



Bhojpuri Village Song and the World

Sampling Indian Literature and the Global Field

This article examines Bhojpuri folksongs that have migrated from north Indian villages to overseas locales, or that have migrated from oral tradition to literary fiction in Hindi and English. The literary examples are drawn from Hindi novels by Ramdarash Mishra, Rahi Masoom Raza, and Phanishwarnath Renu as well as from the novel *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh. Each author makes use of song from north India, or originating from India, as with Ghosh, who also includes material from the Caribbean island of Trinidad and the Indian Ocean Island of Mauritius. I draw on fieldwork in each location to present a literary tour of this global musical scene. In doing so, I argue for space in literary analysis for consideration of individual performances, for experiences of individual performers and listeners, and for the ethnographic encounters that led to various songs finding their way into literary fiction. The literary examples from Hindi and Anglo-Indian fiction are limited to songs I have personally documented in the field, allowing an analysis of the overlapping areas of fiction, history, and ethnography.

Keywords: Bhojpuri—folksongs—Hindi literature—Anglo-Indian literature—ethnography—migration—indentureship—orality

In his 1984 autobiography, Hindi poet and novelist Ramdarash Mishra (Miśra) describes childhood memories of women singing in his village in Gorakhpur district, Uttar Pradesh (UP). One wedding song affects him deeply: a *bidāi gīt* (departure song) in which a bride and her family members weep as she leaves her birth home. Whenever Mishra recalls this song, the memory stirs a pain: “The feeling of women’s sorrow shook me so strongly that whenever I heard a daughter’s departure song I would begin to cry” (Miśra 1991, 85). The song also appears in his novel *Pānī ke Prāchīr*. A father hears it as his daughter is married, and his family fears he will lose control of his emotions (Miśra 1986, 182). These passages were on my mind as I rode the Delhi Metro several years ago to meet Mishra at his home in New Delhi. His autobiography and novel *Pānī ke Prāchīr* (*Water’s Ramparts*) were in my bag, as were recordings of Bhojpuri village songs I had made in eastern Uttar Pradesh ten years earlier, many of which I later read in Mishra’s writing. I hoped to play them for the ninety-year-old author and record his response. Our eventual discussions about Bhojpuri songs encouraged me to write this article, which explores how analysis of songs in Hindi and Anglo-Indian fiction might consider issues of ethnography, performance, and migration.

Mishra writes in Hindi, though he comes from the Bhojpuri-speaking region. Today many Bhojpuri speakers are also fluent in Hindi, and the languages are to a degree mutually intelligible. The songs in his writing are associated with festivals, ritual activity, and specific domestic and agricultural tasks. By writing these women’s songs into a Hindi novel, Mishra has taken them from one performance and linguistic context and refashioned them within another.

Yet Mishra’s writing is also an extension of the original context. As listeners, men are part of the performance community of these women’s songs. The sorrow described by Mishra is a common sentiment among men from villages in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Like Mishra, many men demonstrate great familiarity with the women’s repertory of their villages, and men’s published accounts of women’s songs often include childhood memories characterized by sorrow and loss. We find examples ranging from ethnomusicologist Laxmi Tewari’s recollections of singers in his Kanpur hometown (1974, 63) to Narayana Rao’s memory of his mother’s Ramayana songs (1991) and Hindi author Phanishwarnath Renu’s memories of his sisters singing during his childhood (Renu 1995, 2, 268–71). Women are aware of this effect. In her

study of Maithili women's oral tradition, Coralynn Davis documents narratives of men who are compelled to take action after overhearing women's expression of sorrow (2005, 2009). The act of men writing fiction on that sorrow is hence part of the performance tradition.

At the heart of this sentiment is a feeling of displacement. Mishra writes from the city. His village exists as a memory that is stirred when contemplating song. The metro to Uttam Nagar in Delhi, filled with smartphones and earbud headphones, is a reminder of that displacement. Village songs exist here only in memory. Yet I bring the village via such technology—PDFs of Mishra's own writing and MP3s of Bhojpuri village singers.

When reading novels in Hindi and English, I have sometimes had the unusual experience of encountering songs that I know from village performance. I have recorded Bhojpuri and Maithili songs in villages in eastern Uttar Pradesh and northeast Bihar, and I attended Felicity Hindu School in Trinidad for a year during my childhood, where I learned Hindi and Bhojpuri songs alongside my classmates. By including village songs in his writing, Mishra joins a list of Indian authors that have drawn on local song traditions. This list includes three others considered in this article: two of Mishra's contemporaries, the Hindi authors Rahi Masum Raza (Razā, 1927–92) and Phanishwarnath Renu (Renu, 1921–77), and Amitav Ghosh, born a generation later in 1956, who writes in English. Several works of the Hindi authors Mishra, Raza, and Renu are considered "regional literature," because they are seen to present the total village life of their respective regions. The name of the genre—regional—was introduced by Renu, whose extraordinary 1956 novel *Mailā Āñcal*¹ itself contains over one hundred village songs. When it was first published, it defied categorization by Hindi critics, prompting them to articulate an entirely new genre (Hansen 1981).

Despite its use of song, Amitav Ghosh's 2008 novel *Sea of Poppies* cannot be considered a regional work. The first novel in Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy, it considers the India-China opium trade against the backdrop of the migration of indentured laborers from north India to the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius. Ghosh's postcolonial literary tour of this colonial situation includes song examples from Trinidad and Mauritius—each home to descendants of sugarcane laborers brought under the nineteenth-century colonial indentureship system—as well as songs from the area of north India from which those laborers originated. Having lived or conducted fieldwork in each of these locations, most of Ghosh's song selections were familiar to me. Each one evoked waves of memory—an experience not unlike Peter Manuel's discovery of identical Bhojpuri folksongs among Indian communities on multiple continents (2009), or Helen Myers's search for songs from the Trinidad repertory along the Gangetic plain (1998).

This article considers how analysis of song material in fiction might include consideration of such waves of memory, and how such analysis might contend with the multivocality of the song tradition. Gloria Raheja and Ann Gold's study of north Indian oral tradition suggests that there is no single unified voice articulated by women performers (1994). Song meanings are not static. The meaning of any song is informed not only by structural relationships but also by individual lives

and experiences. This complexity is well documented by Smita Tewari Jassal, who highlights the ambiguities of north Indian song traditions (2012). The song's texts alone tell only part of their story, since their meanings shift with changing realities of gender, power, and agrarian economics. They are given significance through the immediate circumstances of their performance, and their meanings shift to accommodate the individuals present during different performances. Likewise, Ramdarash Mishra is a Hindi scholar, as well as an author, and his scholarship on song in Hindi fiction highlights individual emotional reactions to songs (Miśra 2001).

Such ethnographic experiences can be taken into consideration in literary analysis. When an author of literary fiction is also a member of a performance community—as is the case with Ramdarash Mishra—then it is especially appropriate to consider the author's identity as a performer or listener. Amitav Ghosh's novel includes song material taken directly from ethnographies. When ethnographic experiences directly shape the production of a literary work, then the circumstances that produced those ethnographies also contribute to the meaning of the literary work.

