The Social Life of Transcriptions:
Interactions around Women's Songs in Kangra

Kirin Narayan

Moving oral traditions into the domain of the printed word involves a first step of transcription.[1] Anyone who has transcribed recordings from fieldwork will recollect the grinding effort demanded by this task. One listens again and again: striving to catch the meaning and tone of words as they gallop past, struggling to coax a herd of words into orderly lines, straining to remain attentive to other sounds—comments, interjections, interruptions, parallel performances —that are simultaneously shaping a text. Yet when working with a language other than one intended for publication, assembling a transcription can almost immediately give way to the work of refining a translation and the challenge of embedding a text in the analytical frameworks of presentations and published writings. In this essay, though, I pause to consider the practice of transcription, and the material artifacts made when moving oral tradition into written form. Drawing on fieldwork with singers and their songs in Kangra, Northwest India, I ask: what sorts of social interactions and cultural insights are generated around the laborious process and the raw product of transcribing oral texts?

At first glance, transcribing another's words might appear a perfectly mechanical task— one that voice recognition software could seamlessly accomplish if programmed to understand the language and the idiosyncrasies of a particular speaker. Yet our choices for the form of transcription emerge from our own and local biases of what certain genres of texts look like, and decisions on presentation shape how readers read, recognize, and re-imagine oral texts from the page (Fine 1984; Finnegan 1992:194-207; Tedlock 1983). Further, the form of recording that was used also affects the resulting text; for example, as Dennis Tedlock's (1983) groundbreaking work on transcription of Zuni oral narratives has shown, dictation (as with Boasian handwritten texts) radically influences the spoken tempo of performance (38), while recording devices are an altering presence in their own right (298-99). Following Tedlock, many scholars have striven for

greater fidelity to oral performance by adapting the use of different fonts, formats, notes, and asides in producing transcribed texts. Depending on the intended purpose, folk narratives, life stories, oral testimonies, plays, songs, and other performative genres that have been adapted to written form all demand different creative challenges—yet once written up, the decisions made en route may vanish. As Ruth Finnegan writes (1992:199), "oral-derived texts are sometimes presented as authoritative, but without knowing the transcribing strategies it is dangerous to accept this at face value."

From the perspective of anthropologists, the transcription of others' words is part of a larger spectrum of texts generated while "writing culture" (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Fieldnotes too are rife with quotes, even if they do not carry entire stretches of oral texts. In attempting to reproduce others' words with fidelity, written transcriptions of oral traditions remain more openly recognizable as the creation of *others* than fieldnotes (which also may be others' creations, though they are usually retold in the author's voice). Particularly when written down in a script that the performers themselves are able to read—or understand when read aloud—transcriptions can represent mutually recognizable fragments of shared cultural knowledge, and so are invaluable for eliciting oral literary criticism (Dundes 1966; Narayan 1995) and for more generally facilitating interpretive collaborations (cf. Lassiter 2008; Lawless 1993). In a tribute to Julie Cruikshank's *The Social Life of Stories* (1998), I think of these fieldwork interactions as an aspect of the social life of transcriptions.

A few years ago, the Belgian journal *Interval(le)s* published a special issue on "Interdisciplinary Transcriptions" (2008) that brought together writers and scholars from many fields to showcase a wide span of disciplinary engagements with the process and products of transcription. In an essay for that issue, I was inspired to reflect on aspects of transcribing and translating a Hindu holy man's teaching stories (Narayan 2008b) that I had not elaborated on when writing about these stories for my first book (Narayan 1989). That essay made me also think more closely about transcribing women's songs in Kangra in the Northwest Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh, India. Translating stories, I had not lingered over shades of meaning around each word with quite the same intensity as when attempting to translate songs as a form of oral poetry, and so transcriptions in the original language had not played the same central and ongoing role in interactions. My Devanagari transcriptions of Kangra songs—whether as scribbled pages of notebooks, or as more neatly copied pages—have been a site of sociable exchange with women. My fieldnotes remain a private stash, but these song transcriptions represent a space of shared reflection. Co-created and corrected, transcribed songs are often the product of consultation, even as their presence has given form to further conversations. My mentors and their relatives have also occasionally consulted, copied out, and even hugged these transcriptions when meeting a song. My file was once invited to a hospital bedside to while away the time and distract a patient from pain. In many ways, these transcriptions—situated at a porous interface between orality and writing—have become material talismans of continued relationships across time.

I focus here on a researcher's field-generated transcriptions of words, and for this essay will not engage the importance of music and possible musical transcriptions. So, in discussions of transcribed texts, my mentors in Kangra often sang portions aloud, queried me about the melody (*bhākh*), or suggested alternate tunes. The materiality of audio recordings—listened to

together, brought back, replayed, discussed—would require a different though related account.

While each researcher's experience with transcriptions is likely to be shaped by genre, social context, and intended goals, I now offer a few examples from my engagement with Kangra women's songs to consider how both the labor and material product of transcription—so often invisible in finished scholarly products—can be potential sites of illumination. In the pages ahead, I use "transcription" for the process, and "transcriptions" when referring to the generated texts. I set the scene by describing insights on language use that may be smoothed over in translation, but can be gained through considering the process and products of transcription. I then move on to consider the interactions generated around the transcriptions of two songs: a sung myth that evoked further narratives from one performer, and a mysterious, lyrical reflection on transience whose meaning was revealed through conversations with several different women as well another scholar's transcription and commentary on a variant.

The Language of Songs

In Kangra—as in much of village India—gatherings of women have traditionally sung together at any happy celebration, bringing auspiciousness to the event (Jassal 2012; Henry 1988; Raheja and Gold 1994). Such celebrations mark rites of passage in human lives and also in the lives of goddesses and gods through the calendar year. I was first drawn to women's collective singing at ritual events as a city teenager visiting Kangra during a summer vacation. Later, as an apprentice anthropologist and folklorist, I occasionally began to write down these songs. It was only during the summer of 1982, after my first year in graduate school, that I assembled scores of recordings and a large sheaf of transcriptions as part of a project on gendered expectations in wedding songs (*suhāg*) sung for human and divine brides; subsequently, I have returned to Kangra for intensive stretches of field research and many shorter visits, remaining in contact with singers. This span of time has continually relocated any transcriptions I have produced amid wider social changes.

