

## Introduction: Gender Representation and the Problem of Language and Resistance in India

This book focuses on women's oral traditions and women's use of language in rural Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, northern India. We examine stories, ritual songs, personal narratives, and ordinary conversations from the villages of Pahansu, Hathchoya, and Ghatiyali and reflect on the ways in which these speech genres may be implicated in women's self-perceptions and self-fashioning, and the ways in which they may be understood as constituting a moral discourse in which gender and kinship identities are constructed, represented, negotiated, and contested in everyday life.

Several theoretical concerns inform our ethnographic analyses. At the most general level, we wish to position our arguments about gender in South Asia in such a way as to comment on current attempts to rethink the idea of culture in anthropology and in the social sciences, and attempts to understand the politics of representation in these disciplines. Second, we situate contemporary ethnography from western Uttar Pradesh and eastern Rajasthan in relation to the work of the *Subaltern Studies* historians, insofar as they are concerned with recovering the voices of those whose subjectivity and agency are generally obscured by most historical writing, and insofar as they offer theoretical perspectives on the interpretation of power and subaltern subjectivity. We share with those scholars an interest in what James Scott (1985) has called "everyday forms of resistance" to systems of ideological or material dominance. Our interests lie in exploring the "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990) implicit in women's speech and song, the often veiled, but sometimes overt and public, words and actions through which women communicate their resistance to dominant

North Indian characterizations of "women's nature" (*triyā charitra*) and of kinship relationships. While our primary aim is to understand women's language—the words in which they construct and communicate alternative self-perceptions and alternative vantage points on their social world—we wish to comment also on the relationship between women's moral discourse and everyday resistance, on the one hand, and forms of power in North Indian social relationships, on the other. Third, we focus on the interrelationship between kinship and gender in northern India, specifically on the ways in which a consideration of women's voices and women's agency necessitates a rethinking of standard anthropological conceptualizations of marriage and patrilineality in South Asia. And finally, our consideration of women's speech genres speaks to broader issues of the relationship between language and gender, particularly those connected with the pragmatic aspects of language use, with speech play and verbal art as forms of discourse (Sherzer 1987a) and with women's communicative devices as loci of potentially subversive speech.

#### CULTURE AND THE POLITICS OF GENDER REPRESENTATION IN INDIA

The anthropological objectification of a social practice often takes the form of positioning that practice within a single determinate discourse, a single interpretive frame, which becomes, then, a token of a coherent and totalizing "culture." Within the terms of such a positioning, culture is envisioned either as a "mode of thought" that "incarcerates" the native in a fixed and definite "way of thinking" (Appadurai 1988: 37–38) or as a set of "laws" or "rules" that transforms social chaos into social order, with the result that all human behavior becomes either unambiguously "normative" or "non-normative" within a specific cultural system (Bourdieu 1977: 1–15; Das 1989a: 310; Rosaldo 1989: 102). The construction of such an understanding of a particular social practice has a number of further consequences. Any interpretive strategy that views culture as a completed process, a coherent, bounded, and internally homogeneous "whole," tends also to view experience as given directly in that coherent culture, and thus the necessity of examining experience, and the voices of particular

thinking subjects, is rather dramatically obviated.<sup>1</sup> Second, attempts to understand a social practice as the typification of an ordered and knowable cultural totality focus attention almost exclusively on what Clifford Geertz referred to as "scope," the degree to which the determinate meaning of a particular pattern of thought or social practice does indeed resonate throughout a cultural whole (1968: 111–12). Geertz contrasts the scope of a cultural pattern with its force, "the thoroughness with which such a pattern is internalized in the personalities of the individuals who adopt it, its centrality or marginality in their lives." As Renato Rosaldo points out, in privileging the wholeness and coherence of culture while denying the import of particular positioned subjectivities, anthropologists have not generally attended to the "force" of a particular way of thinking or a particular social practice. If, however, we follow Rosaldo in recasting the notion of force to encompass an attention to the positioned subject (1989: 225–26 n.1), and if we begin to view culture not as a single totalizing discourse but as a universe of discourse and practice in which competing discourses may contend with and play off each other (Kelly 1988: 41), compose ironic commentaries on or subvert one another, or reflexively interrogate a given text or tradition or power relation (Das 1989a: 312; Ramanujan 1989b), we might then begin to interpret experience and subjectivity not in terms of a single, incarcerating mode of thought, but in terms of multiply voiced, contextually shifting, and often strategically deployed readings of the social practices we seek to explicate.