Songs, novels, and ethnographies are all worldly texts that require a worldly method of reading. The case for the worldly nature of texts was made by Edward Said (1983), as part of his reaction to traditions of criticism that separate texts from the social, political, and historical realities in which they are produced and consumed. He advocated attention to “geographical notation,” proposing a “contrapuntal” method of reading that exposes the spatial dimensions of texts. Counterpoint is less a description or quality of literature, and more of a process and theory of reading. It requires the critic to consider the horizontal nature of a text, as well as the vertical nature. But while Western musical counterpoint leads to “concert and order” (Said 1993, 59–60), a text, when subjected to the contrapuntal reading advocated by Said, might not result in a harmonious whole. A contrapuntal reading involves a search for fractures, for gaps, for resistance, and for exclusions. Great works, writes Said, encode experience, rather than just repeat it directly. Repetition is a key element of performance, and this element transfers to the written page, be it an ethnography or a literary work of fiction. Readers and listeners are confronted not only with the vertical text of a single song but also with the horizontal text that includes all previous instances of repetition, from text, field, and memory.

The following two sections explore examples from Hindi novels by Mishra, Raza, and Renu to demonstrate the depth of these authors' interactions with song from their respective districts in the Bhojpuri and Maithili regions. My reading aims to uncover the horizontal text, as well as consider how songs tie these novels to these geographical locations. The final section of this article takes up an analysis of song in Amitav Ghosh's novel. Here, the connection between song and geographical location is less clear. Ghosh's is not a regional work. He takes songs from one continent and century and refashions them within others. Nevertheless, his novel is still informed by ethnographic production, by actual performances, and by the individual sensitivities of the performers whose songs find their way into its pages.



Figure 1. Ramdarash Mishra with his daughter Smita Mishra at their home in Delhi.
Photo by Ian Woolford.

Oral literary criticism and Hindi literature

Ramdarash Mishra was born in 1924, in Dumari village, about 25 miles southeast of Gorakhpur in eastern Uttar Pradesh. In 1944 he left the village to study in Varanasi, where he earned his PhD in Hindi from Banaras Hindu University. In 2015 he was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award for his volume of poetry *Āg kī Haṃsī*. He currently lives in Delhi, having retired from his professorship at Delhi University (figure 1). Like many who move from the village to the city, he maintains an emotional attachment to his village. His autobiographical writings feature village memories, and his 1986 novel *Pānī ke Prāchīr* concerns rural life of eastern Uttar Pradesh. Indeed, when I finally visited Dumari, many residents proudly pointed out landmarks included in his writing.

Riding the metro to Mishra's Delhi neighborhood, I wondered how to ask him about the *bidāi gīt* that brought him to tears. Such matters are not easy to discuss. In a 1975 essay, Phanishwarnath Renu wrote about his own childhood memory of a song performed by his sisters. The memory caused him such distress that his wife feared he was suffocating (Renu 1977, 44–47). Other men I had talked to in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar became emotional when discussing women's songs that elaborate on the bond between brother and sister. This was my first time meeting Mishra, and I did not want to shut down conversation before it began.

As Mishra and I spoke about Hindi literature, our discussion turned to village song. I mentioned my Bhojpuri field recordings, and he asked to hear them. I began with a *devī gīt*—a song for the goddess—from the women's repertory. The song appears in Mishra's *Pānī ke Prāchīr*, in a passage describing the last night of Navratri. Mishra's literary use of the song amplifies the night's mood; the song's imagery is reflected in the night's activities.

... rāt kā pichhalā pahar gīt se tharatharā rahā hai—
nibiyā ke ḍariyā maiyā jhūlelī hinḍolvā
ki jhūli-jhūli nā

*maiṃyā mori gāvelī gītiyā ki
jhūli-jhūli nā.
lagtā hai, sachmuch sāmāne ke per par bhavānī jhūla jhūl rahī hain. rāt samāpt hotī*

. . . The last part of the night shakes with song—
On the branch of the neem tree, Mother swings
Swings, she swings.
My Mother is singing songs
As she swings and swings.
It seems as if the goddess Bhavani is truly swinging from the nearby trees. Night is
over. The blazing red sun appears. (Miśra 1986, 37–38)

This is one of the best-known songs in the Bhojpuri repertory. It appears more than any other in my field recordings from villages around Varanasi and from Mishra's village near Gorakhpur. Versions are also well-documented in published collections of Bhojpuri folksongs (Henry 1988, 86; Singh 1979, 42–43; V. Miśra 1999, 25–26). The goddess swings from the branch of the neem tree. She asks the gardener lady for a drink, but the gardener lady cannot oblige, because she holds her baby in her lap. Different versions elaborate on the mother's thirst, and the gardener's efforts to appease her.

Though sung by women, many men are familiar with this song's text, its performance contexts, and its tune. So, when a group of women performed a version for me in Serwanipur village, an hour or two west of Varanasi by car, men were eager to comment. I was visiting the home of a group of *camār* (leather-worker caste) drummers with whom I had been traveling from village to village as they performed at weddings. The mother of the group's joker, Sarita Devi, was herself a skilled singer. She gathered her daughters-in-law, and they sang well into the evening (figure 2). Many of their songs were *gālīs*, verbally abusive wedding songs that delight singers and listeners alike. Before launching their series of *gālī* songs, the women performed a *devī gīt*, in which the goddess thirsts as she swings on the branch of a neem tree:

*nibiyā kī ḍariyā maiṃyā jheluabā ho kī jhūl laganā
jhulat-jhulat maiṃyā lagalini piasiyā
kaise ke jal achabābau hamarī lalanā ho kee gudiyā hamare nā
bāhini ganapati balakabā ho kī gudiyā hamare nān
balak sutāvau mālini sone ke khaṭulavā
ho kī bhuiyā loṭai nān
jau moī mālini o bhuiyā loṭai jaie
ho uthi levai nā
apane sone ke acarabā ho uthire lebai nā*

Mother hangs from the branch of the neem tree, and is swinging.
And while she swings she gets thirsty.
How can I give you water to drink when my son is in my lap?
Sister, little Ganesh is in my lap.
Gardener-lady, put the child down in a golden cot.
And he will fall to the earth.
Gardener-lady, if he falls to the earth.

Then I will pick him up.
I will pick him up in my golden *āñcal*.

The performance continued. The goddess takes the baby into her embrace, freeing the gardener to offer water from the Ganga and Jamuna rivers. The gardener's future generations are blessed and given the goddess's permanent protection.

I asked the performers about the song's meaning. Sarita Devi replied by affirming its genre. "This is a *devī gīt*," she said. When I asked about its performance context, her son Tulsi, the joker, jumped in to explain. "It is for before the wedding," he said. "Then they sing these wedding songs."

"We will sing for any type of worship," Sarita added. "If we go to worship *bābā* (deity), we must sing this song. At the beginning of any auspicious event, we sing this *devī gīt*." She explained the significance of the neem tree (it has a strong association with the goddess, especially relating to her ability to cool), the reason for the swinging (the goddess is worshiped during the monsoon, when girls set up swings from tree branches), the nature of the goddess's blessing (she also has the ability to curse), and the importance of the golden *āñcal*, the draping end of the sari cast over the shoulder, associated with motherhood and protection. Sarita highlighted cultural, musical, and intertextual elements regarding this song and its relation to others—several of which she explained by singing.

Interpretative comments such as these constitute what Alan Dundes (1966) called "oral literary criticism," which he identified as an essential part of folklore research. In her analysis of women's song traditions from the Kangra region of north India, Kirin Narayan (1995) expands Dundes's concept to incorporate deep ethnographic observation to expose the complex nature of village performance. Such complexity should be understood as present in any literary work that makes use of a performance tradition. Indeed, Dundes cautions that without consideration of ethnographic data, analysis of these works could miss important details (1965, 139–41). The meaning of



Figure 2. Sarita Devi performing *devī gīt* with members of her family.
Photo by Ian Woolford.

a literary passage such as Mishra's quoted above is dependent on local performers' ambiguous and context-dependent understanding of song tradition.