Transcriptions themselves can be thought of in terms of less polished and more polished forms. Through the years, even as my cassette recorder wound forward, I was always trying to keep track of what was being sung in my notebooks. This jotting of texts—a first sketch for transcription—was often on a continuum with the jottings that would be formed into fieldnotes (cf. Emerson et al. 1995:170). Here is a fieldnote adapting a scribble I had made between songs during a Rajput boy's sacred thread (*janeu*) ceremony during the summer of 1991:

> In the cool dark interiors at these events, women sit clustered close on cotton durries. Between singing, a soft burble of conversation, the tinkle of bangles in many registers like swift trickles of icy water in the summer heat. Sharp rising cry of a child now and then. Light filtering in from the door and windows softly illumines the planes and angles of faces. When people cluster by the door on their way in or out, a darkness falls through the room as though we had all entered a tunnel. There is the sweet fragrance of lingering *dhoop*, a starchy scent of new cloth, and from the courtyard freshly cooked rice. Women are wearing shiny fabrics that one would expect to be stinky in the heat, but no. They arrive carrying plastic bags filled with

> pieces of cloth etc. for presentation. When the anthropologist pulls out her notebook dozens of
> eyes converge: what is she up to?

What was I doing? From the perspective of others, perpetual note-taking at such gatherings was surely "a strange, marginalizing activity, marking the writer as an observer rather than as a full, ordinary participant" (Emerson et al. 1995:37). For me, writing notes in English—interspersed with words on quotes in the Devanagari script—and whatever sense I could make of songs as if dictated, was a crucial first step in organizing my recordings, turning songs into written texts, and locating songs within social situations, cultural contexts, and the engagements of particular singers.

Following the training I had received in the classes of Alan Dundes, I had at first transformed these jotted transcriptions into formal texts through several steps. First, I wrote each word out in the Devanagari script.[2] The challenge here was finding appropriate spellings for the dialect, and literate interlocutors sometimes pointed out ways in which I was unconsciously Hindi-izing the sounds of words, for example writing a Hindi-like "*bahanā*" for "sisters" while the word was closer to "*bhaiṇā*" with an aspirated, almost "p" like "b" and a retroflex "ṇ." Despite the imperfections of my spelling, below each Devanagari word, I provided a rough transliteration in English—for non-Devanagari readers to be able to recognize the sounds—as well as a translation of just that word. After this word-by-word version, I attempted a freer line-by-line translation. In my notes I added observations about the context and any commentaries that I was able to gather from singers. While I earnestly labored over each of these steps as a graduate student, in subsequent years I have worked directly from the Devanagari transcriptions of songs to compose translations.

Transforming jottings into such legible sequences of words, I tried as much as possible to confer with singers themselves. During ceremonial occasions when they were busily moving from song to song, I rarely had a chance to divert singers' attention towards help with my transcriptions. During more informal occasions, singers were often happy to guide me immediately after a particular song or sequence of songs. Whenever possible, I tried to follow up with visits with the singers themselves, or else I would turn to help from singers in other households. Writing out words or returning with written words invariably triggered commentary at many levels, as I will soon illustrate through presenting two texts. My showing up again across the years and life stages often yielded deepening dimensions of interpretation.

While I usually transcribed texts myself, when faced with a daunting backlog, I occasionally employed educated local people to help out. Their comments on the process of transcription revealed perspectives on the language of songs as well as the interactions around them. For example, Vidya, who had gained an Hindi "Prabhakar" (B.A. equivalent) degree, said after attempting to transcribe an ancient Brahman woman's repertoire of mythological songs, "the thing with this language is that you can just put any word anywhere, join it together any which way. There's no strict grammar." In songs, she felt, "words are just put in. *Je! Ni! Aji!*

---

[2] While other scripts that have also been occasionally adopted for the Pahari dialect of Kangra—the Tankri script previously used by traders, or the Gurmukhi script of Punjabi, I chose Devanagari—associated with Sanskrit and now Hindi—because I had learned that script in school, and also because in contemporary Himachal Pradesh the script is often used for the mountain dialect.

What do these things mean? They're just put in for the right rhythm."[3] Vidya continued, "this language isn't Pahari, it isn't Punjabi, it isn't Hindi, it isn't anything! It's just a big mix of words." Similarly, Anju, who had returned with her family to the mountain area after studying in the plains, was at first charmed by the chance to listen to older women's songs but later confessed that these could give her a headache: "Such strange language! Such old words!" She sympathetically added, "of course you find it hard to write a book." A young man between jobs with non-governmental organizations who helped out with a few tapes was less struck by the language than the chance to overhear women's often bawdy playfulness during song sessions —"Women really joke together. I enjoyed hearing that so much!"—a reminder of the complicated gendered dimensions of transcriptions made by research assistants from Rajasthan that Ann Gold also mentions (Raheja and Gold 1994:xxx).

