

Unearthing Gender: Folksongs of North India. By SMITA TEWARI JASSAL. Durham: N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012. xviii, 296 pp. ISBN: 9780822351306 (paper, also available in cloth and as e-book).
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Grounded in fieldwork spread across five years, Smita Tewari Jassal's *Unearthing Gender* presents a rich living archive of women's songs from the Purabiya- and Bhojpuri-speaking areas of eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar. Although Jassal states that she is an "outsider" to the region, she provides an empathetic and well-researched analysis of women's songs, a project that, she relates in the acknowledgments, has been inspired by a personal journey to honor her father's memory and reengage the language of her ancestors. This in-depth exploration of songs in rural environments is enriched by Jassal's earlier study of systemic land-based marginalization of women.¹⁰

The overarching thesis of *Unearthing Gender* is that songs and their sung environments illuminate the "organization of maleness and femaleness in relations to a particular society" (p. 2): that is, they shed light on the social construction and transmission of gender and caste ideologies, domestic power relations, kinship, sexuality and marriage, and subaltern critique and resistance. Jassal convincingly demonstrates that women's songs contain many interwoven registers: the political, the affective, and the aesthetic. If they evoke the poignancy of departure from an affirming natal home, they also show ironic awareness of the gendered politics of inheritance that materially disenfranchise women. Women's songs are potent expressions of sociality, but can be "hinted" expressions, not always explicit. However, men's song genres, also acknowledged in the book, remained relatively out of the reach of Jassal's fieldwork, given their all-male performance contexts, such as all-night public festivities.

Jassal's understanding of local issues of social justice and gender and labor inequities—which informs the critical appreciation of women's songs—draws on her own involvement in various NGOs and other activist groups. Bracketed by a well-synthesized introduction and conclusion, chapters 1 to 4 (of six chapters) illustrate several important aspects of her work. First, the book focuses on women from Dalit and peasant communities, an emphasis, Jassal points out, not likely to be found in feminist literature, which tends to highlight upper-caste literary or written perspectives. The songs remain very attentive to women as agricultural producers, not just artistic producers, and as agents within systems of economic and patriarchal dominance. Second, Jassal draws attention to historical and social factors that have contributed to the exclusion or attrition of non-elite, unlettered women's voices. Among these factors are male-centric reformist agendas of the nineteenth century that suppressed women's oral traditions in order to reconstruct female virtue in the light of patriarchy. Third, Jassal shows how women's song traditions lose (and reflect on) a vital performative space with the mechanization of farming and migration, phenomena that have also drastically altered women's compensation in agricultural labor. And fourth, while Bollywood music and cassette culture have adapted and popularized women's folksongs, they have also displaced their lived primacy and diversity.

With these themes threading throughout Jassal's argument, chapter 1 presents songs sung by women during their daily grinding of grain and spices. Jassal shows how the

¹⁰Smita Tewari Jassal, *Daughters of the Earth: Women and Land in Uttar Pradesh* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001).

“work” contexts of these *jatsār* songs is as important as their content: sung usually by an older and a younger woman while they work together in home courtyards, these are occasions for the transmission of not only repertoires but also moral values, norms, experiences, and female authority. The sobering content of these songs expresses the complex politics and emotions of conjugal and natal homes and relations. In chapter 2, Jassal skillfully analyzes another “work” genre of women’s songs (*kajlī*), sung during agricultural work. *Kajlī* songs serve as a source of boisterous camaraderie among women, but simultaneously reveal fissures in conditions of agricultural production. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on marriage songs, which vividly capture the “loose, jagged edges of reality” (p. 154). While wedding rituals ostensibly celebrate a crucial lifecycle rite for women, marriage songs reveal the starker emotion of ambivalence about marriage felt by women in the region. Songs about Sita, the female epicenter of the Ramayana, especially display a wider range of identifications across castes with Sita’s experiences and struggles, not just her chastity. Jassal’s analysis of the masculine epic tradition of Lorikāyan, in chapter 5, extends our understanding of Bhojpuri views on marriage and caste-specific (Yadava) patriarchy and self-identity; this analysis, however, given the all-male performance contexts, is grounded in a 1987 published text of the epic and not on performances or interviews. Chapter 6 takes the instance of “Holi cassette music” to discuss the “gendered impact of technological advancements” (p. 220). Jassal’s insightful discussion shows how the sexually transgressive content of this cassette music works with its male-dominated contexts of production and singing to appropriate and commercialize what would have been *women’s* lived spaces of self-expression, and to reiterate male dominance.

Although more reflection—such as, crucially, on how fieldwork dynamics impacted the actual interpretation of genres and texts—would have been welcome, Jassal does provide a sense of her social presence at events through occasional conversational snippets or descriptions. The book’s greater strength is in its impressive contextual analysis of song-texts; these contexts are not necessarily situated in the interpersonal. *Unearthing Gender* is a rich and important addition to the literature on women’s oral cultures and female subjectivity. Appropriate for use in beginning or advanced courses on South Asian culture and society, world feminisms, anthropology, and folklore, the book converses with previous scholarship on the subject, provides historical depth, and most valuable of all, relates women’s performance traditions to economic and political realities.

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A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics. By SHELDON POLLOCK. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. xxvi, 442 pp. ISBN: 978023173902 (cloth). doi:10.1017/S0021911816001522

This much-needed sourcebook in classical Indian aesthetics covers the period from roughly the early part of the Common Era to 1700, with a focus on emotion in art and the famous theory of *rasa* (a polysemous word that Sheldon Pollock correctly translates in the aesthetic context as “taste”). This is the first volume in the Murty Classical Library’s