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The embroidered word: Using traditional songs to educate women in India

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Culture and Values in Education
McGill University, Montreal
March, 1997

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts

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This thesis considers the potential of using women's traditional folk songs as a primary resource in the context of women's educational programs in India. Listening to the voices of protest in women's ancient songs will not only keep women in touch with the long history of their struggle, but will also return worth and importance to the devalued oral narratives that have been the repositories of women's knowledge and experience for centuries. Education programs that grow out of the rich and varied material of folk songs will, by definition, deal with the issues that are repeatedly raised, like embroidered patterns, in the songs themselves. Family, love, child-rearing and the myriad problems of fulfilling personal desire within the confinements of patriarchy will all, under scrutiny, yield crucial subject matter for education programs. At the same time, spinning new folksongs out of old ones will challenge women to think critically, and with the creativity essential to reworking our cultures so that both women and men are able to realize themselves more wholly.

Cette essai traite des chants folkloriques des femmes comme ressource première dans l'élaboration de programme éducatif pour femmes en Inde. Les voix du défi qui surgissent encore de ces chansons anciennes nous permettrent non seulement d'accéder à la longue histoire de la révolte des femmes mais redonneront aussi de la valeur et de l'importance aux traditions orales qui, pendant des siècles, ont étaient les seuls recueils de l'expérience et de la sagesse des femmes. Les programmes éducatifs qui naîtront de cette tradition riche et variée seront nécessairement axés sur les thèmes qui se tissent continuellement à travers ces chansons. La famille, l'amour, les enfants et les multiples problèmes que la patriarchie impose aux femmes dans la réalisation de leurs désirs personels fourniront une matière essentielle au programme éducatif. L'élaboration des nouveaux chants à partir des traditions anciennes emmenera les femmes à porter un regard critique sur la matière, tout en apportant un degré de creativité. Cette creativité sera essentielle à tout projet qui cherche à retravailler nos cultures pour que les femmes aussi bien que les hommes soient libres de s'épanouir plus complètement.

I would like to thank Professor Ratna Ghosh for her encouragement and humour. Without her support the horizons that I reached as a graduate student would have been far narrower and less colourful.

Thanks to Sophie Lorenzo for her helpful editorial advice and unswerving faith.

Most especially, I would like to thank my mother and father, Uma Khanna and Sohan Varma, for their love and support throughout my studies.

Bol, ye thora waqt bahut hai.
Bol, ke sach zinda hai ab tak--
Bol, ke jan ab tak teri hai.
Bol, jo kuchh kahna hai kah-le!
(Faiz)

Table of Contents

An 'ankita' refers to the signature, the name or evocation of the beloved's name, that a Indian composer imprints into her song like a stamp to show that the words are hers. When it comes to the songs that women in India compose and sing, as they have sung for centuries, the ankita is most often a signature written on air rather than on paper. Its ink flows out of the voices of the women who have handed these lyrics down through generations, as emblems of their own experiences. In this paper I attempt to study the social power, both actual and potential, that women's voices embody. The thesis is divided into three sections:

The first section considers the lives and works of women poets of the ancient and medieval age in India. This section is prefaced by a brief look at the early social history of women in India, beginning with the Vedic age in which women's status was comparatively better, and continuing through later periods which saw the erosion of women's position in society. The stories and the myths of the lives of the poets are interwoven with the greater life of the society in which they were born. The composers whom I have included all sang songs that were circulated by word of mouth for centuries before they were ever put to paper. Many of these songs even now circulate through the towns and villages of India, sung by non-literate wandering singers who have oceans of music inscribed on their memory. The expression of pain felt within the confinements of patriarchy, as well as pronouncements as to how inegalitarian social structures ultimately penetrate into the marrow of intimate relationships between women and men, are given especial emphasis in my reading.

The second part explains how oral folk traditions, and the views embedded within them, may be construed as a point, or a constellation of points, of resistance against the governing patriarchal norms that restrict women's freedoms. Interspersed throughout this section and the next are excerpts of folksongs, from all over India, that have been composed by women. These songs have their roots in the deep past, yet are alive in the daily lives and festivals of Indian women as they continue to sing them today.

In the third and final part of the paper I explore how women's oral traditions, in the context of their personal, lived experiences, can become the means for education for liberation. This section addresses itself to women's educational initiatives that define as their intent the improvement of women's lives in poorer countries. I have attempted to lay out some of the manifold reasons as to why it is essential that education seeking to help women should grow out of the voiced history of these women's struggles, rather than cut itself off from these vital roots.

This study treats song, history and education as ways in which we, men and women both, learn to know each other. It calls for changes in the implanted social organisms that hinder us from knowing each other, and our own abilities, more completely. As much as our own names, or our ankitas, I believe that it is the looped and winding road that we take through this life that ultimately forms our signature.

I. Songs and Stories

The Ancient Period

> Without knowing about me, Vijjakka, dark
> like the petal of the blue lotus
> ...the poet Dandin vainly said
> that the Goddess of learning was all-white
> (Tharu & Lalita, 1992: 55).

The genius of the 7th century BC Karnataka poet Vijjakka, or Vidya as she is more often known, has often been compared with that of Kalidas, one of India's most famous ancient poets and dramatists. Today, however, she has little claim to fame beyond a small circle of Sanskrit scholars and her scattered poems, uncollected in a single book, must be picked out from the pages of a number of different anthologies (Schelling, 1991: xii). Scant details, gleaned mostly from the poems themselves, are known of her life. For example, one source informs us only that she was a woman of "'bold and untamable temper" (Schelling, 1991: xii). Another identifies her as a queen, the wife of Candraditya (a son of Pulakesin II) from the Nerur (Barnstone & Barnstone, 1992: 62). The few pieces of her work that have survived, such as the following, have come down to us through later anthologies such as that of the Buddhist scholar Vidyakara, compiled around AD 100.

> Shamelessly
> Orange like a parrot's beak,
> arousing with a lover's
> touch the clustered
> lotus buds,
> I praise this
> great wheel the sun--
> rising it is an earring for
> the Lady of the East.
> (Schelling, 1991: 12)

The lack of a greater inheritance of women's writing in Sanskrit from India's ancient age is attributed by contemporary scholars to the laws and conventions that restricted women and lower castes to speaking the *Prakrits*, the local tongues and

vernaculars of India's towns and villages. Classical Sanskrit was reserved for the courts, the scriptures, and written documents, and thus was learned and used exclusively by upper caste men such as nobles and priests.