I recorded another version of this song during a *maṭṭikor* ritual south of Varanasi in Banpurwa village, where a young man from the family I was staying with was getting married. During *maṭṭikor*, women of the bride's family and the groom's family, each in their own home, walk to a field at dusk and use a hoe to dig up a piece of earth for use in key rituals. As the sun sets, the women dance and sing verbally abusive and often hilarious *gālīs*, sometimes using a hoe as a crude prop. Adult men rarely accompany women for this ritual, but if a videographer has been hired, he may film the dancing and singing. My microphone granted me access but did not protect me from discomfort when the women teased me as evening fell.

In Delhi, I told Ramdarash Mishra how I was not the only male present in that Banpurwa field. The groom's six-year-old nephew had been given a small drum to play as the women processed. Nirmala Devi, one of Banpurwa's most accomplished singers, led them in the *devī gīt*. I played the recording for Mishra. We heard the young boy's rhythmless drumming against feet marching through the field. Over these sounds came the familiar strains of the *devī gīt*. The goddess swings from a branch of the neem tree, but she is thirsty. How can the gardener give her water with a baby in her lap? The goddess provides the baby with a golden cot, and the gardener offers water in a metal pot. The goddess grants eternal satisfaction for her and her son.

As the women dug, they crowded around the small pit. The groom's sister had returned from her married home for this occasion. She interrupted with a new line, chanting

maṭṭi khaṇ gayī maṭṭi khaṇabā re
bīchhī mārā laī jījī ke bhothihan bāre

The soil is dug! The soil is dug!
The scorpion's sting! The sister's vagina!

In her analysis of scorpions and sexuality in Hindi song and dance sequences, Rishika Mehrishi notes that these creatures have "crept into the South Asian imaginary as metaphors for female erotic arousal" (2019, 290). When I paused the recording and asked Ramdarash Mishra how this couplet found its way into this performance, his reply was brief and delivered with a laugh: "This is tradition." I resumed playback. The sister's new lyrics prompted much laughter from her family women. She ordered the boy to take the bundle of earth on his head. The drum now hung around his neck unplayed, and he brought the earth back to the courtyard, where it would be used to construct the *harīs*, where the gods reside in the wedding. The *devī gīt* resumed, detailing the little boy in the goddess's lap, protected by her golden *āñcal*.

Not immediately obvious in Mishra's novel is a possible connection between this *devī gīt* and light-hearted genres it is often performed alongside. Nor might his reader think to compare the boy in Mishra's literary version of the song with a young out-of-rhythm drummer carrying a bundle of fertile soil. Read in isolation, the song text does not hint at the connection between its performance and agrarian lifestyle. This is not one of the many songs performed during agricultural labor, but it was

performed during a ritual that makes use of many agricultural elements: the hoe, the soil, and the field at the edge of the village. All these performative aspects contribute to the song's meaning, and therefore also to Mishra's novel. Mishra's comment, "this is tradition," is a powerful reminder of the performative, multilayered, nonliteral meaning of any village song. It is part of the novel's counterpoint—that is, the novel's "horizontal text" that includes previous instances of repetition of this song, from both text and field.

The departure theme in three Hindi novels

In some parts of north India there is a ceremony called *ronā*, literally "weeping," when a daughter leaves for her husband's home for the first time. In his analysis of themes of migration and separation in Bhojpuri folksongs, Nitin Sinha explores how songs portray the bride's journey from natal home to marital home as "a moment of lament, dislocation, and movement" in which the bride endures "trauma of separation" (Sinha 2018, 227). She often endures additional separations, when her husband migrates for work and she is left alone and uncared for. Likewise, Dev Nath Pathak highlights paradoxes inherent to the Maithili folksong tradition. "Songs associated with rite-of-passage put together with that of everyday life yield the notion of separation, the end of one stage and progress to the other" (2018, 196). Therefore, there is an overlap of vocabulary and idiom in songs for marriage and songs for death in both Bhojpuri and Maithili song traditions.

Such is the case with the *bidāi gīt* described by Mishra in his autobiography. This well-known Bhojpuri village song is one of many that describes sorrow as a bride departs her birth home. This song appears in two twentieth-century Hindi novels: Mishra's *Pānī ke Prāchār*, and Rahi Masum Raza's 1978 novel *Ḳaṭarā bī Ārjū*. Like Mishra, Raza is understood to have written in the regional style (Pandey 1974, 123–55). He gained fame for writing the script for B. R. Chopra's televised *Mahābhārata*, and also for his 1966 novel *Ādhā Gāv*, which tells the story of a Shia Muslim family in a Ghazipur village in eastern Uttar Pradesh. His *Ḳaṭarā bī Ārjū*, set in a section of Allahabad, concerns the 1974 Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi. As with his novel *Ādhā Gāv*, and in fitting with the regional style, Raza includes songs at crucial moments. When a bride departs, her family women cry and sing a Bhojpuri *bidāi gīt*. The song tells of her weeping brother grasping the palanquin as it carries her to another "country," her new home:

*damaṛī ka sennur mahang bhail bābā,
chunarī bhail anmol.
ehī re sennurvā ke kāran re bābā,
chhuṛalyon main des tuhār.
ḍoliyā kā bās pakare roye bīran bhaiyā
bahinā morī dūr desī bhāī, paradesī bhī.*

The *sindūr* has become expensive, Papa,
The *chunarī* cloth has become priceless.
Because of that *sindūr*, Papa,
I am leaving your country.

Brave brother cries and grasps the palanquin's bamboo,
My sister is going to a far country, and has become a foreigner. (Razā 1966, 76–77)

Raza highlights nonliteral interpretations of this song. The characters see the cloth as a symbol of the daughter's absence, a sentiment that the narrator finds contrary to the song's literal meaning: "When this song was made, 'priceless' must have had a different meaning. But now the meaning of 'priceless' is really a dry, faded, and unfeeling 'priceless'" (ibid., 77). The lyrics are questioned as weeping characters consider how their individual sentiments differ from the song's literal elements. A similar questioning occurs in Mishra's *Pānī ke Prāchīr*. A bride's father declares relief to have performed his duty of seeing his daughter married. His family does not believe him, and they urge him to look away from his departing daughter. The song's narrative matches the song in Raza's novel: the tears of the bride's family, her brother's grasping of the wedding palanquin, and the recognition of her belonging to another family. Performers in the Bhojpuri region would describe it as the same song:

nahīn-nahīn, maine thīk hī kahā thā, vah sukhī rahe, yahī merā sukh hai. ab main nahīn tarāpūngāl hān, main khush hūn.
bahare babaiyā rove, bhītārā je bhaiyā rove
ḍoliyā kā bās dhaile bhaiyā rove
bahinī parāī bhailī . . .

"āh! sandhyā jā rahī hai. nīrū, tumhārī pyārī sandhyā bidā ho rahī hai. pāgal tū khush hai . . . khush hai!" "hā-hā, khush hūn, khush hūn"—*vah ja rahī hai, uski ānkhen se barsāt jhar rahī hai, mat dekh nīrū udhar, terā sanyam tūṭ jāyegā.*

No-no, I said it right. . . . May she live in happiness. This is my happiness. Now I won't be agitated. Yes, I am happy!

