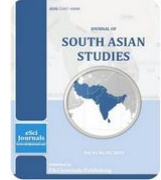




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Review Article

UNEARTHING GENDER: FOLKSONGS OF NORTH INDIA

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By Smita Tewari Jassal, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2012. Pp. 320. ISBN 978-0-8223 - 5130-6. USD 24.95.

Using songs as the center of her analysis, Jassal studied gender and the challenges faced by women among the Purabiya and Bhojpur people of North India. Given the fact that Northern India is a hub of traditional songs, the author's focus on women's songs is indeed commendable. By unveiling the treasures of Indian women's songs to the wider audiences, the author ultimately responded to quench the quest of anthropologists, historians, sociologists, educators and scholars from the field of literature, folklore and ethnomusic for comprehensive and preeminent cultural study based upon traditional women's songs.

While she was in the field, Jassal carefully scrutinized and fetched spoons of songs from the "ocean" of women's songs. As the book came into reality after many years of field work (a period of five years, which is more than the threshold of ethnographic field work), Jassal not only stores traditional women's songs in her book but also she enriches them with meticulous contextual explanations and analysis. Underlying the core of her book is an investigation of women's subordinations as reflected through their songs. The author explains the "interplay between caste, class and gender" (p.4) focusing on the marginalized groups of the society, women. She demonstrates how women's work songs become vehicles for the production and reproduction of gender identity and the way it is negotiated. The songs are sung in a way that they address messages in metaphorical, ironic and humorist expressions. The targets of the songs may be males, father, caste master and the like who are in one way or another responsible

for the oppression of women. As a matter of fact, with songs, women impart lesson if we are geared up to learn. The author describes songs as cultural codes under conditions where women are victims of customs; women express the critical consciousness through songs. Songs are forms of resistance to defend oneself from dominant forms of power and serve as forms of communication that might otherwise difficult to learn about caste, gender, and class. However, Jassal argues that as women's songs were not fitted to the interest of the social reformers of the 19th century, males exerted efforts to modify the songs in accordance with their interests.

The first and second chapters of Jassal's book are devoted to songs related to work such as grinding grain and agricultural tasks with various contexts such as marriage and tensions. These songs are important in essence as they impart lessons to girls who are going to be the would-be wife. As a matter of fact, women's songs pass from generation to generation through the enculturation of children. The author unearths diverse narratives of women's songs along with their underlying messages. The Jatsar songs, most often sung while grinding grain, serve as a bridge that transcends caste boundaries; all caste groups including the lower and upper sing Jatsar songs, which has left fuzzy distinctions between them.

In the third chapter, Jassal displays that emotion that could not be understood by observing the ritual structure of ceremony can easily be apprehended through marriage songs which were brought into play to express joy and sadness. For instance, the wedding songs entail the bitter sweetness of marriage when the bride gets off from parent's home to a new stage of life in

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her husband's home. The bride had to leave her parents' home to go to her husband's residence which "evokes the deepest despair" (p.121). Abusive songs are used as an integral part of wedding celebrations if mismatches happened as a result of either early marriage with older men or much younger ones. Through songs women express their awareness of the inherent injustices about property rights or inheritance once a bride left parent's home.

The fourth chapter deals with women's sufferings through a mythical story of Sita, a wife of a King known as Rama who doubted of her fidelity. Sita decided to walk through a built fire to make sure to the king and the public that she was untouched and still maintained her fidelity. The story of Sita's trial by fire is a source of inspiration for a large number of songs pooled on and sung by peasant and lower caste women at weddings and various settings in northern India. From Jassal's book, one reads Sita's determination and strength to keep her dignity and questioning the long-established and repressive patriarchal system which had long been the center of societal injustices. The narrative of Sita is appropriated both by the lower and upper caste women who reflect the narrative on their day to day life.

In the fifth chapter, we find how masculinity is articulated through the north Indian ballad known as Lorikayan which is a tool for consolidating "caste patriarchies and maintaining control over women" (p.190). The author discusses the nature of the ballad in various contexts such as the performance of the epic, plot at marriage, gender construction, and historical processes. In an occasion where the author herself was together with males who were gathered to performing birha (separation) song, she was advised to leave the area because sexually motivated song was expected to start.

In the last chapter, the author sees that the transformation of songs in the course of history had impacts on the broad cultural notions about women whose traditional songs were appropriated by popular culture in which music cassette brought about multiple interpretation and reproduction of traditions. Women's songs of celebration such as the Holi festival that had timeless quality taking up feelings are now appropriated by males out of the traditional context.

It has been found in this book very fascinating that not only the author has explicated songs as the main vehicle of North Indian women's everyday life in a novel approach but also she has come up with a different perspective of gender study that anthropological accounts failed to do so hitherto in India. Jassal's book is also fascinating in that she uses "practice" theory, a trend that has been popular in anthropological theory since Sherry Ortner's review article in the 1980s, in explicating aspects of women's everyday life to the structured activities in the Indian institutional settings. Her use of practice theory can vividly be understood from such topics as *Songs as Forms of Communication*; *Gender as Socially Constructed*; and *Agency in Women's Songs* in the *Introduction* part of her book. The author's anthropological perspective, songs as a vehicle for women's voices and means of reflection of their subordination to the patriarchal system, would give anthropologists new direction to conduct research on similar issues among different cultures. Last but not least, *Unearthing Gender: Folksongs of North India* is an incredible book by a remarkable anthropologist. While I have no doubt that the book has already penetrated into the academic community with the academic language and essence of international scientific standard, I hope it will also be made available in vernacular languages to the local people, particularly of those who could not read and understand English.