moorcroft 1971 (1841):144). Brij—or Braj—is the region in northern India associated with Krishna’s childhood adventures and romantic liaisons with the *gopis*. “Brij Bhakha” refers to songs composed in the Braj regional dialect (*bhāshā*).

The spread of Krishna stories also appears to have inspired compositions in the Kangra dialect, called Pahari or Kangri. Certainly by the time of the scholar M. S. Randhawa’s pioneering collection of Kangra folksongs made between 1951 and 1961, Krishna’s presence was already established in multiple song genres. As Randhawa notes, “In these songs, Shri Krishna has a preeminent place” (1970:158). A full-scale analytic work in Hindi exploring the many dimensions of Krishna’s identity in Kangra folksongs was subsequently undertaken by Meenakshi Sharma (1989), a local scholar and daughter of the prolific Kangra folklorist Dr. Gautam Sharma “Vyathit.”

I have visited Kangra since I was a teenager, shortly before my American mother moved to a village there. I began writing down Kangra women’s songs in 1980, during a year between college and beginning graduate school in cultural anthropology. I too almost immediately encountered songs featuring Krishna, first in the genre of bride’s songs (*suhāg*) and then in subsequent years through other genres that include birth songs (*hansṇu khelṇu*), groom’s songs (*sahere*), songs of suffering in married life (*pakharu*), and devotional song (*bhajan*). I learned that in Kangra, the word *gopi* is used interchangeably with the term “Gujari”: that is, a woman of the Gujar Muslim pastoralist group associated with cows, buffalos, and the sale of milk products. The 1883–84 official British overview, *Gazetteer of the Kangra District*, draws on regional stereotypes to make a colonial typification of Gujaris; they are described as “tall and graceful in figure” and that moving about in public to sell milk products “unaccompanied by their husbands, undoubtedly exposes them to great temptations” (Punjab Government 1883–84:95). Following the partition of 1947 and creation of the new state of Pakistan, however, the Gujar presence in Kangra was diminished by emigration or brutal anti-Muslim violence. During my own years of association with Kangra, Gujaris were largely an imagined presence in Krishna songs indexing the past rather than in the lived landscape of everyday village interactions in the present.

Radha is perhaps Krishna’s best-known *gopi*, or Gujari, and indeed many of the Kangra women’s songs mention her by name. These

portray her not just as his lover but sometimes also as his wife—a role usually associated with Rukmani. But Krishna’s relationships with many other women are sung about too. My friend Urmila Devi Sood explained Krishna’s prodigious romantic energy as the result of desires expressed by women who swooned over him in his previous incarnation as handsome Prince Ram, or Ramachandra.

Krishna was always falling in love with women. Before he was born as Krishna, he had taken birth as Ramchandra. At the gathering of princes when Sita chose her groom, it was Ramchandra whom she got. All her girlfriends were absolutely incredulous. “Where did you get this groom from: Look at him! He’s incomparable in looks, incomparable in wisdom, incomparable in every single thing. Where did you get this groom for yourself?” They were aflutter, ensnared by desire for him.

So Ramchandra gave them a boon. He said, “In my next life, I’ll marry you all.”

Radha is one of them, and there are many others that he married too ... 108, it’s said. (Narayan 1997:86)

While Urmilaji mentioned 108 *gopis*, other women estimated 360, or even 16,000. Among these was Chandravali, a name that can be glossed from Sanskrit as “collection of moons” or “moonlight.” She is perceived as a woman so lovely that when she enters a town “there’s a doubt whether the moon has risen or Chandravali Gujar has arrived. Her way of speaking, her gait, her style of draping her shawl and everything else about her is wonderfully attractive” (Sharma 1989:121). In order to get to know her, Krishna resorts to special wiles: disguising himself as a woman.