Outside father cries, and inside brother cries.
Brother cries and grasps the palanquin's bamboo.
Sister now belongs to another.

"Oh! Sandhya is going. Niru, your beloved Sandhya is departing. And you're happy, you madman . . . happy!"—She is going, tears are pouring from her eyes, don't look that way, Niru. You might lose your composure. (ibid., 182)

Performers in eastern Uttar Pradesh provided a variety of interpretations of this song. I recorded one version at a village wedding in Jaunpur district, which the bride's teary-eyed girlfriends sang as she departed.

senūravā mahang bhailā bābā ho
chunari bhail anmol
senuravā ke kāran ho bābā ho
chhuralī main des tuhār
bhāā je robalā ḍoliyā ke dhaile ho
bhaujī ka kathin karej

The *sindūr* has now become costly, father.
The *chunari* scarf has become priceless.
Because of the *sindūr*, father—

I am leaving your country.
 Grasping the palanquin's bamboo, brave brother cries.
 Brother's wife (*bhaujī*) has a cruel heart.

The song lists the items given to the bride. All are priceless, except for the final item given by her *bhaujī*, her brother's wife, who is thrilled at her departure. Literal readings of this song gesture toward a kinship system in which conflict arises between certain women. In north Indian folklore traditions, *bhaujī* is portrayed as jealous of her husband's sister, and many village songs elaborate on their rivalry. I asked Nirmala Devi, who led her neighborhood women in the *devī gīt* documented here, about this song's meaning. She repeated the line about the *bhaujī*'s cruel heart. I asked for elaboration, and she added, "This is how it is: *bhaujī* has a cruel heart. She says, 'Look, there goes my husband's sister. She is leaving!'" She then shared a series of other well-known Banpurwa songs that detail the rivalry between these two family members.

The examples from Hindi fiction look beyond the literal meaning of the song texts to consider how their meaning is also informed by performance context. The literary works predicted later turns in anthropology, often influenced by Richard Bauman's (1977) work on performance theory, in which performance context is increasingly understood to be key to understanding a song's meaning. Jassal's discussion of Bhojpuri wedding songs, for example, explores how women's performances can challenge emotions and anxieties surrounding marriage, while also paradoxically justifying those emotions. By embracing the ambiguity of these song traditions, and by providing ongoing analysis grounded in history and ethnography, Jassal reminds the reader that these songs are sites of contention, each with multiple ways of meaning. Jassal's is a contrapuntal reading that contrasts with earlier ethnographic works that favor static readings of song texts to illustrate structural kinship relationships.

In practice, sisters-in-law often bond and may laugh with each other when performing songs about these rivalries. In Banpurwa, I read the song text with two young women: Pinkie and Rajkumari, who are sisters-in-law to each other. "Look," Pinkie said to her *bhaujī*. "The daughter is saying that she will leave her home. Brother is crying, mother is crying, father is crying. And they have given all these things to her." Then she looked directly at Rajkumari with a grin. "*Bhaujī* has a hard heart." Both women laughed, and Rajkumari pantomimed a pout. When I asked why, Rajkumari replied with another laugh, saying, "It's just like this."

This detail regarding the hard-hearted sister-in-law is curiously absent from Raza and Mishra's novels. In Delhi, I asked Ramdarash Mishra about her gleeful reaction to the departure of her husband's sister. He laughed as he explained that "here the relationship between *nanad* and *bhaujī* is considered to be quite adversarial."

My conversation with Mishra turned to the songs in Phanishwarnath Renu's fiction and the singers in Renu's village in northeast Bihar, well east of Mishra and Raza's native Bhojpuri region. I have been returning often to Renu's village since my first visit in 2006. The language spoken there is a variety of Maithili often called Angika, and UP and Bihar are distinct linguistic and folklore regions. Nevertheless, song repertoires across north India share many features, and Renu's novel *Mailā Āñcal* contains one song that resembles the Bhojpuri *bidāi gīt*. It occurs toward the novel's conclusion, just after Gandhi's assassination. The village community enacts a

local procession, complete with a funeral palanquin, which mirrors Gandhi's funeral on the bank of the Jamuna River in Delhi. Many weep as performers sing a departure song that contains the lines, "Four companions lift that palanquin together / And take it toward the Jamuna." A young daughter-in-law emerges from the crowd and chases after the procession in tears. The song continues:

rah-rahkar oṭh tharatharāte hain aur ant mein vah apne ko sambhāl nahīn saktī hai. vah daurṭī hai julūs ke pīchhe. khelāvānsinha chillāte hain, "kaniyā, kaniyā!... ai kaniyā!"

*hā ã re goṛ tora lāgaun ham bhaiyā re kaharivā se
gharī bhar ḍolī bilmāv!
māi je rovary . . .
. . . mā ro rahī hai. bhāratmātā ro rahī hai.*

Again and again her lips tremble, and she ultimately cannot restrain herself. She runs after the procession. Khelavan Singh shouts, "Young bride, young bride! Oh young bride!"

Ah!—I grasp your feet, O brothers!
Stop the palanquin for a moment
Mother is crying . . .
. . . Ma is crying, Mother India is crying. (Renu 1995, 2:285)

In his own scholarship on Renu, Mishra (Miśra 2001) argues that Renu's use of song highlights the pain and joy of village life. During our discussion in Delhi, Mishra elaborated on the connections between this funeral song and the closely related wedding songs and commented on the ability of both to express deep sorrow. This song is categorized in Renu's village as a *samdāun*—a genre performed at moments of departure. At weddings, *samdāun* are performed by the women of the bride's community in scenes much like those in Raza and Mishra's novels. Performers also refer to these songs as *bidāi gīt*, as they are called in the Bhojpuri region. At funerals, however, *samdāun* are performed by men. In this context the literal content concerning a bride's departure is understood metaphorically as the soul's departure from the body. The bride in her wedding palanquin occupies the same literal space, the same vocabulary, as a corpse carried to the cremation ground. Both bodies are carried on a bamboo palanquin, a *ḍolī*. Indeed, across north India *bidāi gīt* share many features with *nirgun bhajan*, which often liken the bride's departure to the soul's departure from the body at death. Three lines from a *nirgun* verse by the fifteenth-century poet Kabir share literal elements with Bhojpuri *bidāi gīt*, including a forest, symbolic of the danger of travel between a woman's birth and married homes: "The departure day has arrived, and the mind is gladdened. / The palanquin is carried to the threatening forest, where I know no one. / I grasp your feet, palanquin-bearer; set down the palanquin for a moment" (Jāfrī 1998, 90).

Performers in Renu's village identify both the literal and metaphorical meanings of *nirgun*. I discussed this song from Renu's novel with a *nirgun* singer, Jainarayan Mandal, who is a close associate of Renu. Jainarayan described it as a *bidāi gīt*, a women's song for the bride's departure: "When she goes, she is happy, thinking, 'Now I am going to my husband's home!' But then she stops the driver and says, 'Now let me

say goodbye to my mother. Let me say goodbye to my brother. And then I can go.' That is when they cry." In Renu's novel, when the song describes crying family members halting the procession, a weeping woman emerges and stops the Gandhi procession. Shouts follow her: "Oh *kaniyā*," which in Renu's village refers specifically to a newly married woman. The distinction between funerary and wedding song collapses.

