Everyday Creativity: Singing goddesses in the Himalayan foothills, by Kirin Narayan

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Kirin Narayan’s *Everyday Creativity* explores women’s devotional songs as affective and aesthetic labour in the Kangra Valley of Himachal Pradesh, India. Having first heard upper-caste Kangra women’s songs as a teenager in 1975, Narayan draws on over three decades of fieldwork in the region and pays homage to the women who brought her into their lifeworlds and into the field of anthropology, some of whom did not live to see the fruits of her labour in the form of this rich ethnography.

‘How strange that people elsewhere will come to know of our songs just as they are being forgotten here’ (p. xxiii), remark Narayan’s interlocutors in Kangra. Indeed, the text gives voice to generations of singing practices that are on the verge of disappearing from the landscape of these Himalayan foothills. My own fieldwork in the region (2017-2019) came at a time when Narayan notes that changing musical tastes, restructured social relations, and vast economic shifts in post-liberalisation India have left these songs to recede from their traditional place during weddings, birth celebrations, and other gatherings. The indelible impact of technological transformations on everyday sociality – from the allure of an evening viewing of a series on television slowly replacing collective singing, to raucous DJs playing *bhangra* songs at contemporary wedding celebrations – makes this text ‘a sort of historical account of the villages and lives in that Palampur area’ (Narayan, personal communication, 14 December 2019).

Nevertheless, Narayan shows how Pahari (ie ‘mountainous’) songs are living entities rather than static oral texts to be transmitted in new contexts. When women get together, they combine ‘pooled memory and joined voices’ (p. 143) to infuse long-established narratives with their interpretations of song melodies and lyrics that are informed by their
own life circumstances. Such ‘playful realignments’ (p. 143) through singing constitute the heart of what Narayan calls ‘everyday creativity’ – the small, seemingly mundane acts through which women collectively reimagine the stories that organise their social and cosmological lifeworlds. As such, Kangra women become masters of improvisation, ‘playing with possibilities within cultural rules’ (p. 29). Emphasising women’s agency through improvisation, Narayan reclaims the concept of creativity from the ‘Big-C’ association of creativity with innovation, arguing instead that through the iterative rendering of familiar stories, women’s songs constitute a transformative mode of joyful expression and ritual cleansing through which singers and hearers are able to conjure, nurture and shape their relationship with the divine.

The book organises the exploration of songs metaphorically through segments of the structure of a plant – the base, fruits and head – with each chapter addressing different aspects of the way singing intersects with and impacts on women’s lives. The elements of the plant’s structure map on to both the genres of songs that undergird different ritual events and the stages of lives that women pass through on their way to becoming expert singers. After tracing her journey to the study of Kangra women’s songs in Chapter 1, in Chapter 2 we learn of the ‘base’ of the plant as the larger historical and social ground upon which women’s songs gain special significance as a form of ritual work marking distinct genres of events in Kangra. Narayan points to the extensive history of men’s outmigration from the region, to work in the army and more recently in industrial jobs in cities, making women’s labour, of which singing is a crucial part, ‘especially needed and valued’ (p. 40).

Four subsequent chapters organise the various ‘fruits’ of singing as they emerge through the stages in women’s lives. Chapter 3, ‘Attaining’, explores the fruits of service (seva) through songs of Shiva and Parvati (who takes on different guises as Gauran, Gaurja, and Sati). Focusing on one singer, Sita-devi, this genre of wedding songs speaks of both service to god as well as service to the family that is required when women pass from their natal homes to their marital homes. Becoming a bride is the first major shift in the life cycle for women after girlhood, and the songs about Shiva and Parvati (Gauran) reflect the careful manoeuvres required to secure women’s futures through marriage. These songs speak to the power of Parvati’s strong will, which mirrors women’s journeys
towards attaining (*paana*) status as wives and maintaining happy homes once they are married.