Songs that were more recognizably in the Pahari dialect, sung to slow melodies and without instrumentation, were usually termed "old women's songs" (*jhabrīyān de gīt*) or just old songs (*purāne gīt*). A woman could present herself as a repository of cultural knowledge by knowing such songs; she could also run the danger of appearing old-fashioned and uneducated by singing *only* such songs in Pahari. Multilingual and literate local people—like the ones who helped me transcribe—often looked over transcriptions to point out how many songs were heavily inflected with other languages, most centrally Punjabi on account of the long historical association with this adjacent plains area (Kangra was considered a hill district of Punjab from 1809 to 1966), but also Hindi and Urdu. Sanskrit words showed up more in the songs of women from Brahman Pandit families, and English words—such as "lipstick," "bus," and "motorcycle"—appeared especially in joking songs. This deep hybridity of languages in Kangra song repertoires, I later learned, had already been described in the late nineteenth century by the colonial folklorist Captain R. C. Temple (1882) who undertook a linguistic analysis of a collection of men's religious songs when Kangra was still part of Punjab: as Temple noted, the songs freely mingled Hindi, Punjabi, and the local dialect. Gathering variants and following repertoires, I came to see how, when women were multilingual, they sometimes shifted words in songs away from Pahari towards languages that gained prestige through a wider spread. Further, women who did not consider themselves *speakers* of Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, Sanskrit, or English might nonetheless be *singers* of songs that carried words in these languages.

Ironically, this hybridity can be smoothed over in a more self-conscious performance of Pahari songs. Pahari songs are also broadcast on a local radio program, and after the 1980s they became available with instrumentation in a more rollicking Bollywood aesthetic through local cassette versions (cf. Manuel 1993). Since the 1990s, brightly costumed Pahari song and dance sequences have been regularly shown on the local television channels or circulated through VCDs (Video Compact Disc) or CDs. Some of these may even be found on YouTube.[4] For example, a nostalgic song, "*Jeena Kāngre dā*" ("Oh to Live in Kangra") performed by two young smiling men with fashionable haircuts and jeans who wander about the countryside

---

[3] While these words were often ways of exhorting listeners to follow, singers also sometimes told me they were there "just to make the step."

[4] As Wagner 2013 has argued, these costumed songs frequently depict "traditional" attire and highlight the Gaddi shepherds. See also Sharma (*infra* 274).

encountering villagers in a range of more traditional outfits had received 44,816 hits as of March 9, 2015.[5]

Women singers whose repertoires have been forged around ritual occasions find the tastes of younger generations increasingly pulled toward this wider technologically mediated circulation of songs, and even at ritual occasions, a DJ (disc-jockey) with loudspeakers often drowns out women's singing. Perhaps this larger context has contributed to many singers' great generosity in granting me their knowledge and time. Taking on my education, singers firmly steered me towards the sorts of songs that they most value: songs that narrate difficulties in the lives of women (*pakhaṛu*) and also devotional songs (*bhajan*) that make sense of difficulties within a religious framework and might retell challenges faced by goddesses, gods and devotees. Such songs could teach you about life's problems, singers explained. But songs involving deities also evoke also evoke a benevolent divine presence and are cherished as a renewing source of inner peacefulness, solace, and blessings. I now turn to two such religious songs to illustrate the social life of transcriptions.

Transcription Triggering Further Narrative

During the summer of 1982, when I was researching wedding songs, my mother (who had settled in a Kangra village) took me to visit Urmila Devi Sood, a woman she had often observed leading others through songs and stories at local ritual events. We had found Urmila Devi, whom I came to know as "Urmilaji,"in the company of two younger married sisters. Learning of my project, the sisters performed three wedding songs of impressive length and beauty as their young children played together in the courtyard. One song was about the birth and marriage of Parvati, Daughter of the Mountains, who in Kangra is also known as Gauran and Gaurja. Her groom, Shiva, the Benevolent One, is also known by such names as Shankar, Senkar, and Bholenath.[6] This song is set to a melody recognizably related to the melody of the song appropriate to the moment of the Vedi rite of marriage when the husband and wife circle the sacred fire.[7]

For the song below, I include a transliteration of the largely Pahari text in which Hindi is also interspersed. My strategies for transliteration are themselves a compromise between words and accents, and should be viewed as more suggestive than authoritative. The final word at the end of each verse was "Ram." Such divine names are often added, almost like a form of punctuation in many religious songs, so accentuating the merit of "taking God's name" and also "to make the step" as singers said. Further, including Ram as an incarnation of Vishnu points to a counterpoint and continuity between Shiva and Vishnu as two major male deities worshipped in the hills:

---

[5] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEcPATE9hvs.

[6] Vividly colorful and comic accounts of this marriage are popular in "vernacular mythology" from different regions of India. See in particular Gold (2002).

[7] The Vedi portion of the marriage follows an earlier portion known as the Lagan, during which the "gift of a daughter" [*kanyā dān*] is made by the girl's father to the groom.

chandra chaṛheyā prakāsh	In the light of the rising moon,
kī bāliyā kanyā	a baby girl
janam līyā hai rām.	took birth, Ram.

jis din kanyā	The day this girl
ne janam līyā hai	was born
bāve man chintā ugameā rām	worries sprouted in her father's mind, Ram.

[*Gaurja's father sends out a Brahman as family priest to find her a good husband*]

hāth par gaḍvā	"With a waterpot in hand,
munḍe par dhotī	a cloth covering your head,
chalo var ḍhunḍan chaliye rām	set out to find the groom, Ram.

ika ban haṇḍeyā	Walk through the first forest,
dujā ban haṇḍeyā	Walk through the second forest,
kajjalī bane jo jānā rām	then go into the dark Kajjali forest." Ram.

[*The Brahman encounters an ash-smeared yogi, and doesn't recognize that this is Shiva. All the same, he follows instructions to offer gifts for an engagement*]

anga vibhūtī	Body smeared with ash,
sarp janeu	a serpent as his sacred thread,
jogiyā ne dhūnī lagāī rām	the yogi tended a sacred fire, Ram.

sāth supārī	"Seven betel nuts,
dhvaja nī narel	a flag and a coconut
main pahaleḍī bheṇt chaḍhāi rām	Here is my first offering." Ram.