The journey's pause—when family members grasp the palanquin—is one key element in these departure songs. As with Kabir's verse, it often occurs near a forest. It is no coincidence that Renu's *Mailā Āñcal* contains other instances of young brides stopping at forests on the way to their married homes. By the time the reader encounters the *samdāun* song performed after Gandhi's death, three other instances of interrupted bridal journeys have already been encountered in the novel. The opening lines of *Mailā Āñcal*'s second chapter describe a "bride who has just departed her natal home," traveling with her husband to her new home. She is not crying, for she looks forward to her new life. They stop at a forest where the husband shows his bride ruins of an earlier age. The forest is not threatening or treacherous, and the ruins are a source of pride. The second instance occurs as the young girl Kamali weeps when reading a passage from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Indirā*, in which a new bride rides on a palanquin to her husband's home. Indira thinks hopefully about her future life, but she is abducted by dacoits when the palanquin stops by a dangerous forest. The third example occurs when the villagers celebrate Independence by staging a wedding between Mother India and Independence. A patriotic song is performed, in which Independence rides on a bamboo palanquin accompanied by India's freedom fighters. But the procession is halted by a socialist agitator who chants, "Freedom's just a big fat lie, / The nation's people starve and die!" (Renu 1995, 2:225).

Before arriving at the departure song in which weeping family members halt the palanquin, Renu's reader has already encountered these three moments of interrupted bridal journeys. The song is a repetition of those instances. Renu gives his reader the tools to read the song not as a static text on a page but as one more note in a series of notes in counterpoint. Renu thus primes his reader to interpret this *samdāun* horizontally, as a member of the performance community would. The palanquin halts because sister is leaving, because grandmother has died, because Independence is a lie. Each song is a moment of repetition predicated on previous performances and on human relationships. Those relationships affect meaning. In performance, the *devī gīt* titled "Mother Is Swinging" is sometimes an interaction between sisters-in-law, as happened in Banpurwa, when a woman returning to her birth home inserted explicit lines into a well-known song performed by her sister-in-law at her brother's wedding. They laugh, but the depth of their relationship, this horizontal conception of village song, brings men to tears.

There is no single voice here but a chorus. Many recent works on these song traditions emphasize their multivocal nature. Jassal (2012), for example, demonstrates how songs can both affirm and challenge gendered societal expectations. No single song or performance from the women's repertory can be offered up as an example of what women think, and women are free, even, to criticize other performers' versions of songs. In her analysis of women's songs in Kangra, Narayan (2016) takes this

multivocality as a theoretical focus. Performers in Kangra demonstrate extraordinary creativity and resourcefulness as they live through the songs of the goddesses about whom they sing. Like much recent work on women's song traditions, both authors engage directly with the emotive content of the song material and emphasize that meaning cannot be separated from performance or performers.

When performing the departure song, women can either laugh or cry. Factors affecting emotional response are countless and include pressures of kinship structures, locations within natal or married homes, and the realities of everyday interpersonal relationships. When Pinki and Rajkumari laughed at sister-in-law's "hard heart," one was in her husband's home, and the other was in her birth home. Despite sitting with each other in the same geographical location, they were both subject to very different gendered expectations regarding their dress, speech, and behavior. During performance, such varying expectations necessarily affect song meaning. At that moment, to these two sisters-in-law who consider each other friends, the traditional rivalry between these two women, as portrayed in the village song repertory, seemed quite comical. As occasional audience members, men may have access to the women's repertory, but the material from Hindi novels presented here suggests a similarly complicated engagement with that emotive world. In a patrilocal system, in which men see their daughters or sisters leave in heart-wrenching scenes, it is thus perhaps unsurprising that men's works focus on the pain of departure. But there is still considerable room for alternate reactions in these literary works. With Renu, the journey from natal home to married home takes on multiple meanings throughout his novel. And in Mishra's novel, the bride's father must be urged by family to perform sorrow.

In Delhi, Ramdarash Mishra became quite emotional discussing Renu, more so than he had discussing his own work. I asked him again about the cruel sister-in-law in the *bidāi gīt*, who is happy to see her husband's sister leave. He explained, as performers often do, by way of another song—this one about the rivalry between these two women. But while describing a song that women in his village may sing together while laughing, Mishra found himself overcome by emotion. "A young woman is in her married home," he explained. Her husband has been gone for some time, but he finally returns. He arrives with her "mother's son," that is, her own brother:

There is a girl who sees that two men are coming on horseback—one white horse, one black. She says, "The white horse carries my mother's son. The black one carries my husband." Her brother arrives, and she says to her mother-in-law, "My brother has come, please let me feed him." She feeds her brother from broken bowls. She tells him how she prepares food for everyone in the house but has nothing to eat herself. Her only request to her brother: *Do not tell our father.*

At this point in his narration, Ramdarash choked on his words. "Look at this," he said quietly, gesturing to his eyes as he wiped them. He then concluded: "Don't tell our mother. She would die if she found out. Don't tell your wife, she would die. Don't tell our younger sister, she could not bear it."

Not long after I met with Ramdarash in Delhi, I traveled to his village Dumari, in UP's Gorakhpur district. I was greeted there by Ramdarash's ninety-four-year-old

brother, the Bhojpuri poet Ramnaval Mishra, who passed away shortly after I met him. The Bhojpuri poet asked me about the health of his brother in Delhi. Despite being blind and almost deaf, he sang one of his compositions that describes seven decades of village change. I also recorded his daughter-in-law Shanti Devi, who performed a series of local songs. She began with the *devī gīt* about the gardener and the goddess. I asked her about the departure song, which she knew well. “Brother grasps the palanquin and weeps,” she sang. During her rendition, it was Ramkirpal, a seventy-year-old man who sat with us on the veranda, who suddenly gasped and cried.

Amitav Ghosh’s worldly text: Postcolonial folksong as a window to the world

The study of folklore and the study of literature have been called “rival siblings” (Rosenberg 1991), with studies of folklore within literature an obvious area of overlap. Folklorist Roger Abrahams was critical of these studies, finding them to provide only glosses of literary features that do little more than demonstrate that an author used folklore to “provide the quaint setting” (1972, 84–85). Indeed, Frank de Caro and Rosan Jordan note that “living writers rarely have even been asked about their uses of folk material,” and that it is notoriously difficult to retrieve that information (2004, 13). This article’s analysis of Mishra, Raza, and Renu’s Hindi works demonstrates the depth of these authors’ interactions with local song. There is nothing quaint here. What remains is to consider how these songs might function in the work of a nonregional author. For this, I turn to Amitav Ghosh’s 2008 English-language novel *Sea of Poppies*. Jan Goldstein, the president of the American Historical Association, has recommended this novel as a method for learning global history (2014). However, a contrapuntal reading of Bhojpuri songs in this novel against their corresponding field locations uncovers mismatches between text and field. Unlike the Hindi authors, Ghosh’s individual readings of song often seem literal. Nevertheless, they combine to produce a wonderful fiction. Rather than sharpen this novel as a global history tool, a horizontal reading of Ghosh’s use of song raises Goldstein’s question regarding the “boundary between history and fiction.”

Ghosh grew up in Calcutta and earned his PhD in anthropology at Oxford. *Sea of Poppies* is the first in his *Ibis* trilogy. It is set in colonial India and opens in the opium fields of eastern Uttar Pradesh, at the famous opium factory in nineteenth-century Ghazipur—not far from the birth villages of Ramdarash Mishra and Rahi Masoom Raza. Characters’ lives converge on the *Ibis*, the ship taking them to the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius. The novel is informed by Ghosh’s ethnographic and archival research on nineteenth-century opium production, and on the British system of indenture that brought laborers from the vast Gangetic plains to the tiny tropical islands of Trinidad, Fiji, and Mauritius.