A History of Women: The Vedic Age

The RgVeda, written by the Aryans, is a collection of Sanskrit poems that marks the first written record of life on the subcontinent, and forms one of the foundational scriptures of Hinduism. The verses describe a society

> in which women married relatively late, at sixteen or seventeen, and did not live in purdah. They took part in gatherings of the clan and had prominent positions at religious rites. Most important, they were in charge of cattle-raising, the chief occupation of the Aryans, and made bows, arrows and other weapons for the men who went to battle (Bumiller, 1992: 16).

The Vedas assert that women were capable of possessing intellectual liberty and scholarship, outlining such stories as those of the philosopher Gargeyi, a brilliant and sharp-witted court philosopher whose bold, ascerbic wit and ability to engage in rhetoric won her glory during a debate before the king. As the story is told, King Janaka held a reunion in the *brahmavidya*, or court, to see who could claim the honour of being the wisest philosopher. A reputed philosopher Yajnavalkya immediately declared that obviously the honour could go to himself and and no other. The other philosophers engaged in verbal duelling with him, but all failed quickly until Gargeyi. Addressing all the Brahmins who were present there, she said that she would ask two questions and if they were answered by Yajnavalkya he would be proved a great expounder of the truth. Yajnavalkya accepted her challenge. However, after the dialogue took place twice and Yajnavalkya had twice failed to satisfy her, he forcibly silenced her with this threat:

> O Gargi, do not ask too much lest thy head should fall off. Do not ask too much

> (Brihdaranyak Upanishad.II.4.1, as quoted in Misra, 1993: 217).

Undaunted, Gargeyi asked the court to permit her two more questions, challenging her opponent with this brave provocation:

> O Yajnavalkya, as the son of a warrior from the Kasis or Videhas might string his loosened bow, take two pointed face-piercing arrows in his hand and rise to do battle, I have risen to fight thee with two questions. Answer me these questions (Misra, 1993: 218).

While Yajnavalkya did finally win the debate, Gargeyi proved herself a remarkably skilled and eloquent rhetorician who is remembered even today in children's story books.

According to the scriptures, however, although Gargeyi in this text stands alone as a woman philosopher at court, the Vedic scriptures maintain that she would have had other accomplished women scholars around her. In the period before 200 B. C., women were, the writings indicate, eligible for the study of the Vedas. One scripture, the *Upanayana*, states that the Vedic initiation of girls was as common as that of boys, and that women could wear the sacred thread if they too elected to study and remain celibate during their initiation (Agrawal & Aggarwal, 1992: 18). Women teachers were of a "considerable number" (Altekar, 1975: 19), gaining particular distinction in the realm of theology and philosophy. Such women teachers also supervised boarding houses for women students who were working towards earning the titles of *Pandit*, meaning learned, *Mantranid* signifying knowledge of mantras and Vedas, or *Brahmavadini*--the accolade bestowed on women who had attained the knowledge of 'Brahman the supreme king'(Agrawal & Aggarwal, 1992: 19).

Another Veda, *Atharva,* goes as far as to say that a girl is not entitled to marry until after having completed her *Brahmacarya*, or student life:

> Just as boys acquire sound knowledge and culture by the practice of Brahmacarya and then marry girls of their own choice, who are young, well-educated, loving and of like temperament, so

> should a girl practise Brahmacarya, studying the Veda and other sciences and thereby perfect her knowledge, refine her character, give her hand to a man of her own choice, who is young, learned and loving (Agrawal & Aggarwal, 1992: 13).

Despite the freedoms that women were said to have claimed during the Vedic age, only two hymns and a few verses of the Vedas are actually attributed to women poets. One of the eight women who composed verses for the scriptures, Surya Savitri, describes the ideal of love between a woman and man as one that is decidedly egalitarian:

> When the morn meets the rising sun, the poetry of Vedas should serve as an offering to the lover; the learned men should be the priests called to conduct their marriage and freedom should be the sheet covering their bed of love (Jung, 1987: 66).

In the later years of the Vedic age, however, this 'bed of love' on which men and women lay down together may have become increasingly a bed of bondage, as human relationships were reined in more severely by sacred laws such as those set out in the famous *Manusmriti*, or Manu's code, the first compilation of Hindu laws. At some point

> between the years 200 BC and AD 200, the upper-caste law codifier known as Manu...assigned to women the status of chattel. "Woman is as foul as falsehood itself," Manu wrote. "When creating them, the lord of creatures allotted to women a love of their beds, of their seat and ornaments; impure thoughts, wrath, dishonest, malice and bad conduct (Bumiller, 1992: 16).

The Manusmriti, whose overall tone is exceedingly misogynistic, is also occasionally contradictory in its view of women. Contrast the previous assertion with this one:

> Where women are respected, there the gods delight, and where they are not, there all work and efforts come to naught. There is no hope of rise for that family or country where they live in sadness (Agrawal & Aggarwal, 1992: 15).

According respect to a woman, however, may not have involved according them social liberties and freedom. Manu writes

> In childhood a woman should be protected by her father, in youth by her husband, and in old age by her son. Verily, a woman does not deserve freedom (V. Das, 1976: 132).

The Later Vedic Age: The Decline in Women's Status

While Manu is often attacked as the chief culprit in the history of the subordination of Indian women, his compilation does not explain the steady erosion in the social position of women that had occurred before his time, and leading up to his work. Girls gradually lost the privilege of wearing the sacred thread, losing with it the right to perform Vedic mantras or sacrifices and thereby the right to earn an independent living. The education allowed to women of rich, aristocratic and royal families may have consisted of the study of Sanskrit or *Prakrit* (local dialect) literature, but would have centred around the "domestic arts, culinary arts, fine arts like music, dancing and painting, household decoration and garland-making" (Agrawal & Aggarwal: 20)." The average marital age which had been sixteen or seventeen years during the Vedic period, now decreased to infancy, with girls being sent to their marital homes later on at puberty. Widows, even young girls who were widowed before ever meeting their husbands, were forbidden to remarry.

Feminist historians have come to believe that the social restraints imposed upon women in India at this juncture are similiar to those imposed on most women as a society evolves from wandering, pastoral clans into sendentary groups that make their living by agriculture (Boserup, 1990). In a tribal society, women tend to be more involved in production and therefore wield more social power. In a settled society, where there is relatively more leisure, the roles of women become increasingly demarcated, with men tending to take the superior position, while women are

relegated to secondary ones, including being the ornamental symbols of that society or particular clan's prosperity.