In speaking of gender and oral traditions in South Asia, we find that it is of critical importance to stress the multiplicity of discursive fields within which social relationships are constructed, defined, and commented upon.<sup>2</sup> The Indian woman has all too frequently been portrayed as a silent shadow, given in marriage

1. The limitations of this conception of stable and seamless cultural "wholes" have been explicitly discussed from a number of vantage points in contemporary anthropological writing. See, for example, Appadurai 1986, 1988; Clifford 1988:63–64.

2. For some of the many ethnographic examples of the interplay of multiple and sometimes competing discourses in South Asian social life, from a variety of theoretical perspectives, see Egnor 1986; Gold 1988a; Grima 1991; Holmberg 1989; March 1984; Oldenburg 1990; Prakash 1991; Raheja 1988b, 1993; Wadley n.d. (forthcoming).

by one patrilineal group to another, veiled and mute before affinal kinsmen, and unquestioningly accepting a single discourse that ratifies her own subordination and a negative view of femaleness and sexuality. Such a unitary representation of feminine passivity in India has a very long history. Colonial reports on the practice of *satī*, for example, often stress women's submissive, unquestioning obedience to the dictates of "religion," and their identity as passive bearers of a rigidly circumscribed "tradition" (Mani 1985, 1989). Such colonial documents also tend to infantilize women, in speaking of the widow as a "tender child," even though most *satīs* were undertaken by women over the age of forty (Mani 1989: 97–98; Yang 1989). These representations of female passivity played a double role in British efforts to construct a moral justification for colonial rule in India. As Partha Chatterjee has pointed out, the representation of Indian women as voiceless and oppressed provided a rationale for British colonial intervention:

Apart from the characterization of the political condition of India preceding the British conquest as a state of anarchy, lawlessness and arbitrary despotism, a central element in the ideological justification of British colonial rule was the criticism of the "degenerate and barbaric" social customs of the Indian people, sanctioned, or so it was believed, by their religious tradition. Alongside the project of instituting orderly, lawful and rational procedures of governance, therefore, colonialism also saw itself as performing a "civilizing mission." In identifying this tradition as "degenerate and barbaric," colonialist critics invariably repeated a long list of atrocities perpetrated on Indian women, not so much by men or certain classes of men, but by an entire body of scriptural canons and ritual practices which, they said, by rationalizing such atrocities within a complete framework of religious doctrine, made them appear to perpetrators and sufferers alike as the necessary marks of right conduct. By assuming a position of sympathy with the unfree and oppressed womanhood of India, the colonial mind was able to transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country.

(Chatterjee 1989: 622)

The "protection" of weak and passive Hindu women became, then, a strategy of colonial domination, and gender characterizations became vehicles for moral claims on the part of colonial

administrators, missionaries, and so forth (Mani 1989; O'Hanlon 1991).<sup>3</sup>

Apart from attempts to legitimate the colonial enterprise as a civilizing mission that would secure a greater degree of freedom for Indian womanhood, nineteenth-century British colonial authors also, as Ashis Nandy (1983) persuasively argues, attempted to differentiate themselves maximally from the colonized by articulating an ethic of "hyper-masculinity" (involving aggression, control, competition, power, and so on) for the West, and characterizing India as the feminine antithesis, as radically "other." Embodying colonially devalued "feminine" qualities, Indian society was seen as unfit to rule itself and as morally inferior to the masculine West. Representations of women's silent submission to the dictates of religious tradition became, then, politically strategic metonymic tropes for the passivity of India as a whole.

Chatterjee has written of the way in which late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nationalism responded to the colonial critique by constructing yet another discourse about women and Indian society, in terms of a redefined "classical tradition":

The social order . . . in which nationalists placed the new woman was contrasted not only with that of modern Western society; it was explicitly distinguished from the patriarchy of indigenous tradition, the same tradition that had been put on the dock by colonial interrogators. Sure enough, nationalism adopted several elements from tradition as marks of its native cultural identity, but this was now a "classicized" tradition—reformed, reconstructed, fortified against charges of barbarism and irrationality. . . . The new patriarchy was also sharply distinguished from the immediate social and cultural condition in which the majority of the people lived, for the "new" woman was quite the reverse of the "common" woman, who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males. It was precisely this degenerate condition of women which nationalism claimed it would reform.