[*Shiva demurs, stressing how inappropriate he would be as a match*]

rājeā dī putarī	"Please give this King's daughter
mahārājeā ko dījīe	to an even greater King—
hum dhuḍ malangīe jogī rām	I'm just a vagabond yogi rubbed in ash, Ram.

mahal chavāre	A big palace
uske rahane ko chāhīye	is what she needs to live in—
ham banon mein baiṭhe jogī rām	I'm just a yogi camped in the forest, Ram.

dariye galīche	Mats and carpets
uske baiṭhne ko chāhīye	are what she needs to sit on—
ham ghās mein baiṭhe jogī rām.	I'm just a yogi sitting on grass, Ram.
sāṭh saheliyān	Sixty girlfriends

uske phirne ko chāhīye   are whom she needs to roam with—
ham ban mein akelā jogī rām.   I'm just a yogi alone in the forest, Ram."

[*The Brahman needs payment for this service, and Shiva continues to act playfully disreputable*]

le jā brāhmaṇ   "Here Brahman, take
tu dhuḍī keḍī muṭhiyā   this fistful of ashes—
main yah o dei dakshinā denī rām   This is the sort of gift I can offer." Ram.

kyā ji karān   "What sir, will I do
terī dhuḍī keḍi muṭhiyā   with your fistful of ashes?
ghar kī brāhmaṇī bairāgī ho jāngī   My wife back home will become an ascetic.
main yah o dei dakhsiṇā na lenī rām   I won't accept this sort of gift." Ram.

le jā brāhmaṇ   "Here Brahman, accept
tu bhangā keḍā goṭnā   this pestle for grinding marijuana—
main yah o dei dakhsiṇā denī rām   This is the sort of gift I can offer." Ram.

kyā ji karān   "What Sir, will I do
tere bhangā keḍā goṭnā   with your pestle for drugs?
ghar kī brāhmaṇī pāgal hoi jāndā   My wife back home will go crazy.
main yah o dei dakhsinā na lenī rām   I won't accept this sort of gift." Ram.

le jā brāhman   "Here Brahman, accept
tu vishiyār nāg   this poisonous snake—
main yah o dei dakhsiṇā denī rām   This is the sort of gift I can offer." Ram.

kyā ji karān   "What sir, will I do
tu vishiyār nāg   with your poisonous snake?
ghar kī brāhmaṇī nu toṛ toṛ khāngā   My wife back home will be eaten up
main yah o dei dakhsiṇā na lenī rām   I won't accept this sort of gift." Ram.

le jā brāhman   "Here, Brahman, accept
tū dhan ki muṭhiyā   this handful of cash—
main yah o dei dakhsiṇā denī rām   This is the sort of gift I can offer." Ram.

de de be jajmān   "Give, give, donor,
tū dhan keḍi muṭhiyā   this handful of cash.
main yah o dei dakhsiṇā lenī rām   This is the sort of gift I'll accept." Ram.

[*The Brahman takes off with the money, and realizes Shiva's divine nature only in retrospect*]

age age chaldā	He walked forward
pichche muḍhe dekhe	then turned and looked around:
jhād sonede bād sonede	golden trees, golden bushes,
sadāshiv antaryāmi rām	all knowing eternal Shiva, Ram.

[*Shiva continues playing with forms when he shows up for the wedding*]

jānji sadāshiv	When Eternal Shiva
lagan jo āeā	came for the Lagan part of the wedding,
ang vibhūtī	his body smeared with ash,
sarp janeu	a serpent as his sacred thread,
jogī dā bes banāe rām	he had taken on the guise of a yogi, Ram.

sāṭh saheliyān	Gaurja's sixty girlfriends
pucchnā je lagiyā	began asking,
tain kīyān pāp kamāe rām	"What sort of sin did you earn?" Ram.

gaurjā rānī	Queen Gaurja
tre tre roī	wept bitterly
apane bāve de pās khaḍoī	standing before her father:
main keḍā pāp kamāe rām	"What sort of bad actions did I do?" Ram.

āī sai nāin	The female barber arrived
le main kardī	"Here, I'll fix this.
uṭha mere sadāshiv	Stand up, my Eternal Shiva
gaurjā mardī	Gaurja is dying
srishṭī dā rūp dharāo rām	put on your Creator-form." Ram.

jānji sadāshiv	When Eternal Shiva
vedī jo āeā	came for the Vedi part of the wedding,
srishṭī dā rūp dharāiā rām	He'd taken his Creator form, Ram.

sāṭh saheliyān	The sixty girlfriends
pucchnā je lagiyā	began to ask:
tain kiyān puṇ kamāe rām	"What sort of merit have you earned?" Ram.

gaurjā rānī	Queen Gaurja
khiḍ khiḍ hansdī	bursts into laughter
apane bāve de pās khaḍoī	standing before her father:
mere janam janam sab koī	"Through all my many births
tain kiyān puṇ kamāe rām	What good deeds did I do?" Ram.

I drew on the last verses in which Gauran talks to her girlfriends for my first published article (Narayan 1986:60-62). The rest of the long song remained submerged in my files. Some years later, as I selected materials for a book, I pulled the song out to join other copies of transcriptions and translations of songs with which I hoped to work. Urmilaji had become a dear friend over the years, and we had worked together on a book about all of the folktales she could recall, along with conversations about their meaning (Narayan 1997). In 2004, when I visited Kangra, I found that a difficult pregnancy had brought Urmilaji's daughter Anamika to the hospital and that Urmilaji too was camping out in the women's ward. When I asked how I might help, Urmilaji suggested that I bring my folder of songs. As she said, "songs remind us that we all have difficulties; even the gods."

Back in the hospital the next day, I pulled out the sheaf of handwritten texts in the Devanagari script accompanied by translations into English. "This is the first song I taped from you," I said to Urmilaji, opening to the song of Gaurja's birth and handing my folder across the bed. "Look at this date—1982, when I was a student." To Anamika, I said, "you probably weren't even born yet."

"Of course I was born!" objected Anamika. "I was born in 1976."

"You were really small then," I said, dimly recollecting the children who had played around Urmilaji and her sisters as they sang that long ago monsoon afternoon.