In Chapter 4, ‘Playing’, we learn of songs about Krishna as sung through one of Narayan’s closest interlocutors, Jagadamba Mataji. These songs, referred to as ‘laughing and playing’ (*hansnu-khelnu*) songs, are regularly sung at boys’ birthday celebrations and represent the second desired phase of women’s lives: becoming mothers of sons. The pressure to give birth to sons and the double-sided axis of anxiety and joy that motherhood encompasses is mirrored by the comedic songs of Krishna’s exploits and adventures. Through the voice of Jagadamba Mataji, we learn that singing is an interactive conversation with the gods. Singing provides a space for the expression of one another’s joys and sorrows (*dukh-sukh karna*) in a context where women’s lives are constrained by gendered and caste hierarchies that force them to toil continuously in their homes, on farms, and, for many women these days, in jobs outside the home. The comedic and erotic songs of Krishna evoke both raucous laughter and happiness even as they affirm forms of high-caste patriarchy that stigmatise both childlessness and the birth of daughters. Still, songs about Krishna are an important locus for play, allowing women to engage in hilarious impersonations and insults that reaffirm ‘the great social salve in being silly and laughing very hard together’ (p. 143).

Chapter 5, ‘Going’, draws on songs about Saili, the basil plant goddess, as sung by Janaki-devi, describing the importance of singing as everyday ritual work in the pleasuring of the gods and the reproduction of familial and community bonds of reciprocity. Just as the basil plant dies each winter to be reborn in the spring, so do women toil in the fields and in the home while singing songs of praise. The worship of Saili, traditionally associated with assertions of upper-caste Rajput identity, is also in keeping with gendered expectations that place restrictions on women’s mobilities and decisions, including the remonstration of son-less mothers and the association of widowhood with impurity. Janaki-devi’s memories of her childhood in a Brahman village, and the pain and sorrow that accompanied her through life after being widowed at the age of fourteen, speaks to the power of songs to express suffering even as they reaffirm women’s resilience. Songs of toil and hardship, including those sung during the gruelling work performed in the fields during
paddy transplantation (*ur laana*), are waning in the valley as young women shift away from Pahari folksongs in everyday life.

Chapter 6, ‘Bathing’, features songs by Asha-devi about the end of the life cycle and the hope of reaching heaven through song. Here we learn of the equal importance of listening and singing and how immersion in sound entails potential transcendence and peacefulness garnered through devotion. This phase of elderly life, and its concomitant closures intersects with what Narayan describes as the irrevocable changes wrought in the era of liberalisation: amongst them, a loss of Pahari songs in favour of Hindi and Punjabi music, and the ambivalence of ‘the new prosperity that [is] unevenly transforming the valley’ (p. 210).

A stanza of one song in particular anchors the chapters and encapsulates the interrelatedness of devotion with women’s ability to transform their situations through song across the three major stages of their lives: ‘An unmarried girl who sings will gain a home and groom. A married woman will play with sons. An old woman who sings this will go to heaven. Listening, praising, is to bathe in the Ganga’ (p. 98). Speaking to the themes of gaining, playing, going, and bathing, we are transported through the heart-warming and, at times, heart-wrenching stories of Narayan’s interlocutors. Starting and ending with reference to Lila Abu-Lughod’s classic work on Bedouin women’s songs in *Veiled Sentiments* (1986), released at the beginning of Narayan’s foray into Kangra women’s songs, the text speaks to the multivocality inherent in women’s songs and to their multifaceted power to act as valves for cathartic release, celebration and transformation through their creative practice of song and dance.

By framing women’s singing as a joyful practice (*sukkini*) – or ‘improvisation for delight’ (p. 225) – we see how singing has the ability to invoke pleasure and beauty even as it reinscribes the constraints of caste and gender. Narayan’s keen ear and subtly interwoven analysis illumines the affordances of an ethnographic perspective that can only be gained through sustained, diachronic engagement with a place. In the coda, ‘Reaching the Head’, we are reminded of how this work got started in Narayan’s own childhood and of how through decades of interaction with particular singers she has learned not just about songs but *with* songs (p. 217). Today, women’s songs have imprinted themselves onto new forms of social action through women’s groups (*mahila mandal*),
NGOs, and women’s rights activists, all of whom are reimagining classic Pahari songs for contemporary issues. Thus, even while songs as captured by Narayan are being re-envisioned in contemporary Kangra, we are reminded of the fact that songs have always been both transformed through the skilful practice of individual singers and transformative in their capacity to reconstitute social bonds between women, men, and the divine.

Building on Narayan’s earlier theoretical contributions to oral storytelling, *Everyday Creativity* remains focused on amplifying the voices of singers, making this feminist ethnography widely accessible and of interest to ethnomusicologists, folklorists and anthropologists alike.

**Reference**

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