(Chatterjee 1989: 627)

Sumanta Banerjee (1989) has analyzed the profound effects of this nationalist redefinition of the ideal woman on women's ex-

3. See Suleri 1992:69–74 for an example of a similar portrayal of the pathos and vulnerability of Indian women, albeit with a different political agenda, in a play by Richard Sheridan first performed in England in 1799.

pressive traditions. In nineteenth-century Bengal, songs and other forms of women's popular culture were often critical of women's position in the society of the time. "Often stark and bitter in expressing the plight of women in a male-dominated society, the poems and songs popular among the lower social groups were, at the same time, tough, sensuous or bawdy, in an idiom specific to women" (Banerjee 1989: 131–32). From the mid-nineteenth century onward, Bengali men, influenced both by colonial education and by nationalist sentiment, attempted to arouse public opinion against these expressive genres, and there were concerted efforts to denigrate and suppress them as "corrupting," indecent, and unworthy of proper Hindu women.<sup>4</sup> In the early twentieth century, the singing of such songs was viewed as a serious feminine shortcoming, and women's lack of formal education was cited as the cause of such moral failings, in women's didactic literature of the time (Kumar 1991: 21).

As Chatterjee observed, Indian nationalism came to view women as the guardians and preservers of tradition.<sup>5</sup> Ketu Katrak (1992) has argued that Gandhi further essentialized "tradition" and female sexuality through his appeals, in the nationalist cause, to the "female" virtues of sacrifice, purity, humility, and silent suffering that could be deployed in the service of the independence movement. His evocation of the mythological figures of Sita, Draupadi, and Savitri as exemplars of noble forbearance and contained sexuality led him to ignore, Katrak suggests, the more defiant and less passively submissive women of Indian history and legend who could equally have served as models of female identity.<sup>6</sup>

The contours of a similar politically motivated deployment of a discourse concerning women, propriety, and "tradition" are evident in Julia Leslie's discussion (1989) of the Sanskrit text *Strī-dharmapaddhati*. Written by Tryambakayajvan in an eighteenth-cen-

4. Tharu and Lalita (1991:187–90) provide translations of the songs of two female folksingers of this period.

5. This continues frequently to be the case in contemporary India. Dulali Nag (1990) has vividly drawn the contours of such a discourse on woman and "tradition" as it is deployed to market saris to middle- and upper-class Bengali women in advertisements in popular women's magazines.

6. The Gandhian legacy for women's movements in India is vastly more complex than this brief survey can comprise. The issue is further debated, as Katrak points out, in Jayawardana 1986 and Kishwar 1985.

tury Maratha court, the text outlines the duties and dispositions appropriate to the *pativrata*, the ideal wife who is devoted to and subordinate to her husband. Leslie suggests that the author's defense of an orthodox Hindu tradition concerning women represents a response to the challenges to that tradition posed by growing Muslim domination, by Christian missionary influence, and by the increasingly popular devotional movements (*bhakti*) that claimed, at least in their poetic traditions, that social distinctions between men and women were religiously insignificant (4). Leslie also points out that the polygamous milieu of the Maratha court presented certain political problems when queens and mistresses became involved in succession disputes and court intrigues. In such a milieu, she writes, "a work prescribing the proper behaviour of women might well have appeared to both kings and ministers to be a project of vital importance" (20). Thus, although the *Strīdharmapaddhati* presents itself as a treatise on the inherent nature of women grounded in the timelessness of the *dharmaśāstrik* texts, the internal and external political compulsions for its composition suggest to us some of the ways in which particular representations of gender are deployed for particular purposes in particular historical contexts (see Chakravarti 1991).