Urmilaji squinted at the Xerox of my old transcription. Eyes narrowed, a finger under each word, she sang the words in a small, high voice.

Both she and Anamika began commenting.

"See, the moment a girl is born you're already worrying about her future," Anamika said about the second verse, when worries sprout in Gaurja's father's mind. "What kind of home will you find for her? What kind of groom?"

I struggled to recollect but couldn't just then come up with a relevant Pahari proverb a man had once recited some years earlier. "Once rice is sown and a son is born—there's no leisure" (*dhān bījān kanne putra jammeyān kadhī sukh nī ondā*). I wanted to make the point that any kind of child rearing could be consuming.

"Life is difficult for a girl," said Anamika.

"Once Gaurja came of age, her father sent a Brahman off to find a groom," Urmilaji explained. "He had to travel a long distance." This long distance was indexed by the Brahman's need to carry along the essentials of travel gear: a water pot for ablutions beside any spring or stream, and also an extra length of cloth to use as a towel or against the heat. From other songs, I was familiar with the convention of naming three forests, with the third one always containing the goal.

The Brahman found someone in the third forest: a solitary yogi meditatively tending a fire, rubbed with the ash of renunciation, his torso encircled with a serpent. Here anyone familiar with images of Shiva could add in other visual details: Shiva's matted locks piled on top of his head, the sickle moon on his forehead, the deer skin on which he sat cross-legged. Though the Brahman mistook Shiva for an ordinary yogi, he mechanically went about the task that the King had commissioned him with.

"The offering is the *sagan* gift," said Anamika.

"For an engagement?" I asked.

"Here it's for an engagement, but we call it *sagan* whenever you give this gift between relatives. For example, when her sons-in-law come to visit, Mother gives them a *sagan*. Usually, a *sagan* includes dried fruit—like a dried coconut—some sweets, some cloth, like even a handkerchief, and some money."

"What about the flag and the betel nuts?" I asked, scribbling along the margins of the text.

"Shiva is a God," said Urmilaji, reminding me that even though mythology might sometimes seem on a continuum with everyday life, it also carried its own logic. "So he gets different offerings. Gods live in temples with flags, right?"

Having received this gift, Shiva at first objected to the Brahman's proposal that he marry the daughter of a King. As Urmilaji explained with a bemused smile, "he said, 'I don't even have a blade of grass of my own, and this princess is used to life in a palace!'"

Finally, Shiva agreed to the engagement, and reached about him to offer the Brahman a gift (*dān*) for his efforts as go-between. The Brahman, though, turned out to be finicky, and rejected all kinds of precious things. Ash from Shiva's own sacred fire! A chance to experience Shiva's own intoxication! He even said no to the protective serpent from around Shiva's own neck. Instead, falling in line with folklore stereotypes of a greedy Brahman, this one wanted money. Transposing earlier historical times with mythological ones, Urmilaji commented, "in those days, the Brahman would have been given gold coins (*mohur*)," with "those days" presumably referring both to the time of earlier singers as well as the ancient mythological past. The Brahman grabbed his gold coins and set off, only later realizing Shiva's identity and that *everything* around Shiva was gold. As Urmilaji said, "only then he understood that this was eternal Shiva, who controls everything from inside (*antaryāmī*)."

Urmilaji expanded on Shiva's original reluctance to marry Gaurja with an affectionate smile: "He said, 'I don't even have a blade of grass of my own, and this princess is used to life in a palace!'" These days, Urmilaji observed, many houses were grand as palaces, but at the time of the song most dwellings were humble. Later, in a cramped nearby apartment, Urmilaji went on to elaborate on a story that wasn't described in this song but was often retold during the Hariyali (or Haritalika) ritual marking Shiva and Parvati's wedding each monsoon season. This story included the background details of just how Gaurja had earned Shiva's attention. As Urmilaji said:

> She went to the forest and did all kinds of *tapasyā*, ascetic practices. She ate only *bilvā* leaves, she didn't drink water; she did all kinds of things. Then she made an image of Shiva from sand and worshipped him. Shiva came and asked her what boon she wanted. She said that she wanted him as her groom. He gave her that boon, promising to marry her.

Parvati was exemplifying cultural models that emphasized *tapasyā*—great austerity and restraint—as generating power and gaining divine attention. Urmilaji also explained more about what happened in the song text after Shiva agreed:

So the Brahman then went to Gaurja's father, the King, and he said that because the groom was so far away, he had not only made an engagement, but he had set a wedding date too. The King said, "Fine." He started preparations for the wedding.

But then, at the time of the wedding, Shiva came with a groom's party of ghosts and ghouls and crazy sprites; all horrific creatures. Everyone was aghast. Then too, Shiva was in the form of a yogi: half-naked, smeared with ash, his hair matted and wild. Snakes and scorpions were dangling from him.

The King was alarmed: "Who is this groom that the Brahman has promised my girl to?"

The Queen began to cry. "How can we give our adored daughter to this kind of groom? Let's call the wedding off!"

But the King said, "No! We gave our word. The wedding has to proceed."

Urmilaji went on to remind me that this song related to the two major steps of a traditional Kangra wedding ceremony: first the Lagan, which included the *kanyā dān*, or gift of a daughter, that is made by the girl's father to the groom, and second, the Vedi, when the husband and wife walk around the sacred fire seven times with their garments tied together. The groom's initial appearance at the Lagan is compared to the form of a mendicant yogi or Shiva. Urmilaji explained, "at this time, the groom strips down and bathes, and everyone from the bride's side has a chance to look at him, to see who he is and that he has no physical defects. They can still call off a wedding at this point." The groom then gets dressed in a simple cotton *dhotī* and wooden sandals, like those of a mendicant.[8]

For the Vedi, or the second part of the marriage, a groom in village Kangra has in recent years dressed up in a suit and shimmering gold tinsel crown. The song alluded to this transformation with the barber's wife urging Shiva to a more conventional look, his "Creator Form." Urmilaji elaborated, "he dressed in good clothes, not in that half-naked yogi form. He looked like a King—a real 'gentleman!'" Shiva took on the "gentleman" householder's creative and generative form as an outcome of the earlier phases of destruction and renunciation for which he is best known (O'Flaherty 1973). As Urmilaji had commented to my younger graduate student self when we were still largely strangers, "because Lord Shiva changed his form, the grooms nowadays do the same."