The highly stringent and detailed prescriptions set out to curtail the social movement of women stems also from the concerns of a spreading society of Aryan conquerors, anxious to keep their bloodlines separate from those of the conquered dark-skinned Dravidians tribes of the south. Consequently, Manu's laws governing marriage are elaborate, painstakingly spelling out exactly who may marry whom. Manu's code also set down the first rules of caste distinctions which laid the foundations for India's ancient system of caste oppression. According to historian Romila Thapar, caste discrimination developed hand in hand with women's oppression. In her view, the code is

> an illustration "of the need to rigidly define caste society," to create rules that keep the outsiders, the people viewed as "pollutants," in their place..."To avoid pollution, you must control birth," Romila Thapar explains. "But you lose control over birth if you lose control over women." (Thapar, as quoted in Bumiller, 1992: 17).

Mother Goddesses and Women of Ancient India

Beginning in 1700 B.C., the Aryan invasions into the Indus valley overran the indigenous, non-Vedic, agricultural societies that had been flourishing there previously. Culturally and politically the contact and friction of these diverse cultures resulted in a hybrid assimilation of indigenous non-vedic rituals and deities into an expanding Vedic repertoire of hundreds of thousands of gods, with multiple names and *avatars*, or divine aspects. This, in turn, resulted in a commingling of myths and customs that dramatically changed the faces of both vedic and indigenous cultures. For example, as the later Vedas, the Puranas and epics took shape, indigenous deities

which were less easily assimilated into the pantheon were legitimized within them by being equated to standard Brahman Gods:

> The worship of these newly absorbed primitive deities was part of the mechanism of acculturation, a clear give-and-take. First, the former worshippers, say of the Cobra, could adore him while bowing to Siva, but the followers of Siva simultaneously paid respect to the cobra in their own ritual services; many would then observe the Cobra's special cult-day every year, when the earth may not be dug-up and food is put out for snakes. Matriarchal elements had been won over by identifying the mother-goddess with the "wife" of some male god, e.g. Durga-Parvati (who might herself bear many local names such as Tukai or Kalabai) was wife to Siva, Lakshmi for Vishnu. The complex divine household carried on the process of syncretism: Skanda and Ganesha become sons of Siva (Kosambai, 1987: 170).

Historian Debiprasad Chattopadhyay points out that the gods named in the early RgVeda are male, yet the Hindu pantheon soon grew to include powerful goddesses drawn principally from the non-Vedic traditions of *Sankhya* and *Tantra*, both sects which worship the female principle (Chattopadhyay, 1959: xvii). An interesting expansion of this hypothesis concerning the marriage of Vedic and non-Aryan religions has been developed by Chattopadhyay. Drawing from "a few fragmentary survivals...preserved in the writings of its opponents, ...of those who wanted to refute or ridicule it," (Chattopadhyay, 1959: xv) Chattopadhyay reconstructs what the ancient texts refer to as the *Lokayata*. The Lokayata essentially refers to the popular culture, "that which is prevalent among the people, ...that which is essentially this-worldly " (Chattopadhyay, 1959: xv).

As in other agricultural societies throughout the world, the cultures of ancient India worshipped mother-goddesses, associated with seasonal changes, harvests and, of course, fertility. The cosmology of early Indian agricultural societies was not based on transcendental notions. Chattopadhyay puts forth the idea that the world-views of these pre-existing agricultural civilizations, which were materialist and in which

prakriti, the feminine principle, was revered as fundamental, were subordinated to the philosophically idealist and patriarchal culture of the pastoral Aryans. Even today in rural parts of India, during sowing and harvest ceremonies the village's male deity is given female attributes or even replaced by female symbols (Tharu & Lalita, 1991: 54-5). Prakrit, the female principle which, in the agricultural societies of the ancient period, would not have signified a benign, domestic principle, but rather one that was vigorous, aggressive and potentially dangerous, was undermined by the male-dominated Vedic Aryan traditions. In this equation the social supremacy of the female, certainly the concept of the female and, in turn, probably the actual women of the society as well, suffered under Aryan rule. Vedic idealism, which evolved a great number of beliefs and rituals that were oppressive to women, may well have grown out of the Aryan struggle against matriarchal cultures. The harsh and unyielding structures binding women's liberties that emerged during this era cast the pernicious social nets that all Indian women, from the ancient age through to today, have struggled within, and spoken of so intimately, in their songs.

Therigatha: Songs of the Buddhist Nuns

The earliest extant poetry of women living in India reacts vehemently to these harsh confinements imposed on them by religion, society and culture. Vedic law, as interpreted exclusively by male Brahmanic priests, had mushroomed into a web of religious rites deemed necessary to the life of a virtuous woman. At every stage of their lives: birth, puberty, adolescence, during the wedding ceremony or widowhood, women were enslaved physically, morally and financially to the performance of such rites, and to the maintenance of the priests who earned their living by conducting these rituals. If these sacraments were not outrightly denied to subcaste or poor women, then they were often impossible for them to undertake because of the cost,

forcing such people to live, in the eyes of society, in an impure state that brought them down even lower on the social scale.

As an ideology Buddhism reacted to such Vedic prescriptions of ritual and sacrifice, rejecting both the religious and social authority of the Brahmanic priests, while placing a strong emphasis on attaining wisdom and knowledge through personal experience. *Therigatha*, a collection of songs in Pali, by seventy three Buddhist nuns known as *theris*, is the oldest anthology of women's literature in India and, possibly, the world. The theris were contemporaries of Buddha, composing their lyrics in 6th century BC. The verses circulated by word of mouth for hundreds of years until they were committed to writing circa 80 BC (Tharu & Lalita, 1991: 65) .

The songs, unlike the verses of scripture, were not intended for the enjoyment of a literate elite, but were used by the theris in their day-to-day lives as they roamed the sub-continent, preaching their message of spiritual freedom. Scholars suggest

> that these compositions, which were used by the itinerant theris as they wandered around preaching their message of release, were re-worked over the five centuries in which they were circulated orally. In the process the sound values, the images, the colour and detail in which feeling and situation were evoked would have been recast as the preachers responded to the requirements of the women they addressed (Tharu & Lalita, 1991: 68).

The reverse is equally true: when songs and stories are told by wanderers to settled peoples, the songs themselves are scattered like seed and left behind, to evolve and acquire the distinct flavours and colloquialisms of the land which has adopted them. As such the poems of the Therigath originate with their authors, but claim as their actual composers not only the nuns, but the women and men who added their own voices to these verses through the passages of time.