Further, the very existence of a text like the *Strīdharmapaddhati* indicates, perhaps, the existence of contrary discourses on gender and "women's nature." As Uma Chakravarti writes,

A close look at the *Strīdharmapaddhati* indicates that the powerful model of the *pativrata* thus plays a crucial role in the "taming" of women. Once internalised by them it also makes them complicit in their own subordination. Ultimate social control is effectively and imperceptibly achieved when the subordinated not only accept their condition but consider it a mark of distinction. What the eighteenth century *Strīdharmapaddhati* also unwittingly indicates is that not all women at all times accepted their condition nor considered it a mark of distinction: Hence the need for repeated reiteration of the duties of women, including the exhortation to women to mount the husband's pyre. The *Strīdharmapaddhati* was a complete manual on the way women "ought" to behave, written in order to counteract the potential or actual "recalcitrance" of women.

(Chakravarti 1991: 185)

Chakravarti's commentary here adumbrates an important aspect of the argument we attempt to make in these pages: that

a discourse of gender and kinship found in certain admittedly authoritative texts and practices does not by any means exhaust or fully define women's subjectivities in South Asia. This seemingly obvious point has not often found its way into writing on the lives of ordinary women in South Asia.

May not other such discourses, whether indigenous or composed by outside observers, be strategically and politically motivated representations that grossly oversimplify and misinterpret women's consciousness? We do not wish in any way to minimize the difficulties and inequities experienced by women in northern India today and in the past; we wish only to highlight the fact that there are no women's voices in many of these representations (Spivak 1985a: 122), and the fact that, as Lata Mani has pointed out (1989: 90), these colonial, nationalist, and "traditional" discourses, and some similar contemporary Indian political discourses as well (Pathak and Rajan 1989), are not primarily about women; they are, rather, political commentaries on the authenticity and moral worth of a tradition.

Chandra Mohanty (1984) has written of the tendency, within Western feminist writing, to define women of the "third world" as victims of male control and of an unchanging "tradition," as unresisting objects in relation to ahistorical and uncontextualized images of "the veiled woman," "the obedient wife," and so forth. Such representations, she argues, define and maintain postcolonial relations between the first and third worlds by positing, implicitly or explicitly, the moral superiority of the West and the moral degradation of the "patriarchal" third world.<sup>7</sup>

We cannot of course claim to have extricated ourselves entirely from these colonial and postcolonial ways of thinking. We are painfully aware of the perils involved in presuming to speak with any authority about women whose lives are so different from our own. Edward Said (1979) exhibits a quote from Marx as an ani-

7. It is not only *representations* of gender that are implicated in postcolonialism; the often harsh realities of women's economic and political situations in India are of course produced in the context of postcolonial national politics and the global political economy. Mies (1982), for example, analyzes the location of Indian housewives' lace-making work within the contemporary global economy, and Spivak (1992) explicates Mahasweta Devi's short story "Douloti the Bountiful" as a critique of the production of women as bonded laborers and bonded prostitutes within the caste and class dominations of postcolonial Indian capitalism.



madversary epigraph to his *Orientalism*: "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented."<sup>8</sup> It is precisely because of our conviction that Indian women can indeed represent themselves that we struggle to translate their words in these pages. Said explicitly castigates those totalizing and essentializing Orientalist discourses that privilege historically unchanging and univocal characterizations of social life in which human agency is radically deemphasized and a mute submission to "tradition" assumed. In attending to the multiple perspectives, shifting purposes, and reflexive and ironic commentaries evident in North Indian women's songs, stories, personal narratives, and everyday talk, it is our hope that the authority of such normalizing and essentialist discourses may begin to disintegrate as we come to understand both the heterogeneity and the resistance evident in women's speech. We do not intend, of course, to speak with any presumption of closure or totality with respect to the subjectivity of the North Indian women we know. When Indian women represent themselves in their own words, no single unitary voice is heard; we have only begun to listen to a few of these voices.

Trawick has recently commented that representations of Indian women as "repressed" and "submissive" are but half-truths (1990: 5). They are half-truths in the sense that they may not define the only discourse of selfhood and feminine identity available to women in India. Many such scholarly representations have involved assumptions concerning Indian women's "ideological self-abasement" (Spivak 1985a: 129), that is, the degree to which they have assimilated "traditional" devaluations of womanhood and female sexuality and values stressing women's submission to male kinsmen into their conceptions of selfhood. Thus Sudhir Kakar has argued that the identity and self-perceptions of Hindu women depend heavily on a set of male-authored mythic themes concerning the ideal woman condensed in the figure of Sita, the virtuous and faithful wife of Rama in the *Ramayana*. Kakar perceives a "formidable consensus" in India as a whole, rural and