Chandravali’s Song

I met Chandravali for the first time on a sunny morning in February of 1991, as I sat out in the courtyard of a Brahman settlement. I had been intermittently filling tapes with songs through almost four days of wedding festivities. For this wedding of a son, relatives had assembled from near and far, joining friends and neighbors. Women had been singing almost constantly—clustered close around ritual action, sitting on mats in rooms apart from the men, or dancing and prancing naughtily when the men departed with the groom’s party. Women’s presence in song was important to the event because in Kangra, as in much of India, women’s songs are considered to bring good fortune to an occasion (cf. Henry 1988:110–11). Some steps of the rituals demanded certain descriptive songs that tended to repeat with different kinship terms inserted each round. Between

these charged ritual moments, any generally appropriate song (for example, with a romantic theme) could be sung.

Most women's traditional songs in the Pahari dialect use a repetitive melody, with each line sung twice. This means that any woman—or group of women—might lead the song and that even someone who has never heard it before can join in for the repetition of each line. There is no fixed boundary, then, between performers and audience. Some women are said to have a *sukinni* or special predilection and interest in songs and are most likely to volunteer to lead. Others, though, might abstractedly mouth the words without much attention; else having fulfilled the ritual obligation of being present, they might turn to chatting in a low undertone.

"Women are always singing," observed one woman with a prodigious knowledge of songs. "You hear so many songs, but only some go sit inside your heart." Even among singers, then, repertoires of songs and versions of the same songs varied with individual predilection and also the kinds of songs that a singer was exposed to as a member of an extended family and resident in a village. Therefore, for women gathering together for ritual celebrations from different families and villages, it was a challenge to synchronize versions. Sometimes this involved a quick huddle of lead singers to work out a melody and a narrative line in advance; at other times, midway through the song singers would confront a divergence, and the version most loudly sung (or backed by more voices) would win out.

As is common at weddings, the groom was repeatedly compared to other celebrated bridegrooms of Hindu mythology: Ram, Krishna, and Shiva. Yet the songs emphasized not just the experience of the groom but also women related to him. As Susan Gal has observed, women's "voice" refers not just to the spoken word but also to perspectives on social relations that often diverge from representations stemming from dominant (male) groups (Gal 1991:176). Rich ethnographic work in other regions of India has shown how women's oral traditions challenge dominant ideologies of gender and of kinship (Flueckiger 1996; Raheja and Gold, 1994). This emphasis on female characters means that in women's folklore, mythological events are often recast to emphasize women's perspectives (Rao 1991).

By the fourth morning of wedding rituals, the groom's party had returned with the bride, and a big lunch feast was to be held in celebration. In the meanwhile, many of the guests were resting outdoors, seeking warmth in the sun. I sat out on a cotton rug with

a group of women who had traveled from the groom's mother's village of birth. By now, my microphone had become part of the celebrations and had even been commandeered as a mock phallus for some bawdy skits that the women put on while the groom's party was gone. For days, various women older than me had been taking charge of my research, instructing me what to tape and what to ignore as "too filmi" (as in Bollywood film music). They had also been generously offering to "fill up" my tapes with their most cherished Pahari songs.

That morning, Sarla Upadhyay, a fine-featured woman in her fifties, took charge of my microphone and sang "Naglila" or "the snake play," a song that recounted how, as a boy, Krishna had vanquished the Serpent King Kaliya yet spared his life on account of the Serpent Queen Champa's petition. Sarla told me that many upper-caste women knew this song and might sing it as part of their morning routines. When I asked what genre of song this was, Sarla explained that this was a Gujarati song, also known as *byāgare* or a morning song. As other women had already explained to me, *gopis* in their Gujarati form are associated with the mornings because that was when they used to go out to sell their milk, curds, or butter. Because cowherd women are celebrated for their devotion to Krishna, songs associated with them could also fit the larger genre of devotional *bhajan*.