The Therigath resembles a necklace of cameos, of autobiographical moments in which these women's lives underwent epiphanies. From being bonded to this world

through toil, sorrow, or the pains and desires of their bodies, they achieve release through the power of Buddhism. Often the poems use the language of women's labour, of the kitchen, of housework, or of artisanal or agricultural labour, to celebrate the freedom from the toil and hardship of daily life. So **Sumangalamata**, daughter and wife to workers in the rushes, sings

> A free woman. At last free!
> Free from slavery in the kitchen
> Free from the harsh grip of hunger
> And from empty cooking pots.
> Free too of that unscrupulous man,
> The weaver of sunshades.
> Calm now, and serene I am.
> Purged of anger and the body's hunger,
> To the shade of the spreading trees I go
> I am at ease
> (Tharu & Lalita, 1992; 69 and
> Barnstone & Barnstone, 1992; 71).

Such poems also proffer a strong criticism of a religion such as Hinduism that had come to rely so heavily on scriptures, laws and priestly interpretations that it allowed to the ordinary man and woman no expression of personal suffering and longing.

The poems of the Therigatha reveal glimpses of the personal lives of women from all walks of life, from queens to courtesans, artisans and labourers. As P. Thomas writes

> These Theris came from...palaces, brothels and
> the huts of outcastes, and the stories of many
> have the genuine ring of the true devotee, the
> repentant sinner and the disillusioned
> voluptuary (Thomas, 1964: 84).

All were gathered together into the *sangha*, or ascetic community, by the egalitarian tenets of Buddhism. Regardless of caste or status, everyone, preached the Buddha, was united in Buddhism "as are the rivers in the Sea." Both men and women were deemed capable of reaching nirvana, and monks and nuns were required to undergo similar rigorous meditative training and philosophical education, as they were also both entrusted with the responsibility of preaching the doctrine.

Mutta writes of her spiritual deliverance as a rescue from the tiring and meaningless ways of the world:

> So free am I, so gloriously free,
> Free from three petty things--
> From mortar, from pestle and from
> my twisted lord,
> Freed from rebirth and death I am,
> And all that has held me down
> Is hurled away
> (Tharu & Lalita, 1991: 68).

Life Stories of the Theris

According to the *Paramatta Dipani*, the biographical notes that accompany the Therigath, the composer of the above lyric, Mutta, was born in Kosala, as the daughter of a poor brahmin. She was married off to a hunchback, but she told him that she could not continue with domestic life and induced him to give her consent to leave the world. After repeating many mantras, she finally attained nirvana, at that point uttering the verse that is attributed to her.

Many of the stories of the nuns tell of lives in which women were bound, in body if not in soul, to loveless, incompatible marriages. Ishadasi narrates her own story:

> I worked with great devotion; morning and
> evening I used to bow to my father-in-law
> and mother-in-law; I used to welcome my
> husband's sisters and brothers, and gave food
> and clothes to all the members of the household.
> I used to wake up early, finish my household
> duties and then go to my husband and greet him.
> With my own hands, I used to dress his hair and
> decorate him. I used to caress him as a mother
> her only child, I cooked with my own hands,
> washed the utensils and cleaned the kitchen.
> In fact, I used to work like a maid-servant from
> morning till night without rest. Yet my lord did
> not love me (Thomas, 1964: 85).

Ishadasi was married thrice, two times to the sons of wealthy merchant families similar to her own and finally to a wandering mendicant, whose poverty, her father felt, might

induce him to stay in the comfort of their house. After a fortnight, however, he too left--after which Ishadasi understandably decided to retire to the convent.

Another story, that of Utpalavarna tells of a woman who, estranged from her husband and daughter, was shocked to discover, years later, that the daughter was now her co-wife, having just married Utpalavarna's second husband. Shocked, she too left for the sangha. The story of Baddha describes a woman who wilefully escapes murder by a greedy husband who, pretending to be insane, fools her and tries to kill her for her jewellery. After pushing him off a precipice, she heads for the nunnery. Men do not appear in a favourable light in these songs; masculine perversity, waywardness and love of sexual variety are often pointed out as the source of the tortures and miseries that the women faced in their secular lives.

Unequal Relations of Power in the Sangha

The egalitarian ethos of Buddhism, however, appears at times to be a thin veneer to a theology that was, in practice, antagonistic to women (Chakravarti, 1987). Accounts of the travails which women were forced to endure before they were permitted to renounce the domestic life and join the 'houseless' ascetic community, give us insight into the patriarchal ideologies governing the social relationships of women in the early Buddhist period. As the story goes the Buddha's royal foster mother--Majapajapati Gotami, desired to join the sangha. After walking miles through the dust and heat, she found the Buddha and made her request, which was greeted by a summary refusal. Her persistent appeals yielded no result. At last, Ananda, one of the Buddha's younger disciples intervened on the Queen's behalf arguing that, given the principles of their belief, women could not be barred from entering the religious life. To this the Buddha was forced to concede, but in order to safeguard the faith, he laid down 'eight weighty laws' which any woman who entered the order would have been bound to obey. He is alleged to have remarked, regretfully, that if women had not

joined the sangha the doctrine would have endured a thousand years, now it would die out after a mere five hundred! (One would have liked to have heard his response to being told that, in 2600 years or so, the songs of the theris would still be circulating.)

Gotami willingly accepted the eight weighty laws, which held as their central concern the continuation of male authority over the nuns and the affairs of the sangha. For instance, it was ordained that no theri could ever rebuke a *thera* (monk), but that all *theris* (nuns), no matter how senior, could be subjected to reprisal by a thera, no matter how young a novitiate. Notwithstanding these lopsided regulations, a considerable number of women joined the sangha. The Therigath songs show evidence of women finding renewed strength and the possibility of freedom in this existence, less eclipsed at least by the shadows of an unhappy domestic life.

The Medieval Age

Hundreds of years after the theris had roamed the Indian countryside, Bahinabai (1628-1700), a Marathi speaking poet of Central India, raises another cry against the strictures imposed by Hindu religion:

> The Vedas cry aloud, the Puranas shout,
> "No good may come to woman."
>
> I was born with a woman's body
> How am I to attain Truth?
>
> "They are foolish, seductive, deceptive--
> Any connection with a woman is disastrous."
>
> Bahina says, "If a woman's body is so harmful,
> How in this world will I reach Truth?"
> (Tharu & Lalita, 1991; 107)

In this *abanga*, a form of rhythm used in the songs women sing as they grind flour or husk grain, Bahina asks how she, with her blood and body deemed impure by priests and scriptures alike, is ever to know truth or God. In a skeptical manner she voices a bold question that women throughout India must have asked themselves. Since early

medieval times, the answer to this heartfelt question for many Indian women and men has been *bhakti* worship, which literally means intense personal love and devotion to God.