This was not the only previously transcribed text that Urmilaji shed light on through commentary in the course of those hot summer days of Anamika's confinement. In addition to expanding on songs she had herself first shared with me, she also was delighted to read transcriptions of other singers' versions of familiar songs. For example, she lit up with pleasure on encountering a long song in which Krishna dresses as a woman to impersonate a long-lost sister of the beautiful Chandravali. "It's been so long that I've been wanting to remember this song!" Urmilaji exclaimed, embracing the file. She explained that as she had no one to sing it with, she had forgotten how it began and unfolded (Narayan 2008a:85). Transcriptions of songs, I learned, could not just evoke the companionable presence of fellow singers but also a renewed imaginative connection to the song's characters who became present through singing.

---

[8] Urmilaji also pointed out that songs relating to Shiva were also sung at the time of the Yajnopavit, or sacred thread ceremony performed for boys of "twice-born" Brahman, Rajput and merchant castes, during the ritual moments when the initiate is dressed in only a shift with a satchel for alms carried over one shoulder.

Transcription and Hidden Meaning

In October 2013, in the air-conditioned hush of the American Institute of Indian Studies Ethnomusicology Archive library, I came across a book bringing together folksongs of Himachal, transcribed in the Devanagari script and summarized in Hindi. This book, *Himachali Lok Geet* (Thakur et al. 1983), had been published by Language and Culture Division of the State of Himachal Pradesh, with collectors contributing songs from different regions. Settling down at an available library desk, I began eagerly leafing through the pages in search of any songs collected in Kangra. Almost immediately, I encountered a version of a song whose beautiful melody had always captivated me, even as its enigmatic words had left me bewildered and unsure of where to place it in my writings. As I read in that quiet space, women's voices began flowing, turning, cascading, gaining volume inside my ears:

> *Rāmā chār chaṇaṇa diyā chār chaukiyān . . .*

> Rama, four sandalwood trees make four low seats,
> Rama, four sandalwood trees make four low seats.
> cloth is spread over, Rama,
> cloth is spread over.

Actually, the words before me read:

> *Syāmā chār mahendi diyā ji ḍāliyān . . .*

> Syama, four henna branches.
> The leaves wither and fall on the ground, Syama,
> the leaves wither and fall on the ground.

All the same, this was instantly recognizable as a variant of a song that I had first written down and recorded in November 1990 as a group of Brahman women sang in honor of the wedding of the sacred basil goddess, Saili. With practically every return to the singing group's company, I had enjoyed listening to this song amid an always changing sequence of songs that filled each session.

Presenting this song, I bypass transliteration, moving straight to a translation. Attempting to capture the beauty of the song as a poem on the page, I do not repeat each line twice. For the mysterious final lines of the refrain, I use the technique of incremental repetition (Hirsch 2014:304): that is, I vary the wording slightly each time to convey a deepening understanding of the meaning of "Maru Desh."

> *Rāmā chār chaṇaṇa diyā chār chaukiyān upar bichhde rumāl rāmā . . .*

> Rama, four sandalwood trees
> contain four low stools.
> > Cloth is spread over, Rama.

Those who are clever
take and make things their own, Rama.
        Fools regret in their hearts, Rama.

        My Uddho! Town of Mathura!

        What kind of place is that, Rama,
        where those who go can't ever return, Rama,
        where those who go can't turn around
        to come back?

        That is Maru Desh, Rama,
        that is the desolate country.

Rama, four shades of henna
on four branches.
Color withers, scattering across the earth, Rama,

Those who are clever,
take and make things their own, Rama.
        Fools regret in their hearts, Rama.

        My Uddho! Town of Mathura!

        What kind of place is that, Rama,
        where those who go can't ever return, Rama,
        where those who go can't turn around
        to come back?

                That is the desolate country, Rama,
                that is the country of death.

Rama, four limes
on four branches.
        Juice drips, splashing on the earth, Rama.

Those who are clever,
take and make things their own, Rama.
        Fools regret in their hearts, Rama.

        My Uddho! Town of Mathura!

What kind of place is that, Rama,
where those who go can't ever return, Rama,
where those who go can't turn around
to come back?

That is the country of death, Rama.
that is the afterworld.

Hearing small, intense Asha Devi lead others through this song in November 1990, I was bewildered. The transcription in my notebook carries big question marks in the margins. The same group sang this at various other gatherings for boys' birthdays as well, and each time I heard the song, I could not make sense of it. During the course of fieldwork in 2002, Anju, the young college-educated local woman who helped me with transcriptions was intrigued. For most songs, she just wrote out the words, but for this one, she attempted a Hindi summary at the end of the transcription: "A smart person," she wrote, "does every sort of work and a fool just looks on. In this way, a smart person plants lime saplings and henna saplings too. Those who die don't come back."

I now revisit the song adding in commentaries elicited by sharing transcriptions as a slowed-down space of reflection. For the last song about Gaurja's wedding to Shiva, I relied on Urmilaji's virtuosity as storyteller and articulate interpreter of oral traditions. Yet singers were not equally interested in indulging my questions about interpretation. When I showed up after song sessions with transcriptions and questions, the spectrum of responses ranged from brushing aside my questions in order to move on to the delights of sharing further songs to patiently summarizing the story and perhaps even comment on particular lines—or, like Urmilaji, to embark on an open-ended exegesis, reflecting on meanings, elaborating on associated narratives, and even a network related songs. I now present examples from such a spectrum in relation to this song.