Perhaps Sarla's mention of Gujaratis was what prompted the groom's mother's half-sister, Suman, to take the microphone next. Suman was an animated woman in her late thirties, with a ready smile and dangling gold earrings. At a time when I was in my early thirties and regularly chastised for being unmarried, I had liked Suman at once, on our first meeting, when she declared that she was not married and was not interested in ever getting married, either. Grinning now, Suman started in on another song that she also identified as being of the genre of Gujarati and morning song. She sang in a soft, clear voice, the melody weaving hypnotically. Her companions didn't seem to really know the song, though, and she didn't bother to repeat the lines twice. Instead, the others sat listening appreciatively. Each verse ended with the filler word *jī*—a form of respect that added to a rhyming, repetitive force. Occasional verses used a larger filler chunk, *bhalā jī*, which roughly translates as "how fine!"

The song begins with Krishna asking his wife, Rukmani, to loan him her physical form (*rūp*), but Rukmani says that forms can't be lent and offers him her ornaments instead.

dīye dīye rukmaṇ rupe de aṇe bhes denā badalāi bhalā jī .
 “Give, Rukmani,
 give me your form.
 I want to switch my looks.”
 How fine.

“Take my jewels, Krishna,
 Take my silver ornaments too.
 But you can’t borrow a form.”
 How fine.

Krishna put on her jewels.
 He put on her silver ornaments, too.
 He switched his looks.
 How fine.

All dressed up as a woman, Krishna makes his way to the Gujarī Chandravali’s village and looks around for her house.

Asking, seeking
 He made his way through the lanes:
 “Which is Chandravali’s house?”

“Jasmine flowers in the courtyard,
 A grand entrance, a verandah:
 That is Chandravali’s house.”

Asking, seeking,
 He arrived at the outer entrance:
 “Is this Chandravali’s house?”

“Jasmine flowers in the courtyard,
 A grand entrance, a verandah:
 This is Chandravali’s house.”

The promise of fragrance and beauty in the enclosed inner courtyard lures Krishna in through the outer entrance. When he arrives, he presents himself to Chandravali as her long-lost sister, but she is mystified.

“Come sister,
give me a hug:
Your little sister is here.”
How fine.

“When were you born?
When were you married?
Since when have I had a little sister?”
How fine.

“When *you* were married,
Then *I* was born.
Since then you’ve had a little sister.”
How fine.

Though puzzled, Chandravali is eager to be hospitable to this new-found sister, offering the traveler a hot bath and food.

“I’ll fetch some cold water
and make it hot.
Come sister, let’s take a bath.”

“I’ve already bathed
in the Ganga and Yamuna.
Why don’t you bathe and I’ll scrub your back?”

“I’ll winnow special *jhinjhan* rice
and cook us a meal.
Come sister, let’s eat.”

“I don’t eat rice
on *ekādashi* days.
Why don’t you eat and I’ll feed you?”

Krishna is mimicking a pious woman who bathes in sacred rivers and fasts on appropriate days of the lunar cycle (like *ekādashi*, the eleventh day). He tenderly shows his sisterly affection by offering to scrub Chandravali’s back and feed her with his own hands. Trusting in this loving sister, Chandravali makes up a bed for them, which is just what Krishna has come for. At first, he improvises an

excuse for his male body, but as she touches different body parts in a speedy succession, he has no chance to account for himself.

“I’ll shake out the covers
and prepare the bed.
Come sister, let’s sleep.”

First, Chandravali felt
his legs:
“Your legs are made like a man’s!”

“When I was young,
mother died.
Out grazing cattle, my feet became like a man’s.”

Second Chandravali felt
his head:
“You have a man’s lock!”

Third, Chandravali felt
his chest:
“Your chest has a man’s yellow shawl!

Fourth, Chandravali felt
his thighs:
“You’re wearing a man’s cloth!”

All of the sudden, after his thighs are identified, the song’s action changes to eating.

“Eight measures of flour,
Nine measures of ghee:
Let’s enjoy sweet pancakes and savory *pakoṛās* together.”

In much Indian folklore, as A. K. Ramanujan has pointed out, eating is a sexual metaphor; as he writes, “The word for eating and (sexual) enjoyment have often the same root, *bhuj* in Sanskrit. Sexual intercourse is often spoken about as the mutual feeding of male and female” (Ramanujan 1982:272). Research among Krishna devotees in Govardhan, a major pilgrimage center associated with Krishna in North India, extends such an understanding of food to a devotional framework—as Paul Toomey (1990) observes, food is used as both a metaphor and a

metonym for the intense emotions of love and devotion bonding Krishna and disciples.