Origins of Bhakti

Mysticism, a facet of bhakti, may have evolved its expression in Hinduism as a result of contact and cross fertilization with the doctrines of Christian mysticism or the ecstatic and mystical cult of Islam known as Sufism. Some religious historians suggest that this protestant movement was consciously disseminated in order to hold on to Hinduism's devotees, as a response to the threat of Moslem conquest and the subsequent spread of the more egalitarian ideas of Islamic faith. Originating before the eighth century in the Tamil speaking land of South India , by the 13th century bhakti currents had swept across the northern hill and central plains of the country. The poet-saints, referring to people of deep religious feeling rather than canonized miracle-makers, were the leaders of the movement, voicing in their hymns intensely personal and emotional beliefs. They raised

> an impassioned cry against the ossified ceremonial religion of their day and the ideal of "passionlessness" based on ascetic virtues. Following the doctrines of 'bhakti-yoga', the path of devotion expounded in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, they expressed in their poetry the religious impulse which gave momentum to this new development (Kurl, 1973; 1).

Since bhakti was based on the fundamental belief that the deepest bond between God and the human soul was a direct, immediate one, unencumbered by any church or go-between, bhakti appealed very strongly to the common and the poorest man and woman. Earlier such people had been denigrated as untouchables, told that their difficult lot in this life was due to sin in their previous ones, and were thus

psychologically alienated from God--and physically as well, since they were sometimes not allowed in temples or inner sanctums.

> This soul-searching appeal of the casteless, classless, and creedless democratic Bhakti Movement swayed people throughout the country and converted them to the new religion of love and dedication. This religion was built on the cornerstones of simplicity, faith in worship, humility and dependence upon God's grace. It absolutely rejected the pomp and show of costly time-consuming Vedic ceremonies in which faith and devotion were secondary to personal desires. It was actually a movement of the humble, by the humble, for the God who, in return, loved the humble. Wealth, family, religious austerities, Vedic knowledge, wisdom, and ascetic practices, were rejected since they were considered external conduct and not internal dedication. They could not be the instruments to achieve the Supreme and his love. The basic code of behaviour--selfless work, detachment, honesty, and love--was the soul of this movement (Kurl, 1973: 2).

Women Within the Bhakti Movement

In the religion of bhakti, the devotee acts and speaks as a *gopi*, a lover, who perceives God as her beloved. The strong emotional appeal this may have had for many women who were struggling in the fetters of unhappy marriages--matches often arranged in infancy--is suggested by the flocks of women poet-saints who, like the theris before them, abandoned their squalid stoves and beds and devoted themselves to singing the praises of their god.

Women had to endure hardship and severely restrictive social mores at every stage of their life. The main purposes of marriage was to join families for reasons of land ownership and, most importantly, to produce a male heir. As Manu had decreed, a woman's father, then her husband, and then her son, was considered be her 'Lord'. Dying before her husband raised a woman to the status of a household deity--to be worshipped with garlands of fresh flowers, but his death before hers would bring her

humiliation, torture and possibly death by being pushed onto the funeral pyre. Many times women even jumped voluntarily, as was the prescribed custom, into the flames to avoid a worse fate of living in a household where she may have been tortured, starved and openly despised.

As a bride ornamented in jewellery, henna, and red clothes, a woman may have entered her in-laws' home as *Laxmi*, the goddess who brings wealth, but she was thereafter treated as chattel and confined to the four walls of the house. Nor was it unusual for a woman to be sexually exploited by the all-powerful male members of the family or clergy, or abused by female in-laws. The crippling routine of housework coupled with her mother-in-law's taunts are repeatedly mentioned in Kashmiri bhakti poet Lal Ded's verse. Mirabai, on the other hand, cursed her husband-king and his family, rejected their gifts of costly ornaments and exotic foods, since its lure distracted her from devoting herself entirely to her true 'husband', Krishna.

For ordinary women of all castes, perhaps the greatest influence of bhakti worship lay in its liberating women from strictures and taboos that prevailed in the name of religion. Leela Mullatti believes that

> the rejection of the superior role of a Brahmin minimized these tortures of women...every woman devotee could pray and worship God at all times of 'disabilities', that is, when she was nursing a baby or a sick person, or when she was poor and unable to undertake offerings or pilgrimages, she was believed to be forgiven by God. Her conscience was clear... Such a theory and practice made her more independent, confident and a tougher prey for exploitation (Mullatti, 1989: 5).

Bhakti worship allowed women to express their feelings and thoughts, devalued in both public and private life, and claim God's blessings directly. In the intimate beckonings of bhakti poetry, even male poets refer to themselves in the feminine, attaching themselves to their Lord as a lover. The emblem of vice is not a wicked female, instead the more public and therefore masculine pursuits of status and

scholarship often figure as the major obstacles to selfless attachment. As Susie Tharu and K. Lalita note:

> The [bhakti} path of devotion set up no barriers of caste or sex. The women poets of the bhakti movements did not have to seek the institutionalized spaces religion provided to express themselves, and women's poetry moved from the court and the temple to the open spaces of the field, the workplace, and the common woman's hearth (Tharu & Lalita, 1992: 57).

Speaking a Common Language

One of the most powerful ways in which bhakti drew women into its fold was its use of the vernacular prakrits rather than Sanskrit. By speaking and singing directly to the populace in their native tongue the bahkti poets broke the monopoly that time-hallowed Sanskrit had held on religious verse. Kabir, the weaver poet, describes how this allows the beauty of worship to become available to everyone:

> Sanskrit is the stagnant waters of the
> Lord's private well
> the spoken language is the rippling
> waters of the running stream
> (Kurl, 1973: 3).

Many of India's regional literatures that flourished after the Medieval period locate their origins in the works of the bhakti saints. Even today, songs composed by bhakti poets hundreds of years ago are still recorded, passed down through generations, in the memory of the common people and sung during the course of the day or at times of prayer. The lyrics have evolved as well, and in some cases the same myths and songs, adopted by different communities have, like a grafting of a rose, split into recognizably different hybrids. For example, Parita Mukta, in her study of 'the people's Mira'--Mirabai as she exists in the consciousness of the traditionally oppressed peoples of Rajasthan and Gujurat, finds that this social configuration of the poet emphasizes

qualities of rebellion different from those of the Mira recognized by India's elite (Mukta, 1994).