8. For discussions of some of the specific guises Orientalist discourse assumes as it constructs its representations of Indian society, see Cohn 1968, 1984, 1985; Inden 1986a, 1986b, 1990; Mani 1985; Pinney 1989; Prakash 1990; Spivak 1985b; Suleri 1992.

urban, "traditional" and modern, in folklore and in myth, concerning the image of the ideal woman that Sita represents:

The ideal of womanhood incorporated by Sita is one of chastity, purity, gentle tenderness and a singular faithfulness which cannot be destroyed or even disturbed by her husband's rejections, slights or thoughtlessness. . . . The moral is the familiar one: "Whether treated well or ill a wife should never indulge in ire."

(Kakar 1978: 66)

Thus male psychological development, which is in fact Kakar's central focus, is profoundly affected by the mother's "aggressive, destructive impulses" or emotional claims directed toward her son as a result of her inability to challenge the ideals represented by Sita and to demand intimacy and a recognition of her worth as a woman from her husband (87-92). In Kakar's view, women either uphold a univocal normative order or deviate from it; there seems to be little recognition of a multiplicity of culturally valued strategies or perspectives for constructing selfhood and moral discourse.

A similar set of representations often defines the relationship between gender and sexuality in anthropological writing on South Asia, and a similar set of assumptions about women's subjectivity is often entailed. Both Sanskrit texts and vernacular oral traditions contain positive images of women as mother and as ritual partner and exhibit disdain and reproach for women as wives who are seen as sexually treacherous, sexually voracious, and polluting by virtue of their association with menstruation and childbearing (Bennett 1983; Kakar 1990: 17-20; Vatuk and Vatuk 1979b). These attitudes have undeniably serious implications both for women's self-perceptions and for the material and ideological relations of power in which they live their lives. But to assume that such characterizations define the limits of women's self-understandings and moral discourse is to ignore or silence meanings that are voiced in ritual songs and stories from Pahansu and Ghatiyali and in gestures and metamessages in ordinary language throughout northern India (Das 1988: 198), the existence of which indicates "the inadequacy of official kinship norms to give an exhaustive and definitive understanding of the sexuality of women" (202). If Indian women do unequivocally internalize certain ad-

mittedly prevalent South Asian views of female sexuality found both in texts and ordinary talk, as Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery, and Andrew Lyon (1989) seem to assert, we would be justified in speaking of an ideological self-abasement. When, however, there are contextually shifting moral perspectives within a set of cultural traditions, the question of the relative force, the relative salience, and the relative persuasiveness of these discursive forms is of critical significance in the anthropological representation of the ideologies of gender and selfhood held by women and men. In the expressive traditions that we examine in chapters 2 and 4, women confront and voice their rejection of those devaluations of female sexuality, and they begin to comment critically on their implications for men's control over women's bodies and women's lives.

Characterizations of South Asian women as repressed and submissive are also half-truths in the sense that, at times, submission and silence may be conscious strategies of self-representation deployed when it is expedient to do so, before particular audiences and in particular contexts. There may often, in other words, be something of a discontinuity, a schism, between conventional representations and practices, on the one hand, and experience, on the other; certain discourses may be invoked and employed in particular circumstances, without exhausting the explanatory and evaluative possibilities within a given way of life (Jackson 1982: 30–31). But to say that a particular practice or a particular way of speaking is strategically deployed need not imply that it is motivated by individual self-interest (de Certeau 1984: xi), that it is directed only toward political or economic ends, as Pierre Bourdieu's use of the term (1977) would suggest, or that it is disconnected from a set of culturally informed moral valuations. In his characterization of poetic discourse as "strategic," Kenneth Burke writes that literary texts may be thought of as adopting "various strategies for the encompassing of situations. These strategies size up the situations, name their structure and outstanding ingredients, and name them in a way that contains an attitude toward them" (1973: 1).<sup>9</sup> Burke suggests that the strategic aspects of poetic

9. My understanding of the relevance to anthropology of Burke's theoretical position owes much to conversations with Richard Herrell and to his work on gender identity in the United States (Herrell 1992).