Mixing up ghee and flour to fry delicious sweets and savories seemed evidence of Chandravali's assent to sharing sensual treats with Krishna. As Suman explained years later, with a significant look at Durga Pandit, her older half-sister, "He knows the night is going to be really long; he orders all this food so they can keep eating." "Oh, *that's it!*" responded her sister, shouting with laughter.

As Krishna and Chandravali share this prodigious amount of food, Chandravali's courtyard is visited by other women too. In what appears to be Krishna's voice, Chandravali is informed of her visitors:

"A washerwoman has come to your courtyard.
A half-year's heaps of clothes are to be washed:
Wash them all in one night."

Asking for a half-year's worth of work to be performed, Krishna uses his powers to prolong the night to six months. The erotic connotations of this women's work were unexplained in the song, but rooted in cultural practice (cf. Toelken 1995:48–68). In 1991, washing clothes by hand while squatting by a stream still punctuated most village women's lives, and the short wooden bat they used while washing often stood in as a mock phallus in bawdy skits. No sooner than the washerwoman finishes her work of submerging, sudsing, thumping, rinsing, twisting, squeezing, and spreading out the huge pile of clothes, than another woman arrives:

"A wool-carding woman comes to your courtyard.
A half-year's worth of wool is to be carded:
fluff it all in one night."

Again, the metaphor of carding was left to the imaginations of listeners who might have observed two brushes rubbing against each other, flattening, stroking, extending, and fluffing out wool until it was soft and light.

A whole year later, Chandravali remonstrates:

"You tricked me once, Blue-black one,
You tricked me twice.
Turn this night into morning."
How fine.

The song ended here, grins still sticking to the faces of the assembled women. Sarla observed that she had never heard this song in full before, and Suman explained, “I learned this from my mother.”

With a literal earnestness I now wince to recall, I censoriously asked why, if Krishna tricked women this way, he should be worshipped. “Oh, it’s not just Chandravali, he has 16,000 other *gopis*,” the women sitting around Suman assured me. “Sixteen thousand or 360?” someone else asked. Gayatri Upadhyay, one of the other cousins-in-law present, quickly summarized a story in which the sage Durvas Rishi challenged Krishna, “If you’re really pure and celibate then walk through the Yamuna river.” Krishna walked right through, but when Durvas Rishi followed the waters closed up. “It’s all God’s *lila*, a divine play,” the women agreed. In judging Krishna as a philandering man I had clearly missed the point: his charm and shape-shifting were all part of an ongoing cosmic playfulness between God and devotees (cf. Sax 1995). Indeed, the *gopis*’ relations with him, where they often pine, can be viewed as an allegory of the soul’s separation from God (Hardy 1983).

That morning though, Chandravali’s song evoked the rich theme of sexual impropriety. As I often found, in the impromptu sequences of songs that emerged at gatherings, the intertextuality between songs could elaborate retellings around a particular theme. Krishna’s encounter with Chandravali inspired the women to move on to another song that I taped in many variants, where a passing soldier is propositioned by a woman he addresses as Nainavali or “the one with the eyes.” They then went on to sing about a woman whose libidinous younger brother-in-law tries to lure her into a tent, while her husband remains oblivious. Continuing with my ethnographic earnestness, I asked if such relationships ever happened between wives and their husband’s younger brothers (it is a common theme in North Indian folklore). “Oh no!” the women assured me, “these things don’t happen here.” Gayatri reflected a moment, then suggested, “Maybe this happened to someone, sometime. And then we all sing about it.”