Bhakti and Human Relationships

In the poetry of the bhaktas, the devotee's relationship with God becomes the means by which she wrestles with her own inner demons and with the forces, social or otherwise, that prevent her from completely realizing this relationship. As Neera Desai writes,

> the bhaktas were not social emancipators, they were individuals, trying to lead a liberated life. It is their individualism...that continues to inspire us (Desai, 1983: 99).

This means to self-fulfillment was often earned with great difficulty and peril to the self. The bhakti poet Mirabai says of freedom that it never comes without a cost, be it ever so little or great, to oneself. Referring to her saviour Krishna, she says:

> I bought Kanh;
> the price that was asked, I paid
> Some cried "It's too much!"
> Others murmured "It's so little!"
> I paid cash, not omitting a single cent:
> My love, my life, my body, my soul,
> my self.
> (my translation from Goswamy &
> Dallapiccola, 1982: 194).

Mukta, in her research on the bhakti poet Mirabai, met with several ordinary Indian women who today carry on the tradition of bhakti in their own lives. I think that it is worth reproducing one of these stories here, to glean some insight into why women turn to bhakti worship, as well as to show how so much of India remains steeped in archaic social norms barely different from those of the medieval era. The women suffer from the same prejudices and difficulties, and perhaps seek similar passages to freedom, the only passages they see as being open to them. Mukta records Ranjanabehn Deval's recollections, a middle-aged woman who lives with her son and

daughter-in-law in Udaipur, in a run-down *haveli*, (an old mansion now sectioned off and rented out).

> My *mausi* (maternal aunt) was blind from birth. She used to compose *bhajans* (hymns), but she never claimed these as her own. She would say, 'There are innumerable *bhaktas* (devotees) . They have all created them.' My mausi was married at the age of fifteen. Who would marry her, blind as she was? He was an older man, who had a wife and children (you know that in our community they often have more than one wife). After the marriage ceremony, when her husband came to her, my mausi said, 'I will leave my body if you come near me.' He left her alone from then on, and though she lived in the same house as him, she had her own room, and she used to stay up till the early hours of the morning, singing bhajans (Mukta, 1994: 213).

Bhakti, in such circumstances, provides the strength to resist dehumanized relationships, argues Mukta. It resists by providing a means of escape from everyday relations, such as the mausi's refusal to consummate the marriage, or more commonly, by allowing the self to reserve an enclave, an inner courtyard, a place apart, bonding with God in a way that attempts to mitigate the loneliness caused by not being able to forget those deep emotional ties with another. As Mukta writes, "it is a self-created reality which is profoundly and intimately personal even as it is socially circumscribed, enabling the self to regenerate its capacity to face, endure, and at times overcome the harshness of an unloved existence (Mukta, 1994: 214)."

Turning towards bhakti, to devotion to a lover-god who though caring is also evanescent, shows a profound turning away from personal bonds which do not nurture. Unequal relationships of patriarchy are at their most brutal in their microcosm, that is, in their most common manifestation: the daily life of the home. The unequal distribution of power, wealth and choices all have a deep effect upon the very worldly relationship between a man and woman. Mutual love, to which respect and equality are essential, become unlikely; and life loses one of its deepest ways of

being fulfilling. The songs and life stories that follow are, among other things, a testimony to this urgent need for our societies to evolve stronger possibilities for more balanced relationships between women and men, relationships that are not based on inegalitarian systems that penetrate so profoundly into our core that they prevent the possibility of mutual giving.

Women Bhakti Poets: Their Lives, Myths and Songs

Songs composed during the medieval bhakti era, as I have already mentioned, are still sung all over India today. The devotional hymns can be traced back to their composers who always embedded within their song their *ankita*, their personal signature, in the form of either their own name or their chosen intimate appellation of their god. Sule Sankavva, a 12th century bhakta of the South, who composed in the language Kannada, uses the ankita Nirlajjeshwara, which translates approximately to 'libertine Siva', expressing Siva's quality of being without shame. While many of the poets of the bhakti movement were artisans who plied small trades, it is unusual to find one who, like Sule Sankavva, was a prostitute (Tharu & Lalita, 1992: 81). In her only extant poem, Sule Sankavva dramatically transforms a moment in the everyday life of a prostitute, transforming it into a symbolic test of her allegiance to her god Siva:

> In my harlot's trade
> having taken one man's money
> I daren't accept a second man's sir
> And If I do,
> they'll stand me naked and
> kill me, sir.
>
> And if I cohabit
> with the polluted,
> My hands nose ears
> they'll cut off
> with a red-hot knife, sir.
>
> Ah, never, no,
> Knowing you I will not.
> My word on it,
> libertine Siva (Tharu & Lalita, 1992: 82).

As in many bhakti poems the distinctions seem to blur between the spiritual and the real. Is the man described in the poem, to whom the poet feels such a deep attachment, a god or the description of a man of flesh and blood? Even if we take the singer at her word there is always room for expansion in this poem that may use the metaphors of a holy love to describe an illicit one.

Mahadeviyakka

When she was ten, Mahadeviyakka was intitiated to the worshipping of Siva by an unknown guru. The 12th century Kannada poet, rebel and mystic considered this the moment of her true birth, rather than than her physical birth which took place in South India, in Udutadi.

Apparently the form of Siva at the Udutadi temple was called Cenna-mallikarjuna, translating to 'the Lord White as Jasmine.' Falling in love with Siva, Mahadeviyakka took this name as her ankita, in songs such as this :

> Riding the blue sapphire mountains
> wearing moonstone for slippers
> blowing long horns
> O Siva
> when shall I
> crush you on my pitcher breasts
>
> O lord white as jasmine
> when do I join you
> stripped of body's shame
> and heart's modesty? (Ramanujan, 1973: 114)

Despite her having betrothed herself to Siva, many men tried for her hand. This rivalry between a Divine Love and a worldly, human love, each of which have their unique ability to torture, is a central theme in many of her songs, and this tension is played out in the story of her own life. Kausika, the king of the land, fell in love with her and persuaded her parents, by avowals of love as well as by force, to let him wed her. Mahadeviyakka married him and lived with him, but her marriage with this

worldly *bhavi*, or unbeliever, was far from a success. A.K. Ramanujan, drawing from the poems and other sources, writes

> it must have been a trying marriage for both.
> Kausika, the worldling, full of desire for her as
> a mortal, was the archetype of sensual man;
> Mahadevi, a spirit married already to the Lord
> White as Jasmine, scorning all human carnal
> love as corrupt and illegitimate, wife to no man,
> exile bound to the world's wheeling lives, arche-
> typal sister of all souls. Significantly she is known
> as Akka 'elder sister'. (Ramanujan, 1973: 111).