discourse might be understood as exhibiting several of the properties of proverbs. A proverb takes its meaning not only from its overt imagery, its semantic content, the shared understandings it presupposes, but also from the context in which it is deployed, and the communicative functions it fulfills within a specific speech situation (Briggs 1985; Gossen 1973; Raheja 1993; Seitel 1977). Burke writes that "proverbs are *strategies* for dealing with *situations*" and that strategy here should be understood as an attitude, an evaluation, a perspective on a situation (1973: 296). Burke's critical writing continually stresses the multiplicity of strategies, of attitudes toward recurrent social situations that are created in literary discourse, paralleling the manner in which a proverbial utterance, in Hindi as in English, may be countered with another equally compelling proverb that evaluates the situation at hand in radically different moral terms. Like proverbs, the larger discursive forms we analyze here are invoked in particular circumstances and by particular positioned actors, as strategies in the construction of selfhood and relationship, gender and kinship, in Pahansu and Ghatiyali.<sup>10</sup>

In the preface to *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (1980), Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty writes that although her book is about images of women in the Hindu tradition, the relevant texts have all been composed by men. "If women composed their own mythologies," she goes on to say, "we do not have them." It is just this sort of image of the silent Indian woman that allows Kakar and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to see her as a passive assimilator of a one-dimensional and monologic set of cultural premises and moral perceptions.

In analyzing women's oral traditions and women's commentaries on them, it soon became apparent to us that women have in fact composed their own mythologies. Though they may not carry the authoritative weight of certain versions of the *Ramayana*,<sup>11</sup> women's songs and stories consistently compose ironic

10. De Certeau (1984:18–21) has also pointed out the analogies between proverbial enunciations and ways of using, manipulating, and recreating systems of meaning and valuation.

11. In fact, the many different *Ramayana* texts and oral renditions are not unanimous in depicting Sita as totally submissive to male authority. Variation on this point exists among the texts composed and performed by males (Lutgendorf 1991), and even more so in the *Ramayana* texts, in the form of song traditions,

and subversive commentaries on the representations of gender and kinship roles found in the epic texts, in male folklore genres, and in a good deal of everyday talk. This is not to suggest that women always and everywhere subvert North Indian kinship structures or discourses that place them in a subordinate position, or that they are equally inclined or empowered to do so. Rather, our work points to the polyvalent nature of women's discourse, and to the multiple moral perspectives encoded therein. When one listens to women in rural North India, Kakar's "formidable consensus" dissolves into a plurality of voices. In this book we attempt to discover how these varying interpretations of gender and kinship are situated in women's complexly figured identities, and how they shape the tenor of their everyday lives.

GENDER AND THE SUBALTERN VOICE: RESISTANCE,  
ACQUIESCENCE, AND WOMEN'S SUBJECTIVITY

The work of the *Subaltern Studies* historians has raised a series of critical questions concerning the existence of subtle modes of resistance to hegemonic forms of social and political hierarchy in South Asia. Their investigations focus on recovering the subaltern voice that has not generally been recognized or represented in historical writing. Although the six volumes of essays edited by Ranajit Guha and published under the title *Subaltern Studies* are concerned primarily with caste and class subalternity and resistance to colonial rule, several of the papers address the issue of gender and women's subjectivity from this historical perspective (e.g., Das 1989a; Guha 1987). These essays are subtle and provocative analyses. Yet several methodological and theoretical exigencies become apparent in these attempts to represent a gendered subaltern perspective.

The first is simply the inherent difficulty of retrieving the sub-

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composed by women (Narayana Rao 1991). A sixteenth-century version of the epic composed in Telugu by the female poet Atukuri Molla also appears to speak of the vitality and strength of Sita more consistently than the male-authored renditions (Tharu and Lalita 1991:94-98). This heterogeneity of "tradition," and the alternative visions of female virtue to be found in these many *Ramayanas*, were ignored in the tremendously popular televised serial production of the *Ramayana* aired in India in 1987-88. Many Indian feminists have protested against the images of female subordination and female passivity depicted in the televised epic.