I came to tape many versions of the songs about the bantering soldier and also of the horny brother-in-law, but the song of Chandravali remained a rare text for which I recorded no variant. Looking through libraries in the intervening years, I found mention of Chandravali—also spelled Candravali—as Radha’s rival in Bengali compositions surrounding Krishna, indicating that she

exists in other regional traditions beyond Kangra (Delmonico 1995; Wulff 1977). In a Bengali song, Krishna has failed to show up at a tryst with Radha; he has spent the night instead with Chandravali, and shows up wearing her blue-silk sari (Wulff 1997:72–73). This song also echoes the theme of cross-dressing, though here it is the outcome rather than pretext for Krishna's liaison.

Chandravali With Oral Literary Criticism

Years went by without my encountering Chandravali again in the field. Her song clearly had wider circulation in Kangra, for Meenakshi Sharma's study of Krishna songs devotes two pages to Chandravali Gujarī (1989:120–21). Although Sharma does not reproduce the text, her comments about Chandravali's identity indicate her knowledge of the same—or a similar—song. As Sharma writes, "In the whole group of Gujarīs, Chandravali Gujarī is so especially entrancing in her beauty that he [Krishna] takes on various forms to try and trick her. He is so keen to woo her that he even takes on the form of a woman. Although he's discovered in the end, he has accomplished his goal" (1989:120).

I continued to visit my mother and friends, and my continued interest in this song—and others—also resulted in retellings generated by my presence. Visiting Kangra in 2004, I took along a file of selected songs, including Chandravali's song, that I hoped to bring together in a book. My old friend and collaborator Urmilā Devi Sood, or Urmilājī, was as always eager to look through and listen to songs. Leafing through my transcriptions in the Devanagari script, Urmilājī hit upon Chandravali's song.

"For so long I've been wanting to remember this song!" Urmilājī exclaimed, a smile breaking out over her face. She pulled the file closer, as though to embrace the text. "I didn't have anyone to sing it with, and I'd forgotten the root verse," she explained. "See, if you hear a song a lot, you make it your own, little by little. You remember the story, you sing the tune. But if you don't hear others sing it, you can forget how it goes."

Urmilājī's comment underlined that this song was rarely sung. Also, her words were a reminder that songs are a form of collective memory (Halbwachs 1980), sustained through cohorts of singers; indeed I often heard older women claim that if they had no one to reconstruct particular song texts with, they forgot the song.

Squinting at my transcription, Urmilājī recreated a singing community for herself. She sang to Suman's words though using a

different melody. Coming across unfamiliar verses, she sometimes shook her head, inserting her own version. Having been reminded of how another woman sang, she was ready to share with me the song as she recalled it, complete with divergences from the text in her lap. She also elaborated on the song, treating me to her own oral literary criticism (Dundes 1966). As I had previously observed, for Urmilaji as for many other Kangra women, to explain a song was not to elaborate on symbolic depth but rather to retell it as a story, spelling out implicit meanings and logical connections (Narayan 1995).

Though Urmilaji was seeking to remember the root verse or *dhak* “from which the song grows its leaves and flowers,” when she sang her own version, this starting verse turned out to be different, using the name Shyam—the dark-hued one—for Krishna.

dāḍī manīā shyām moochhā manāēā bhes liyā chandrāvalīā jī
 Shyam shaved off his beard,
 he shaved his moustache.
 He took on the look of Chandravali.

Here Krishna’s stripping of visible male marks is highlighted. Instead of borrowing his wife Rukmani’s clothes and ornaments, he mirrors Chandravali’s own beauty as her would-be sister.

Similarly, visiting Kangra in 2007, I stopped in to see Sangeeta Devi, a woman from Durga Pandit’s settlement who had generously helped me during fieldwork almost fifteen years earlier. She had not been in good health in the intervening years and was practically blind, but she carried an air of amusement. As we chatted, we somehow got to talking about Chandravali, and Sangeeta Devi broke out into a laugh. She immediately began singing, as though being reminded of this song made its presence so compelling that it had to be unfolded to the very end. Her melody was closer to Suman’s.