Asha Devi clearly preferred singing to talking about songs. She tended to deflect my ponderous questions about texts, always eager to instead get on with the next song that had come to her mind. In 2013, when I asked her again if she could help me understand this song, she briefly answered a few questions, but—in keeping with the theme of four—repeatedly emphasized that she had only studied four classes and was non-literate (*anpaḍh*). "Those who are smart are those who can read and write," she said, "I'm a fool who hasn't studied. Women weren't able to study in my time." Identifying Krishna's friend Uddhav in the song, she immediately launched into singing about another of Krishna's friends, Sudama.

Asha Devi's niece-in-law, Subhashini Dhar, though, was usually willing to go through songs with me. On a hot afternoon in 2002, Subhashini Dhar humored me by discussing this song for which I had brought along a transcription. The song, Subhashini explained, drew on images of what was hidden within appearances and could too easily be wasted. So, sandalwood trees could be carved to make seats, yet these could be concealed by spread cloth. Lime trees would eventually carry ripe limes, yet if these were not used, they would fall, juice dripping on the ground. Henna bushes could give leaves for the orange-red stain of henna dye, and yet left unused, these leaves would wither and scatter.

"What this means," Subhashini patiently explained, "is that you should make something your own, make full use of it, don't just waste it! Some people just toss away old things they come across, some pick up things and clean these up for use—they are the smart ones. It's not that you just waste things; you can squander time, too. A smart person recognizes the hidden worth inside things, takes them, makes them her own. A fool doesn't stop to think about what the worth of something could be. Later, fools might realize and regret that they missed a chance."

The version—another collector's transcription—that I had found in the library includes a commentary in Hindi that closely mirrors Subhashini's. The commentary explains that the song "sheds light on the perishable nature of the this world. Those moments that people don't seize as an opportunity, they later regret" (Thakur et al. 1983:16). This version includes just two verses: one about the henna leaves that can wither, and a second about books that become available in the market—those who are clever buy the four rare books while fools regret losing the opportunity.[9]

Urmilaji was not a singer in the same village as Asha Devi or Subhashini, but working from the transcription, she also shared thoughts on the song's meaning, verse by verse. A wooden seat (*chauki/chaukā*), she noted, would especially be used for ritual occasions: to install images of deities, or else to seat the person undergoing a ritual transformation. She sang portions from a song about a sandalwood stool that might, for example, be sung to a groom. For the next two verses, Urmilaji observed, "a smart woman plucks limes and uses them in chutney, and doesn't just let limes sit on a tree until they fall. A smart woman harvests henna leaves to grind and mash and apply as decoration on her hands; she doesn't just let the leaves fall down." The stools, then, indexed ritual celebrations and transformations; limes indicated delicious sensuous pleasures, and henna stood for a married woman's adorning herself: all forms of a full and conscious embracing of life as it inevitably heads toward the country of no return.

"And what about four?" I pressed. "Why do you think everything come in fours here?" "Four is a good number," Urmilaji said. She began to sing a verse from a song sung when a bride sat to her first feast in a husband's village:

> With four mango and four grapefruit trees,
> my garden is beautiful.
> With four swans and four crows
> my flying flocks are beautiful.

"With four people you have a sense of happy celebration (*raunak*)," Urmilaji said. "With four birds, or four trees, there are enough that these look beautiful." Four indicates balance and completion. Four evokes four directions, four eras of time, four goddess temples watching over the valley, and even the classical Hindu four stages of life. In a further pun, the word I have translated as "clever" (*chatur*) can also indicate "four."

Urmilaji didn't comment on the repeated line, "My Uddho, Town of Mathura." "Udho is like Krishna, you could even say Krishna," Subhashini had said; Mathura, after all, was the kingdom that Krishna triumphantly conquered from his despotic uncle King Kamsa. Other

---

[9] The four books possibly reference the four Vedas.

women too asserted that Uddho was the same as Krishna. In the version I found in the library, the refrain runs "My Uddho, Town of Judhya (Ayodhya)," and the commentary explains that the god "Ram is settled in the town of Ayodhya but once a person leaves this world, he cannot return"—affirming "Uddho" as a reference to divinity that remains steady amid shifting human lives. Yet "Uddho" sounds very much like Krishna's friend "Uddhav" from the *Bhagavata Purana* that is replete with Krishna stories (Bryant 2003). Asha Devi favored this identification, identifying Uddho as Krishna's friend. In the familiar story, Udhhav comes as a messenger from Krishna once Krishna has been established as ruler in the town of Mathura, bearing the message from Krishna to his lovers, the *gopīs*, that their missing him so intensely actually keeps him close in their hearts. Without mentioning Krishna directly, then, the song evokes him as a perpetually present absence, just as hidden potentials are present within perceived forms. That Uddhav looks very much like Krishna also adds to the mysterious instability of forms.

And what of Maru Desh—the desolate country? This, explained Subhashini and Asha Devi alike, is where Yama, God of Death lives. As Subhashini said, "once you go there, you can't come back; you have just this life. Krishna went to Mathura and there, he killed Kamsa. He sent Kamsa off to Maru Desh."

"The song doesn't say anything about Kamsa, does it?" I asked, mystified, looking back through the song's words to see any reference to Krishna's uncle.

"Not directly, I'm giving you an example," said Subhashini. "Uddho" then, also evoked an arc of stories in Krishna mythology. Running her finger under the line about limes containing juice, or *ras*, Subhashini also played on the word's meaning to include aesthetic pleasure and she improvised on the structure of the song itself. Smiling bemusedly at me, she said, "This is like the *rasa* within a song: songs should be learned! But a foolish person says, 'this is nothing!'"