The novel includes eight songs, in transliterated Bhojpuri or Hindi, with Ghosh’s English translation. For these texts, Ghosh cites the nineteenth-century accounts of George Grierson (1884), Edward Henry’s 1988 study of Bhojpuri song, Sarita Boodhoo’s 2003 study of Mauritius Bhojpuri song, and my mother Helen Myers’s 1998 study of Indian music in Trinidad. These are telling choices. Grierson’s accounts are contemporaneous with the events depicted in *Sea of Poppies*. The works on

twentieth-century Mauritius and Trinidad are potentially reliable sources for music of the nineteenth-century Gangetic plain. Both island locations are home to Bhojpuri communities descended from nineteenth-century indentured servants, and there is evidence of marginal survivals of older Bhojpuri forms in the island locations.

Reading and fieldwork make good companions with the Hindi novels by Mishra, Raza, and Renu. The same is true of Ghosh's novel, because it is shaped not just by texts but also by the world. That world includes nineteenth- and twentieth-century performances, interactions between local singers and foreign scholars, and the ongoing winds of musical change. More than anything, it includes songs that matter to many people. Consider the *devī gīt* used by Mishra in his novel, which I have recorded in villages from Varanasi to Gorakhpur districts, and which has been reported from all corners of the Bhojpuri region. A tally of the population of this area suggests that over the past 150 years, performances of this song have mattered to hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people. Such history, which compelled Ghosh to include the songs, is part of the geographical notation of his novel. A contrapuntal reading of *Sea of Poppies* can take this history into account, including the history of the scholarly texts that informed his work, and including the recent history of the populations of these island colonies who brought Bhojpuri village song *sāt samundar pār*, across the seven seas.

Having spent part of my childhood in Trinidad, sent there by my ethnomusicologist mother, and having conducted research on village songs in north India and in Mauritius, I am familiar with the Bhojpuri song repertory of the three musical locations in Ghosh's novel. Edward Said's insistence that texts are a part of the world demonstrates that the worldly critic can study the world without traveling it; the world is already a part of the text. Nevertheless, my interest in village performance has led me to an investigation of the nonfictional locations where those performances take place. An analysis of one song from each location—Mauritius, India, and Trinidad—will suffice to demonstrate the global reach of Ghosh's work and provide a contrast between Ghosh's use of song and that of the Hindi authors.

Location one: Goodlands, Mauritius

One song in *Sea of Poppies* is hummed quietly by a character named Deeti. Her pathetic husband has lost his job at the opium factory, setting in motion the chain of events that brings her from the Gangetic plain to the *Ibis* and the ocean. Sitting on a bullock cart, Deeti feels surrounded by darkness, prompting her to chant an evening song, "as if by habit."

Sājh bhailé
Sājha ghar ghar ghumé
Ke mora sājh
manayo ji

Twilight whispers
 at every door:
 it's time
 to mark my coming. (Ghosh 2008, 99)

Ghosh's source for this song is Sarita Boodhoo's volume on Bhojpuri culture in Mauritius. As part of his research for *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh spent time in Mauritius with members of the Bhojpuri community—descendants of the nineteenth-century indentured servants who arrived on ships like the *Ibis*. I had a chance to ask Ghosh about his motivation to include village song lyrics in his novel; he cited his experience witnessing the important role of song in the Bhojpuri community of this tiny Indian Ocean island nation.

When I conducted fieldwork in Mauritius in the late 1990s, I witnessed a lively song repertory. Many Mauritius Bhojpuri songs are directly related to, if not obviously versions of songs still performed in villages of eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar. Some Mauritius songs closely match songs performed in India today, in text and tune. Other songs may be marginal survivals from the nineteenth century, while others are lively adaptations to the Mauritius Creole community—with French *auto* and *avion* in place of Bhojpuri and Hindi *ghorā* and *hāthī*. Deeti's song, "Twilight Whispers," is known in Mauritius and north India as a *sandhyā gīt* (twilight song). It is one of the best-known songs on the island and serves as the musical cornerstone of the Friday evening tradition called *gīt gavāī* (song singing), in which neighborhood women are invited to sing in the home where a wedding is taking place. In the decades since I visited, there have been many local efforts to promote and preserve *gīt gavāī*, which is seen as a central part of Mauritius Bhojpuri culture (Dawosing 2020).

On Friday afternoon, family members use tape and cardboard to cover the floor of the front room of the house. This protects the floor and creates a less harsh surface for the barefooted women to dance on. One woman is hired to lead others in singing. Once she arrives, the women perform *nād puja*, a worship of sound itself (figure 3). The mother of the bride or groom bows to the *ḍholak* drum and makes an offering of Mauritius rupees. Fresh vermilion is applied to the parting of her hair, and the lead singer directs her to apply vermilion to the drum. She then lights a small piece of camphor, which has been placed within a betel nut upon the drum. Pounded ginger mixed with sugar is presented to all the singers as they begin the first set of four or five *sandhyā gīts*, which are the best-known items in the Mauritius Bhojpuri repertory. They are performed without instrumental accompaniment, and often all women in the room sing. The songs tell of *Sandhyā*, the goddess of morning and twilight, of the boundary between night and dark. She is asked to leave her home at the bank of the river and to come reside within the house. How, the song asks, shall we worship the goddess and welcome her into this home?

I attended a wedding in the north Mauritius town of Goodlands, where Manti Ramodin, an expert performer of the Mauritius Bhojpuri repertory, led the family and neighborhood women in a performance of this song. Her opening lines correspond to those in Ghosh's novel, and therefore also to the version in Boodhoo's folksong collection, from which Ghosh drew the song:

sāj̄h bhaīle
sanjhā ghare-ghare ghumilā ho
kehī more sanjhā manāī jī
apane mahaliyā se bulilā apān bābā
ham lebon sanjhā darasān



Figure 3. *Nād pūjā* in Mauritius. Photo by Ian Woolford.

*bahise ke debon mātā sone ke sinhāsan
acharā pasāri guṇ gāun*

Evening falls
Evening travels to every house
Who will appease my evening goddess?
My father calls from within his house
I will take the holy vision of evening
I will give Mother a golden throne to sit on
Spread your *ānchal* and sing her praises.

Manti's song continued. Additional family members call from within the house. They offer the Goddess pure water, exquisite food, a cooling fan, a beautiful bed, milk and pudding, and finally they promise to perform a fire sacrifice in her honor. Manti concluded with an invocation to Tulsidas, author of the sixteenth-century *Rāmcaritmānas*, by uttering the following:

*tulsidās balu ās charan ke ho ās charan ke
tuhi ke charan chitalāv*

With great hope for the blessings flowing from Tulsidas's feet
I bring my mind to your feet.

The Mauritius *gīt gavāi* ceremony begins with this and other *sandhyā gīt*, after which the women sing four or five songs about the divine relationship between the deities Shiva and Gauri. As these songs conclude, they are offered more pounded ginger with sugar, cardamom, and cloves. Women still fill the room, but the number of singers may be reduced to five or six skilled performers. Those women are offered

small cups of whiskey, which are refused at first, then accepted after much insistence. Now they sing lively *jhūmar*, accompanied by the *dholak* drum and the *lotā*, a small brass pot played with spoons. They dance in a circular pattern, in a style reminiscent of women's dance from north India but also influenced by the Mauritian Sega style. The singing and dancing often continue into the early morning hours.