Sangeeta Devi’s version told the familiar story but again a little differently. She elaborated on Krishna’s transformation into a woman across five delightful verses: he orders eye makeup (*sūrmā*) and perfume (*attar*) from wandering peddlers; he orders a full, long skirt stitched with a brocade border; and he decorates a long wrap with gold spangles. Then, he paints a woman’s *bindī* on his forehead and adorns himself in the sixteen ways of a married woman (*solah śringār*)—which would include earrings, bracelets, necklaces, ribbons, and various kinds of makeup. Then he sets out to cross the

river. The boatman recognizes him despite his disguise, bemusedly asking why he, Krishna, should need a way across (playing on the image of salvation as “crossing over”) and so Krishna jumps across the flowing Yamuna. The cowherds out grazing cattle and an old woman collecting dung cakes for fuel don’t recognize him, though, when they tell him how to identify Chandravali’s house. As usual, she’s puzzled by a little sister showing up, and the song proceeds much as I had previously encountered it until they get into bed. After Sangeeta Devi observed, “We don’t like to sing from here on when there are girls around,” she launched into a fuller account of the dialogue between Chandravali and Krishna as she discerns that he is a man. He tells her that his feet became masculine after the austerities (*tapasyā*) that he did out in the forest (echoing a body of songs mentioning Goddess Gaurja’s forest austerities to win her groom, Shiva). He tells her that he’s wearing a man’s cord around his waist because in the region he’s from, it’s now the custom for women to wear these too. He goes on to explain that his chest hasn’t filled out because he hasn’t yet borne children. Though Sangeeta Devi omitted the sequence of cooking and eating together, and the visits from workers of different castes, she included verses I hadn’t heard before. Chandravali’s husband sits hunched over by the gateway as six months pass by without fresh food or water, and the cowherds hunch over, waiting out six months in the forest too.

Sangeeta Devi took great pleasure in the song, but she did not elaborate much beyond explaining unfamiliar words rooted in past practices: the wandering perfume sellers (*gāndhis*) who Krishna summons, the brocade border (*chhapuā lon*) on Krishna’s skirt, and the man’s waistcord (*tarāgi*) hidden under his disguise. She ended by commenting with a smile, “This was Krishna’s *līla*, his play; he had so many queens, all his life.”

Urmilaji, though, often expanded on songs through narrative commentary. She explained, “Chandravali was very beautiful and she did a lot of ‘acting,’ putting on airs.” Using the English word ‘acting,’ Urmilaji seemed to portray Chandravali as a glamorous, slightly petulant film star. “She was haughty,” Urmilaji continued. “She wouldn’t talk to Krishna and so he decided to trick her.” Urmilaji went on to describe how Krishna found Chandravali by the fragrant sandalwood tree (as opposed to Suman’s jasmine bush) in her courtyard. The sweet scents—whether of sandalwood or jasmine—seem to surround Chandravali’s lustrous allure. In Urmilaji’s version, Chandravali sat spinning in the courtyard as

Krishna appeared. “In those days,” Urmilaji commented, “women did a lot of spinning.”

Assuring me that it was absolutely plausible that Chandravali might not have known that she had a younger sister, Urmilaji explained: “In the past, women would have nine or ten or twelve children. Daughters would grow up, and then the mother and the daughter would be giving birth at the same time. So one sister could have been born after another sister was married and if that sister were married far away, how would they know of each other? See, in the past, women were sometimes married so far away across the mountains that they might never be able to visit home in their whole lifetime. I’ve heard it said that when a bride came from far away, the wood for her cremation was packed in a bundle and sent at the time of her marriage!”

Urmilaji continued by noting that the fine *jhinjhan* rice that Chandravali cooks for Krishna was now displaced by other modern varieties and remembered only in songs. Coming to the washerwoman’s arrival, Urmilaji observed that lower castes did not enter the house in the past but rather stood outside in the courtyard. She recounted how big bundles of clothes used to be kept for washermen engaged in service (*gaḍi kalothi/jajmāni*) relations with higher castes (cf. Parry 1979:67–70). In her version it was not just six months of clothes, but *twelve years* worth of clothes being vigorously washed through the night.