Conclusions

As raw materials for scholarly production, written transcriptions of oral texts are likely to largely remain hidden. Like fieldnotes, they form part of a larger archive of writing generated in the field that only selectively sees the light of publication. What Simon Ottenberg has written about fieldnotes holds for transcriptions too. Contrasting the "scratchnotes" that precede fieldnotes and the "headnotes" that organize experiences in memories that might not have been fully fleshed out through fieldnotes, Ottenberg describes changing relations to the fieldnotes through time (1990:159):

> We are on a moving escalator with our fieldnotes. They change during the process of field research as we mature in the field. They are in a changing relationship to the native as well as to our headnotes. As our social milieu alters through our lifetime maturation our relationship to our notes alters. As the political and intellectual climate of our scholarly field changes, our relationships to and uses of our fieldnotes change.

Similarly, transcribed oral traditions are reframed through time, in our own thinking, and in how they are viewed by others. More mutually created than fieldnotes, transcriptions are also more recognizable as cultural knowledge that belongs to a community, and so are more easily shared

for collaboration. Such collaboration is of course only possible if the people involved are willing to grant a researcher their time and patience, which is within the context of sustained, ongoing relationships.

Both the songs I have reproduced in this essay speak to a larger theme of shifting forms and recognitions—a disreputable yogi ascetic seemingly withdrawn from the world may be revealed as a great god who takes on the form of creation; a sandalwood tree can become stools visible or hidden; limes may rot or be eaten; henna leaves may wither or be used as dye. Transcriptions also represent a moment of transition from the oral to the written. Even when settled into writing, transcriptions can move in and out of social interactions. They might remain buried in files, be carried back to performers for reflection, or reach entirely new audiences through translation.

While writing this essay, I found a sheet of paper filled with proverbs among my many files of transcribed oral traditions from Kangra. The sheet is not dated and whatever identification I had once written on the right corner is now too smudged to read. "*Lekhen kauṛi dāne ghoṛā*—in accounts, a cowrie shell; in gifts a horse," declares one of the proverbs. I recognized this as a proverb recited by Sarla Korla when a helpful young man whom she was reimbursing for a purchase had told her not to bother about exact change. She explained that her beloved father, "always full of charm and sayings," had used this proverb to emphasize the importance of keeping meticulous accounts and also being unstintingly generous with gifts. The proverb points back to earlier eras when cowries were a form of small change and horses were prized as a means of transport.

Viewing this transcribed proverb in the context of this essay is a reminder that when transcribing words, a painstaking attention to exact detail is rewarding. Yet when attempting to compose aesthetic translations, this hard-won accounting of transcription disappears into the background so a text might prance into new settings.

The Australian National University

References

Bryant 2003   Edwin Bryant, trans. *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God; Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa Book X*. Introduction and notes by Edwin Bryant. London: Penguin.

Clifford and Marcus 1986   James Clifford and George Marcus, eds. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Cruikshank 1998   Julie Cruikshank. *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Dundes 1966   Alan Dundes. "Metafolklore and Oral Literary Criticism." *The Monist*, 60:505-16.

Emerson et al. 1995   Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fine 1984   Elizabeth Fine. *The Folklore Text: From Performance to Print*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Finnegan 1992   Ruth Finnegan. *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices*. London: Routledge.

Gold 2002   Ann Grodzins Gold. "The Tender Trap: Lord Shiva's Wedding in Vernacular Mythology." In *Multiple Histories: Culture and Society in the Study of Rajasthan*. Ed. by L. A. Babb, V. Joshi, and M. W. Meister. Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat. pp. 84-116.

Henry 1998   Edward O. Henry. *Chant the Names of God: Music and Culture in Bhojpuri-Speaking India*. San Diego, CA: San Diego University Press.

Hirsch 2014   Edward Hirsch. *A Poet's Glossary*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Jamison 1996   Stephanie Jamison. *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jassal 2012   Smita Tewari Jassal. *Unearthing Gender: Folksongs of North India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Lassiter 2005   Luke E. Lassiter. *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lawless 1993   Elaine Lawless. *Holy Women, Wholly Women: Sharing Ministries of Wholeness*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Lorenzen 1999   David Lorenzen. *Kabīr Legends and Ananta-Das's Kabīr Parachai*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Manuel 1991   Peter Manuel. *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Narayan 1986   Kirin Narayan. "Birds on a Branch: Girlfriends and Wedding Songs in Kangra." *Ethos*, 14:43-75.

Narayan 1989   _____. *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative as Hindu Religious Teaching*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Narayan 1995   _____. "The Practice of Oral Literary Criticism: Women's Songs in Kangra, India." *Journal of American Folklore*, 108:243-64.

Narayan 1997   _____. *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon: Himalayan Foothill Folktales*. In collaboration with Urmila Devi Sood. New York: Oxford University Press.

Narayan 2008a   _____. "Singing and Retelling the Past." In *Living with Stories: Telling, Retelling, and Remembering*. Ed. by William Schneider. Logan: Utah State University. pp. 74-94.

Narayan 2008b   _____. "The Ascetic Practics of Eating Sweets: Transcribing Oral Narrative." Special Issue, *Transcription. Interval(le)s*, 2.2-3.1:597-606. http://www.cipa.ulg.ac.be/intervalles4/56_narayan.pdf

O'Flaherty 1973   Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty. *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Śiva*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ottenberg 1990   Simon Ottenberg. "Thirty Years of Fieldnotes: Changing Relationships to the Text." In *Fieldnotes*. Ed. by Roger Sanjek. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. pp. 187-270.

Raheja and Gold 1994   Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold. *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Tedlock 1983   Dennis Tedlock. *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Temple 1882   Richard Carnac Temple. "Some Hindu Folksongs from the Panjab." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 51:151-225.

Thakur et al. 1983   M. R. Thakur, Vanshi Ram Sharma, Jagdish Sharma, and Sudarshan Dogra, eds. *Himachali Lok Geet Bhag I (Himachal Folksongs Part I)*. Shimla: Himachal Pradesh Bhasha evam Samskriti Vibhag.

Wagner 2013   Anja Wagner. *The Gaddi Beyond Pastoralism: Making Place in the Indian Himalayas*. New York: Berghahn.