The *sandhyā gīt* performed at the evening's beginning require less expertise from the performer; all women in the room participate, reinforcing what Kevin Miller (2008), writing on Indo-Fijian musical identity, calls a "community of sentiment." Ghosh was moved by the strength of this community, which he witnessed firsthand during his time in Mauritius. This musical community did not exist during the time period depicted in *Sea of Poppies*, and Ghosh therefore does not attempt to transplant the twenty-first-century Mauritius performances into his novel. The whisky, the laughter, and the dancing have no place there, for there is no community aspect to the novel's performance. It is not sung but "chanted" by a woman enveloped by darkness. Instead, the song stands as a prediction. A fictional peasant woman from north India thinks of her future and chants a song. That song is one of the strongest symbols of a community that she will never know, but within which, as a performer and creator of song, she is essentially a participant.

Location two: Uttar Pradesh, India

When Deeti flees her husband's family, she recalls her wedding and the journey to her husband's home. She made the journey by boat, and the ladyfolk who accompanied her sang on a sensual theme common to the region's erotic song tradition: "Oh friends, my love's a-grinding." The next paragraph describes Deeti's memory of reaching the riverbank and being carried to her husband's household in a *nalki*, a bridal palanquin.

The songs had grown increasingly suggestive while she sat waiting for her husband, and her neck and shoulders had tightened in anticipation of the grip that would push her prone on the bed. Her sisters had said: Make it hard for him the first time or he'll give you no peace later; fight and scratch and don't let him touch your breasts.

Ág mor lágal ba
Aré sagari badaniyá . . .
Tas-mas choli karái
Barhalá jobanawá

I'm on fire
 My body burns . . .
 My choli strains
 Against my waking breasts . . . (Ghosh 2008, 32)

The song sets up a frustrated expectation. The moment Deeti's sisters prepared her for does not come, because her husband is an impotent lump, more wed to his opium pipe than his wife. It seems also intended to add an element of ethnographic authenticity to the scene. Indeed, analyses of folklore in literature have often highlighted this literary function of folklore (Evans 2005, 99). A contrapuntal reading

can look farther and take the novel's geographical notation into account, including the exact performance and scholarship that led to Ghosh's inclusion of this song.

The source for this song is Edward Henry's 1988 study of Bhojpuri music in eastern Uttar Pradesh. The song belongs to the *pūrvī* genre, and Ghosh uses two of the eleven lines in Henry's text. Henry describes *pūrvī* as a kind of "entertainment music" performed for the men of the *barāt*, the groom's wedding party. In eastern Uttar Pradesh, the *barāt* often camps outside in a field, where entertainment is provided. When Henry collected this *pūrvī*, the entertainment was exclusively live. Today, Bollywood films projected onto large sheets hung from the trees are a common option.

Pūrvī performances included harmonium and *ḍholak* players. The principal singer could have been either a female dancer or a female-impersonator called a *lauṇḍā*. In this case, it was performed by a woman to entertain the primarily male audience. Henry is conflicted, though, as to whether this song should be properly categorized as a *pūrvī*. This song describes a face-to-face conversation between lovers, rather than the typical *pūrvī* theme of love in separation. The refrain presented in Henry's text is "jawan jawan kahī piyā mānab sab bachaniyā" (Whatever you say, my love, I'll do what you want). And the last lines are unambiguous: "Unbutton the buttons, lover, take pleasure. / Just remove my nose ring and slowly kiss me" (1988, 209). Henry suggests that *pūrvī* may have solidified as a genre between the 1920s and 1940s, citing studies of Bhojpuri music in the Caribbean, none of which identify *pūrvī* in the New World, as evidence that the genre did not exist under that name during the period of nineteenth-century indentured labor. That is, *pūrvī* as such may not have existed during the period portrayed in Ghosh's novel. Nevertheless, song texts such as these certainly predate the twentieth-century *pūrvī* phenomenon, even if their appearance in this exact genre did not (Henry 2006, 3–6).

The sensual union described in this song is atypical of the *pūrvī* genre. Genres are fluid designations that can be reworked by performers to multiple artistic ends. Performers who are hired for a wedding may be more concerned with entertaining than they are with preserving ambiguous boundaries of genre classification. In the case of keeping a raucous group of groomsmen occupied, this might mean inserting sexually suggestive lyrics into a genre that does not normally accommodate them. Henry presents a theory of "genre entropy," which he explains as the "degradation of organization within a genre" in which musicians enliven their performances by incorporating text and tunes from other genres, thereby changing their nature without changing their name (Henry 2000, 101).

At more recent weddings in villages around Varanasi, I found songs of this amorous type are increasingly common during live performances for the *barāt*. This was the case during the Banpurwa wedding previously described, in which Nirmala Devi led the women in the *devī gīt* during the *maṭṭikor* ceremony. The next day the groom and his *barāt* traveled by bus to the bride's home in a village in Jaunpur. The men camped out in a field and were entertained by a troupe that performed film songs and energetic renditions of Bhojpuri hits (figure 4). The group's lead female singer sang the following lyrics many times during the night, because it was requested again and again by the men of the *barāt*, who threw money at the stage to have their request honored. As noted by Bidisha Chakraborty and Vandana Nain in their analysis of

popular Bhojpuri songs, performances such as this focus on the male spectator while relying on “deep misogyny and gender stereotypes” (2020, 2). Indeed, encouraged by this song, young men in the audience openly speculated on the singer’s possible sexual promiscuity.

nayā-nayā māl bā
dādhī bemisāl bā
jaise chāhā,
vaise āj dūngā
o launde rājā chakkū mār!

Here’s some nice new stuff
 With an incomparable beard
 I’ll give whatever you want today,
 Oh Big Boy, beat me with your knife.

As with the *pūrvī* from Henry’s collection, the speaker in this song addresses her lover directly. Her lover is young (his beard is newly developed) and she will do whatever he wants. In the fourth line she calls him her *lauṇḍe rājā* (Launda Prince), translated here as “Big Boy.” This is an unusual juxtaposition of words. *Rājā* means “prince” or “king.” *Launḍā* can refer to a young or effeminate man, to the female impersonator who dances and sings during *pūrvī* and related traditions, or even to the male genitalia.

This song was not identified by the performers as a *pūrvī*, which are rarely performed now, if at all. But the text is similar, and the performance context is identical to the *pūrvī* documented by Henry, which Ghosh later included in his novel. I heard the “new stuff” song performed at a time when the *pūrvī* genre had all but disappeared. As traditional *pūrvī* lyrics gave way to those with more contemporary entertainment value, the tunes, too, may have been replaced. What remains are



Figure 4. Entertainment for the groom and his relatives at a wedding in Uttar Pradesh. Photo by Ian Woolford.

songs through which women tease their male audiences by providing public windows on women's expressions of desire.

The scene from the Jaunpur village field, or from Henry's ethnography, is not the one depicted in Ghosh's novel. The fictional scene has the bride Deeti traveling on the river by boat to her husband's home. This is her ritual departure from her natal home to her married home. The women accompany her, singing as they go. The scene implies that the song is part of the women's song repertory: one of many songs that women sing in the company of other women. In truth, such women's songs are distinct from *pūrvī*. When I asked him about the appearance of his work in Ghosh's novel, Henry recalled that the singer performed the song with "a twinkle in her eye." But in Ghosh's novel the twinkle is absent, replaced with a literal reading of the text. A woman's public performance of female desire, used to entertain raucous men throughout the night, has been presented by Ghosh as private thoughts of a young woman on the threshold of her bridal chamber. Women in this region of India certainly do use private song performance in this way, when no men are present. But Ghosh drew this song from a public wedding context, in which men camped out overnight in a village field are left to speculate on how this public performance might reflect women's private desires. Ghosh, likewise, refashions the public performance into a private, interior moment.