“Chandravali admits that Shyam has conquered her,” Urmilaji concluded. “She says ‘You tricked me this way, and you tricked me that way.’ He tricked her first by arriving in the form of her sister. Then he tricked her again by making the night so long; twelve entire years long!”

While my transcriptions in the Devanagari script were a matter of delighted recognition, curiosity, and even amused comment by women singers like Urmilaji who could read, whenever I happened to bring out cassettes from previous years, these were greeted with an outpouring of emotion. Hearing the voices of old women who had since died could especially bring tears to the eyes of their surviving family members. Durga Pandit, a half-sister of Suman’s (though not the groom’s mother) even gathered relatives to listen to a tape of songs from an aunt-in-law who had passed on. Eyes downcast, somberly listening, the group of women then responded by singing related songs sparked by the same themes.

Visiting in 2004, I mentioned to Durga Pandit that I had taped her half-sister's song of Chandravali, and she wanted to hear it too. She knew of the song, she said, but she didn't know how to sing it; as she explained, her sister had been born of a different mother and they did not grow up singing the same songs together. I brought over the tape, and Durga Pandit borrowed her older daughter-in-law's portable tape recorder. She set this out on the verandah and started playing the tape, twiddling the knob to the highest volume. Her second daughter-in-law called us in to eat lunch just as the song began. I noticed nervously that this daughter-in-law's husband was home that day, already sitting cross-legged by the hearth with a rimmed steel *thālī* before him. Usually, women's songs were sung amid other women at ritual gatherings. I worried: would this gray-ing, mild-mannered man find the song risqué? What were the ethics of my playing Suman's voice before a male in-law without asking her permission? "Shouldn't I turn the tape off?" I asked weakly, standing in the doorway. "Oh no, we'll listen as we eat," assured Durga Pandit. As her daughter-in-law ladled fragrant, steaming rice and aromatic dhal onto our steel *thālis*, Durga Pandit cocked her head, smiling and laughing at Krishna's deceptions. Her son seemed oblivious, but I could not relax as I worried about inappropriate retellings in an altered context.

When I next visited, I found Durga Pandit all dressed up in a shiny gray synthetic outfit, all set to go out. "Is your taxi still here?" Durga Pandit enquired. "Let's go visit Suman!" It turned out that she also wanted to look in on a sick niece with appendicitis who lived in her sister's extended family home. We piled into the boxy van and wove our way for over an hour along the mountain roads, eventually emerging with gifts of fruit and biscuits, as well as my file of transcriptions and the tape containing Chandravali's song.

Suman greeted us with laughing warmth. After plying us with hot tea and refreshments, she asked what progress I had made through the years with my book on songs. We played the tape and she looked over my written version of her performance years earlier. There was one word I particularly hoped she could illuminate. When Krishna asks for his wife's jewels (*gahane*) he also asks for her *bande*. Various women I had consulted when transcribing came up with different explanations for this archaic word—maybe this was really *boonde*, or teardrop earrings, they suggested. Else, elaborating on the word *band* or "fastened," they improvised that this could be some kind of belt or a blouse with ties at the

back that women wore in the past. Suman thought it was a kind of silver ornament that women once wore, and so I abide by her gloss. The key issue was that Krishna borrowed women's clothes for his disguise.

Like Urmilaji and Sangeeta Devi, Suman explicated her song in terms of past practices. Remarking on the verse of Chandravali preparing the bed, she explained that in the past, mattresses were rolled up during the day and spread out for sleep. She also recalled the previous social hierarchy when lower castes came to the house to perform their services, explaining that this was why the washer-woman and the wool carder woman showed up in the courtyard.

"Mother used to sing this," she informed her teenage niece who was recuperating from her appendicitis operation and sat wanly looking on. "Mother said that her mother sang this song. It's an old song, from the old times."

"Do you and your sisters know this song?" I asked the niece.

She shook her head. "We don't know any of these old songs."