Certain Mahadeviyakka songs, or *vacanas*, as they are called, suggest that the intensity of her attachment to Siva may have been rooted in her distaste for conventional wedlock and the unfairness and inequality inherent in such social relations:

> I love the Handsome One:
> he has no death
> decay nor form
> no place or side
> no end nor birthmarks.
> I love him O mother. Listen.
>
> I love the Beautiful One
> with no bond nor fear
> no clan no land
> no landmarks
> for his beauty
> (Ramanujan, 1973: 134).

Even tooday in Indian society 'love marriages', as they are termed, are frowned upon with a degree of suspicion in more conservative quarters. Marriages, as we have already seen, were not affairs of the heart as often as they were contracts concerning land entitlement. Daughters were used as a kind of social coin or currency, and bloodlines were merged to ally clans, not hearts.

It is this kind of loveless, bitter union that Mahadevi sought to escape. At one point, when Kausika appears to have tried to force his will on her, she cuts her ties to this world. Like many other saints, like the theris before her, she enacts her homelessness in this world by taking to the open road, walking towards Kalyana, a

centre of pilgrimage for *Virasaiva*, or Siva-worshipping, saints. Throwing away her clothing, defying the conventions that preached modesty as a way to virtue, she wandered the roads naked, defiant and weary, through a world of molesting attentions. She asks

> You can confiscate
> money in hand;
> can you confiscate
> the body's glory?
>
> Or peel away every strip
> you wear,
> but can you peel
> the Nothing, the Nakedness
> that covers and veils?
>
> To the shameless girl
> wearing the White Jasmine Lord's
> light of morning,
> you fool,
> where's the need for cover and jewel?
> (Ramanujan, 1973: 129).

Scorning the indecent pruderies of society--the warped conventions that deem loveless, contractual marriages as honourable while labelling the nakedness of the human body, God's creation, as shameless, she walked, singing her rebellious verses, until she reached Kalyana. There she faced a trial by dialogue with the guru Allama, at which point she is said to have spoken some of her most powerful vacanas. When he asks her why she has thrown off her sari, only to replace it with her long hair, she replies

> Till the fruit is ripe inside
> the skin will not fall off.
> I'd a feeling it would hurt you
> if I displayed the body's seals of love.
> (Ramanujan, 1973: 112)

At the end of this catechism between guru and disciple she was accepted into the company of saints. From then onwards began "the second lap of her journey to her Lord" (Ramanujan, 1973: 113). Restless, she left Kalyana and wandered off again

towards Srisaila, the Holy Mountain where, barely in her twenties, she is said to have burned into a oneness with Siva.

Ramanujan writes that Mahadeviyakka, like other bhaktas, struggled with "her condition, as body, as woman, as social being tyrannized by social roles, as a human confined to a place and a time" (Ramanujan, 1973: 113). Her uniqueness lies in her never abandoning, despite travails and adversity, her quest for a relationship that was fulfilling and satisfying to herself. Her songs cleave to the heart of the dilemma that all women and men must face when they attempt to live honestly in a world that ensnares with false promises and fake joys.

Mirabai

Mirabai (c. 1498-1565) is the most famous of the saint-poets of the Bhakti movement. The legend of her life is celebrated by children and the poor, and her songs are sung throughout India, in grand concert halls as well as in rural huts.

She belonged to a royal *Rajput* (from Rajasthan) family of Merta. Besides this piece of fact, many contradictions surround the story of her life. Like Mahadevyakka--and there are many resemblances between her story and Mira's-- she was very young when she became enamoured of her personal god, Krishna. In one poem she declares that Krishna's vision appeared to her in a dream, stirring her so profoundly that she declared herself his bride and dedicated her life entirely to him. When she came of age, however, she submitted to a marriage with the powerful crown prince of Mewar, yielding to her mother's pleas that she not disgrace the family name and, most particularly her mother's honour by refusing to comply. When the wedding festivities were over Mira had no desire to bring to her new home any of her magnificent ornaments or clothing, taking only a small idol of Krishna with her. This infuriated her marital family as a daughter-in-law is customarily supposed to worship the in-laws' deities. But Mira refused to exchange her lord Krishna for their goddess Kali.

Central to the accounts of Mirabai's life is the bitter duelling that went on with her in-laws: anger and violence on their part was greeted with indifference and defiance on hers. She took a *chamar*, a subcaste leather tanner, as her guru and sought the company of wandering saints and mendicants, even dancing openly in the temple. According to popular legend, her husband, the king or *Rana*, makes two attempts to kill her. The first time a deadly snake concealed in a basket turns miraculously into a garland of flowers, and the second time a goblet of poison given to her to drink becomes nectar. After the Rana's death, Mira, refusing to accept the lot of a widow and immolate herself on his pyre, became a wandering saint herself, travelling throughout Gujurat and Rajasthan, often plagued by envoys from the royal family who, though hundreds of miles away, acutely felt the barbs of shame directed at them by this defiant woman's actions.

Mira bhakti : Undoing the Marital Knots

From a social and political point of view, Mira's actions throughout her life constitute an attack on Rajput authority and the institution of marriage and the caste system. One of the most remarkable features of Mira's life and song are their sustained challenges to the norms governing the marital tie and marital life. In one song Mira sings that she is bound to the *ektara* and the *chautara* (both musical instruments played by the wandering saint-singers) and will not accept any other marriage:

> Ranaji came to the forest
> Ranaji came to the marketplace
> Mirabai, do listen
>
> I am already wedded, they want to marry me off again
> I will not marry another husband
> I will hold an ektara in my hand,
> I will hold a chautara in my hand,
>
> I am dyed in the colour of my beloved
> (Mukta, 1994: 122).

In another song she point-blank tells the Rana:

> Tie the necklace round your *dasi* (servant-girl), Ranaji
> This *tulsi* garland (wedding garland) is in the name of
> Hari (Mukta, 1994: 128).

