

Transmissions and Transitions in Indian Oral Traditions: An Introduction

Kirin Narayan

To assemble a group is to invite conversation. The essays that come together in this special issue of *Oral Tradition* all arrive bearing insights cultivated through extended engagements with very different settings. Settling into this shared space, the essays speak resonantly to each other. They cluster around shared themes, circulate in paired dialogues, and also stand back to offer the others distinctive perspectives.

Many special issues that this journal has hosted first emerged from a conference where participants met face-to-face and heard each other's ideas. This set of contributors assembles together for the first time with the journal's publication. I imagine that my fellow authors will be just as intrigued as I have been to learn what others have written, and to contemplate these six essays as a sociable group. I use this introductory space to offer notes on conversations that I perceive; a discerning reader will no doubt pick up on others.

But first I need to establish the wider setting of the vast diversity of Indian oral traditions that stretches beyond these contributions, and indeed stretches beyond the boundaries of modern India into the Indian diaspora. The work of these six scholars cannot possibly convey the many regions, languages, religions, and genres of traditional performance that contribute to India's cultural vibrancy. The many planes of differentiation within India offer the dynamic for variation set into motion when oral traditions move between regions. Power differentials also shed light on the standardization that occurs when dominant groups dictate tastes. Such dominance is variously embodied in the authoritative clout of Brahmanical or *puranic* Hindu texts and practices, the prestige of middle class values, and the mesmerizing power and spread of technological mediation. Especially since the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 and the growth of a vast middle class, oral traditions have been revalued through a middle-class lens—some traditions embraced with nostalgia, others discarded as outmoded. The push towards greater literacy in formally recognized languages over sometimes unwritten dialects has also meant that non-literate forms of knowledge carried in regional dialects can be seen as quaint and irrelevant. That approximately half of the population of about 1.28 billion is age 26 or younger means that traditions associated with the vanished life worlds of elders can be less captivating than contemporary cultural forms centered around youth's concerns and carried by film, television, and the internet. The hard-won knowledge of lower caste specialists in ritual and oral tradition, as well as the informally communicated oral traditions of the poor, the nonliterate and

the old, can seem detached from the goals of getting ahead amid increasing urbanization, industrialization, and the spread of technology.

In terms of region, these essays mostly present oral traditions from sites in north India, in a big band stretching from Rajasthan towards Bengal—with the exception of Flueckiger's fieldwork location in Andhra Pradesh and Prasad's use of a story from Karnataka. The essays' cultural resonances also extend beyond India with Prasad's counterpoint between Shakespeare and Indian folktales and Friedlander's description of how Kabir song traditions have been recast in the West. With languages, the group tilts towards Hindi and North Indian languages—with Flueckiger, working in Telugu, offering the exception. At the same time, the medium of English used to convey the authors' thoughts about oral traditions and to discuss preexisting translations and scholarly literature is a reminder of the ways that the English language has since colonial times onwards become an aspect of Indian orality. In terms of religion, the contributions offer insights into the practices associated with Hinduism whether in localized variation or in pan-Indian standardization, though Friedlander's account of the diverse audiences for Kabir illustrates how Kabir also belongs to Muslim and Sikh communities and is even appropriated by mystical Christianity. And in terms of folklore genres, the essays offer examples of myths, legends, folktales, songs and proverb.

The essays at first glance fall into two groups: those that highlight oral traditions in the context of ritual life (Flueckiger, Gold, Sharma) and those that focus on the mutual constitution of oral traditions and written texts and the generative space between (Friedlander, Narayan, Prasad). Flueckiger, Gold, and Sharma speak of shifts in ritual practices and a standardization associated with pan-Indian versions shaped by with *puranic* traditions, mass media, and the ascent of middle-class values. Friedlander, Narayan, and Prasad describe moments in the making of texts—whether collections of songs attributed to Kabir, an anthropologist's sheaf of transcriptions, or a new edition of King Lear emerging in interplay with Indian folktales around the same filial-love theme. Yet the songs described by Friedlander and Narayan connect with ritual too, whether for collective worship or to celebrate life-cycle events. That Prasad's essay does not address ritual is an important reminder that though many performances of oral traditions are associated with group rituals in India, oral traditions may also be exchanged as an aspect of face-to-face interactions.

The essays can also be paired as conversational partners, in shifting formations with each juxtaposition bringing particular aspects of Indian oral traditions and their transformations into focus. For example, highlighting deities, these essays describe rituals and stories around goddesses (Flueckiger, Gold); vernacular sung mythologies of Shiva (Narayan, Sharma); and songs as well as stories that acknowledge a formless divinity as the maker of fates (Friedlander, Prasad). Looking towards identity, the essays reflect on radical transformation and dislocation from the very core of self-definition (Flueckiger, Sharma); the importance of kinship relations in sustaining selves (Gold, Prasad); and how the very act of transcribing oral traditions into written collections is tied to community making (Friedlander, Narayan).

Each essay also offers distinctive insights. Since all the assembled abstracts are just a click away, I will not attempt to summarize but rather try to identify the central contribution that I found most illuminating and that might be of value to scholars working outside India as a region. I line these up in alphabetical order. Focusing on the Goddess Gangamma, Flueckiger

shows how ritual and narrative mutually constitute each other, sometimes running parallel, sometimes intersecting, and how with ritual transformed and narrative corpus marginalized, the very identity of a Goddess shifts. Looking to collections of Kabir's songs, Friedlander points to how the diverse collections of oral traditions attributed to the same author carry clues to values of the communities for whom they were first written down. Drawing on over three decades of fieldwork, Gold pairs two ritual fasts that women undertake for their own auspicious married state and a husband's well-being to show how, amid changing hopes for marriage and trends towards standardization, this ritual action continues to create a reassuring sense of continuity. Presenting her work with Kangra women's songs, Narayan argues for the value of reflecting on the practice of transcription and the interactions generated around the material artifacts when moving oral tradition into written form. Prasad, a folklorist, brought her own interest in Indian folktales to conversations with her father, a Shakespeare specialist, as they worked through his new edition of *King Lear*, and from these exchanges Prasad offers the concept of an interspace that starts with difference, encompassing intertext and intersubjectivity. Focusing on the Nuala performances of the Gaddi shepherds—once a sacred space of trance enhanced by the performances of ritual specialists, now an occasion for drunken revelry with recorded music—Sharma shows how focusing on one ritual through time can provide a prism on folklore, social change, and dislocated selfhood.

I am honored to participate in this lively gathering and to learn so much from my colleagues. I welcome all readers who now join us from across the world, bringing to these essays their own interests and expertise.

The Australian National University

This page is intentionally left blank.