"These days girls are too busy studying and watching television!" asserted Durga Pandit, echoing a complaint I often heard older singers make. "The times have changed." I could only reflect how different everyone's lives—including mine—had been in the early 1980s, when I first became interested in collecting Kangra songs, and television was unknown in the valley. At that time, local songs had been part of a taken-for-granted aspect of ritual life; although songs contained the past then too, there seemed to be a greater continuity with that past. By the twenty-first century, though, the imaginative break engineered by education in the national language and widespread exposure to other sorts of lives through the media had rendered local songs such as Chandravali's as clearly belonging to a past time.

Retelling the Past

That oral history can be transmitted through folklore genres is an established insight (Scheub 1987; Tonkin 1992; Vansina 1985). Here I have explored a song of a genre where mythological presence spills into legendary time, evoking a generalized past rather than any particular historical events. Although none of the singers I knew claimed Chandravali as a real historical figure living in a particular Kangra village, nonetheless, *byāgar* or Gujari as a genre of Pahari song seemed saturated with a connection to a regional past. This connection has several dimensions.

First, the past can be summoned up in the very linguistic terms present in a text. In the case of Chandravali, I learned about the concrete details of bygone kinds of clothes and ornaments, varieties of rice, ways of making beds, and forms of labor associated with particular castes. The very term “Gujari” for the kind of song was a painful reminder of the current absence of Muslim Gujars in most Kangra villages and would sometimes evoke stories of which areas of villages they had lived in. With downcast eyes and hushed voices, older women would sometimes remember how Partition in 1947 led many Gujars to migrate across the mountains to the newly formed state of Pakistan while others who stayed on were brutally murdered amid anti-Muslim riots.

Second, the plot of the song drew on practices and feelings associated with the past, for example child marriage, the lack of communication across distances in the mountains, the hospitality lavished on visitors walking far distances, and caste relations that led lower castes to the courtyards of their patrons. To understand why people behaved in particular ways in the song, then, was to recall how ancestors had once lived. Retelling the story of Chandravali, singers spoke not of Krishna mythology set in the Braj region, but of the ways their ancestors had lived in Kangra.

Third, the transmission of a song linked a singer backward in time with female exemplars and co-performers. Women often spoke about how their songs connected them to other women of the past—beloved relatives and generalized women alike. Suman, for example, linked her performance to her mother and grandmother. Similarly, an old woman I called Tayi, or Aunty, told me that through singing, “you get some solace (*tasalli*) in your heart, that there have been times like this for other hearts in the past.” Yet even as the songs carried a connection to the past, they also could be used as a commentary on the present, offering moral instruction to younger women. As one woman said, “Suppose I bring a daughter-in-law here tomorrow, she’ll say [in a delicate, lowered voice] ‘Hah! My mother-in-law is terrible! She does this, she does that.’ But if I convey these songs to her then it’ll come into her brain, ‘Oh no! Oh brother! These people had even worse times than me. My situation is good after all! I shouldn’t carry on this way.’ Do you understand now? It’s for this reason that stories of the past, the songs of the past, should be listened to, should be sung, transmitted from one person to another so the singers can say, ‘Look at the hardships! These are such wonderful songs. Such touching songs!’”

Fourth, my own attempts to record this oral tradition amid the flow of time establishes it as oral history; as Schneider has pointed out, “[O]ral history is both the act of recording and the record that is produced” (2002:62). My own returns to Kangra through time and attempts to find illumination on this text were folded into the memories carried with retellings, and sparked further retellings. By eliciting versions, commentaries, and comparisons, scholars themselves clearly generate retellings from others in the field. At the same time, scholars produce their own retellings in translations across languages and into publications.

I have focused on how this song points backward, over the horizon of a vanished past, and moves forward through channels, like this volume, that may include an anthropologist’s transmutations. Equally one could explore how a song evokes shared cultural assumptions that endure through time and space, for example the figure of the endlessly surprising and adorable divine prankster, Krishna. The first morning that I heard Suman sing, I had tried to draw her out into more commentary. I asked, “But *why*? Why does Krishna trick Chandravali?”

Suman had shrugged, laughing. “He’s Krishna, after all!” she said, implicitly invoking a rich cultural history of retellings.

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