altern woman's voice from the South Asian historical archive, wherein there was little concern to preserve a record of such voices, the voices of ordinary and often illiterate women. Indeed, insofar as they did not speak in a voice agreeable to powerful males, women's voices were often quite literally *erased* from the historical record. In the early years of the twentieth century, Lt. Col. Charles Eckford Luard, an administrator serving in Central India, commissioned Indians serving under him to record women's songs "from the lips of the local people." In the margins of one of these handwritten records in the India Office Library, I found the following notation, made by an Indian serving under Luard: "This is quite obscene. I have therefore used pencil that this should be struck out if considered befitting" (Luard n.d.: 160). But, as we shall see in chapter 2, it is precisely through such supposedly "obscene" language that women voice potent critiques of prevailing gender ideologies. By shifting attention from the historical archive to ethnographic inquiry, then, we hope to reposition some of the theoretical and epistemological concerns of the *Subaltern Studies* scholars. We hope to grasp the relation between hegemonic discourses on kinship and gender, on the one hand, and women's subjectivity and agency, on the other, within the context of lives we have come to share, however marginally and intermittently, in Pahansu, Hathchoya, and Ghatiyali, and with reference to the language these particular women speak, a language we have struggled to recognize and translate in these pages, a language that is alive and not yet erased from all memory.

Such a repositioning is almost essential methodologically, given the limitations of the historical record, but it is also significant from a second, theoretical, standpoint. Spivak (1985c), Rosalind O'Hanlon (1988), and Veena Das (1989a) discuss a number of critical epistemological issues embedded in the subalternist project. Das, for example, points out that the term *subaltern* cannot refer to distinct and well-defined social groupings; rather, the term should be used with reference to certain kinds of perspectives on a cultural discourse or a set of social relationships (1989a: 324), perspectives that may employ reflexive devices to interrogate or subvert that dominant discourse (312) but that may not necessarily coalesce into a closed, unified, discrete, and

knowable totality. In offering her critique of an essentialist view of subjectivity, Spivak has raised several caveats concerning the tendency of the *Subaltern Studies* scholars to posit a unified, consistent, and pristine subaltern consciousness, the tendency to create self-determination and continuity out of what may actually be heterogeneous determinations and discontinuous discourse (1985c: 10–15). Similarly, O'Hanlon suggests that the attempt to recover and represent the subjectivity of the subaltern and his resistance to hegemonic discourse has been predicated on an insufficiently problematized notion of "the self-originating, self-determining individual, who is at once a subject in his possession of a sovereign consciousness whose defining quality is reason, and an agent in his power of freedom" (1988: 191).<sup>12</sup> She argues that "the demand for a spectacular demonstration of the subaltern's independent will and self-determining power" has meant that the continuities between hegemonic discourse and subaltern culture have generally been ignored (213). She goes on to suggest that Guha (1983: 13), in speaking of the "sovereignty," "consistency," and "logic" of subaltern consciousness, has inadequately documented the limits of resistance, and the fact that the subaltern may at times speak from within the dominant discourse and at times stand outside and comment critically upon it (O'Hanlon 1988: 203, 219).<sup>13</sup>

12. These observations on the difficulties inherent in attempts to recover a subaltern subjectivity are analogous to those considered by de Lauretis (1984, 1986) with respect to the understanding of female subjectivity. The central problem is to articulate an understanding of subjectivity and experience that avoids, on the one hand, a totalizing and essentialist reading that sees subjectivity as *determined* by gender and, on the other hand, an overemphasis on free, rational intentionality. We share with de Lauretis a view of subjectivity as "a fluid interaction in constant motion and open to alteration by self-analyzing practice" (Alcoff 1988:425). The particular appropriateness of such a formulation for the understanding of South Asian selfhood and emotion is brilliantly illustrated by Trawick (1990).

13. But Guha has more recently, following Gramsci, written of the contradictory and fragmented nature of subaltern consciousness (Guha 1989). On this point, see also Arnold's discussion of the relevance of Gramsci's view of the contradictory nature of subaltern culture to peasant society in India (1984).

In a recent publication (1991), O'Hanlon has written explicitly of women's resistance to male-authored gender ideologies in nineteenth-century colonial India, and she has made the point that this resistance both critiques and perpetuates the dominant discourse. In the text she examines, a book written by Tarabai Shinde in 1882, she finds that this female author at times simply reverses essentializing male characterizations of female nature, instead of critiquing the very structure of patriarchy itself. I do not find this to be the case in the women's songs we consider in this volume. Rather, women contest the very notion of essential natures and the