Location three: Felicity, Trinidad

Having left the Gangetic plain, Ghosh's characters find themselves on the *Ibis*, where the captain critiques a shipboard peasant group's performance through a mouthful of food.

But in spite of the plenitude of food and drink, there was less conviviality in the cuddy than there was around the chuldan, where, from time to time, the migrants could even be heard singing a few snatches of song.

*Májha dhára mé hai bera merá
Kripá kará ásráí hai tera*

My raft's adrift in the current
Your mercy is my only refuge . . .

'Damned coolies,' muttered the Captain, through a mouthful of lamb. 'Bloody Doomsday couldn't put a stop to their caterwauling.' (Ghosh 2008, 374)

Nineteenth-century documents tell that such performances did take place on the ships. While visiting the Mahatma Gandhi Institute in Mauritius, Ghosh could have viewed several displays of musical instruments brought by the nineteenth-century coolies on ships like the *Ibis*, as well as read officers' accounts that describe shipboard performances. The 1858 diary of Captain E. Swinton of the Trinidad-bound *Salsette* said that the coolies were "very musical." His wife Jane Swinton found that the coolies' music and "native dances" were "very useful in keeping up a good state of health," and she participated in them herself (Myers 1998, 9–12).

As with my experience with Mishra's novel, I immediately recognized several of the songs in Ghosh's text. But this passage startled me more than any other, because

I know this song well from my childhood, and I am deeply familiar with the history of the scholarly source from which Ghosh learned the song—that being my mother Helen Myers’s 1998 book on Indian musical culture in Trinidad. When I was in sixth grade in the 1980s, she sent me to her Caribbean field site and placed me in the care of Maati and Mesho Rohit. Mesho was a teacher at Felicity Hindu School on Cacandee Road, where I was enrolled for a year, and where I learned this song and many others alongside my classmates. With its opening request for knowledge, it is especially appropriate for young students: *he jagata pitā bhagavāna, hame do jñāna* (Oh, ruler of the world, Lord, grant us knowledge). The mechanics of these performances were equal in importance to any individual song’s literal content. Every performance was a teaching tool, in which we learned through constant repeat and refrain. The performance style was predicated on language loss. In a Trinidad Indian community that was fast losing knowledge of Hindi and Bhojpuri (Mohan and Zador 1986), this structure allowed groups of young children, including myself, a British boy with limited knowledge of Hindi, to sing entire Hindi songs on philosophical topics.

These Cacandee Road performances were the source for the *bhajan* in Ghosh’s novel. The temporal and spatial shifts that appeared when comparing the literary examples with the performed examples from Mauritius and eastern Uttar Pradesh become even more pronounced with this example from Trinidad. A group of shipboard peasants perform a song whose literal content concerns bodies of water and aquatic vessels, thus inviting a literal reading of the song. The experience of a shipboard “snatch of song” bears little resemblance to the sunrise performances at the Divine Life Society or to the daily *bhajan* drills at the Felicity Hindu School. For likeminded readers on Cacandee Road, this song belongs with raising the Trinidad flag the morning (I was the designated flag-raiser), and with Trinidad’s national anthem: “Side by side we stand, islands of the blue Caribbean Sea.” It belongs with cricket after school, and harmoniums, and with backyard ducks for dinner, with essays on Wordsworth and on dengue fever, with Trinidad Creole I no longer speak, and with lining up in front of class, to be given lashes by the teacher for an offence I do not remember. The fictional text is dependent on these real-world performances. And literature, with its ability to open doors, opens them back toward that world.

Sea of Poppies is not about any of the scholarly texts from which Ghosh selected musical examples, nor is it about the processes that produced those texts, including the postcolonial anxieties that underpin anthropological and ethnomusicological work of the late twentieth century. But it is nevertheless dependent on those texts and anxieties. The unusual postcolonial circumstance that would find me, as a young British schoolboy, overseas and learning Hindi *bhajan* from members of the Bhojpuri community of a former British colony is connected to the scholarly text that informed Ghosh’s novel. My mother was eager, after all, to record me when I returned to my family, and my spontaneous performances must have strengthened her conviction that this repertory was of fundamental importance to the Trinidad Bhojpuri community. A contrapuntal reading of Ghosh’s work takes these experiences into account.

Reading in the global field

The song traditions that Ghosh draws from rely on deep repetition that encodes emotions that are at times impossible to discuss. Mishra and Renu both describe tears on contemplating songs of their villages. It takes an entire novel to explain why memory of a village song brings tears to the eyes of a ninety-four-year-old Hindi professor sitting at his home in Delhi. Renu's novel provides the reader with the tools to understand a tear-filled song from the perspective of performance. Each song represents one note in a series of notes in counterpoint that ring throughout each novel. These Hindi novels sit well in the field. A certain harmony sounds when the vertical text of any single one of these novel's songs is considered alongside the horizontal text that includes field, performance, and memory. Contrapuntal reading uncovers both elements of these texts: horizontal and vertical. A certain dissonance, however, sounds within Ghosh's novel. His songs are sourced from ethnographies and a colonial administrator's accounts, and a contrapuntal reading of his novel reveals fractures and gaps. Nevertheless, the songs in his novel are as worldly as those in the novels of his Hindi counterparts, and they too must sound out in the world.

At the beginning of *Sea of Poppies*, Deeti views an apparition of a ship with large white sails. She has never seen such a thing in her life. The reader knows of the *Ibis* in her future and may suspect this to be the beginning of the kind of magically realistic journey that has come to characterize much Indian writing in English. But the novel takes a different path. Each song becomes like Deeti's vision of the white-sailed ship: harbingers of performances to come in far-flung locations across the world. Ghosh projects the multilayered counterpoint of today's performances back into his fictional nineteenth century. Deeti possesses the knowledge that will inform the *pūrvī* genre, whose genesis lies somewhere during the 1930s and by the end of the twentieth century was giving way to new performance forms. She has the knowledge that informs the evening performances in Mauritius, with the smashed ginger and sugar, the cardamom and cloves, the whisky and dancing. The shipboard performance likewise predicts the Bhojpuri traditions in the New World. These are songs that still bring pain and joy in twenty-first-century performance and memory; each song is a window on a human world that can bring individuals to tears. Ghosh's novel is a postcolonial tour of colonial India, and its songs are visions of a postcolonial identity yet to be formed. All exist within the thoughts of a nineteenth-century peasant, who is part of the network of associations that contribute to the worldliness of this text. Her songs tell this story.

NOTES

1. The notorious difficulty translators often encounter when translating titles is well demonstrated by *Mailā Āñcal*, where the word *āñcal* refers both to the "region" of Bihar portrayed in the novel, and also to the "fabric at the end of a sari"—the part of the garment associated with modesty, grace, protection, and motherhood. Both elements are *mailā*, that is "dirty," "unclean," or even "backward." Multiple meanings are present, in a title that likens this dusty region of India to a soiled garment worn by Mother India (see Junghare 1982).

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