It has to be understood that Mira said this to the most powerful figure in the land--a King, a man, and her own husband. Sullying his honour would automatically mean death to a subject and war to an enemy. During the Medieval age, Rajasthan was a warring nation constantly divided by turbulent political strife. At such times loyalty to the clan becomes paramount as the clan derives its strength from numbers and the individual, in turn, takes privileges from being allied with the clan. Honour is valued above all else. While a wealthy Rajput king may have maintained a galaxy of richly-veiled wives, sexual infidelity on the part of a woman would have resulted in her and her lover's death, the malice sometimes spreading to destroy even members of their families. Rajput women were famous for their courage and bravery, often choosing to kill themselves rather than suffer degradations at the hands of other victorious tribes. Rejecting these chimeras of valour and honour for the life-giving love of her god, Mira announces in another song

> This ill fame is sweet to me, Rana,
> this ill fame is sweet to me. Your
> slanders are sweet to me...
>
> (Rana replies)
> Mira, show me your Ram in person
> or you will be shown up as a charlatan.
>
> (she replies)
> Rana, my Ram is visible within each heart
> Only you are unable to see him
> as the foundation of your heart is rotten.
>
> I have found my *satguru* (worthy preceptor)
> in the alleyways of love.
> I am not now able to turn back.
> Mewadi Rana, this ill fame is sweet to me.
>
> Bai Mira sings the glory of Girdhar.
> My bangles are dyed a deep red,
> Mewadi Rana, this ill fame is sweet to me

(Mukta, 1994: 102).

By wearing these red bangles, hallmarks of the married woman, Mira once again claims her place as Krishna's wife. In her choice of Krishna and her simultaneous rejection of the Rana, Mira stands out for rejecting the shackles of a patriarchal marital institution which requires a woman, for reasons of property and social honour, to enter into an intimate relationship with a man for whom she has no affinity. Mira employed bhakti, her worshipping and singing, as a way of carving out an enclave for personal liberties:

> Bhakti enabled Mira to uphold a life based on love. Bhakti enabled her to establish a relationship which was of her choosing and which was self-directive. The power to express and bestow a love was of her own volition...Mira's challenge to Rajput [codes of conduct] lay not simply in her enunciation of Krishna bhakti, but in the stands that she took in the pursuance of her love for Krishna. She posited the power of her relationship with Krishna against her relationship to the Rana, her lord and husband. This earthly master meant nothing to her. She refused to consummate the relationship. At his death, she refused to immolate herself with him, declaring that the tie with her beloved was an immortal one, and that she did not accept the status of a widow...Mira brought into question the authority of a prince, a husband, a patriarch all at the same time. If she had upheld her love of Krishna quietly in her heart, or within the precincts of a temple this would have been tolerated. What was not tolerated was her *public* affirmation of this (Mukta, 1994: 65-6).

Even today, some four hundred years after her death, Mira's name is considered a form of insult, meaning a loose woman, in parts of Rajasthan--the land whose king she defied. Women of those parts would never name a daughter after her, though she stands as one of India's most famous saints, and shares with them her natal land. Her songs are still a thorn in their side, and singing Mira bhajans is not tolerated. On the other hand, the dalit people of some parts of Rajasthan and Gujurat, with whom Mira had shared her life of poverty and ostracization, nickname their country *Mirabai ke desh*, the land of Mirabai. Her appeal is still very strong for women, since for many of

them, the vulnerabilities and degradations brought upon them by marriage and widowhood is very much with them today. Child marriages still occur in parts of India, and even in the urban centres, hospitals often receive the burn victims of dowry deaths. The last decade saw a *sati*--a young widow named Roop Kanwar --raised to the status of a local deity in Rajasthan when, after being pushed or throwing herself into the flames--no one seems to know which, she burned to death on her husband's funeral pyre. It is no surprise then, that one of the most famous and frequently sung Mira songs sung in neighbouringGujurat today concerns the fear of widowhood:

> I have become attached to your face, beloved Mohan
> I have become attached to your face.
>
> The domestic life is a sour and hollow one.
> One weds--and then becomes a widow.
> Why should I go to his house, beloved Mohan?
> I have become attached to your face.
>
> I married my loved one,
> and achieved an indestructible relationship.
> I annihilated the fear of widowhood.
> Beloved Mohan, I have become attached to your face.
>
> Mirabai is blessed.
> My one hope rests in you.
> Oh, I am fortunate, beloved Mohan,
> I have become attached to your face.
> (Mukta, 1994: 148).

That woman today remember and sing such songs, songs composed by women who actively tried to free themselves from the emotional and social constraints that kept them from living, is a tribute to their ever-strong desire for a dignity that is as yet denied to them in their everyday social relations. However, what this form of bhakti does not accomplish is combining with others to evolve a collectivity which can forge new and better societal bonds. This desire for relationships based on more equal footing must now move from the realm of the imagination into the realms of power and emotional strife to challenge societal relations more actively. The most powerful means by which this can be accomplished is through raising the consciousness of

individuals, which in turn can unite, like rivers in a sea, to voice a forceful and powerful expression of a need for change.

II. Song Rituals as Resistance

Origins of the Debate

While *shakti,* or the feminine principle, may be revered in India as a powerful and potentially dangerous force, tiger-riding and earth-destroying goddesses seem to be found only within the brightly painted walls of the temple. Beyond the temple's gates however, flesh-and-blood women are caught within the walls of the home, or within the invisible, yet more impenetrable walls of a society that restricts their freedoms and choices. While the feminine principle, as evidenced by destructive goddesses such as Kali, is viewed as so potentially virulent that it must be strictly controlled, Indian women have, through ancient history until our days, been encouraged to be docile, ever conscious of their honour and shame, to defer to fathers, then husbands, then sons, and to be, at once, both slaves and ornaments to the house.

In contrast to the virago-goddesses that must be pacified, Indian women have long been characterized as passive and empty of personal ambitions. This portrayal appears in a variety of sources including literature, proverbs, folklore and scriptures as well as British colonial texts and modern day Indian cinema and songs. Karl Marx, among many other Western writers, established the South Asian village and its caste ridden inhabitants as stagnant, inert, passive and apolitical (Marx, 1967: 36-7). Not surprisingly, this view prevails even now among India's elite classes, most of whom have been educated in British-style public schools. On many occasions I have heard people in the drawing rooms of Delhi, Calcutta or Bombay bemoaning the *dalit* (subcaste) and rural people as essentially lazy, uninterested in issues such as health,

hygiene or education that would help them improve their quality of life. Belying this however, is the flourishing of the women's movement in India in the past decade, drawing into its fold women from beyond the borders of the politically-enlightened middle classes. Such groups are campaigning for better working and living conditions throughout India, as well as an end to practices against women that have been perpetuated through the centuries. On academic frontiers, social historians who have, in the past, neglected the quieter forms of personal rebellion, are now examining more closely everyday social phenomena that women are more likely to engage in, such as singing and storytelling that, if they do not radically alter social relations, have for generations provided women with an avenue for expressing their discomfiture with tradition and *kismet*, or destiny (Haynes & Prakash, 1991:4).

Women, as we know, have historically been barred from overt participation in public and politicized confrontations, being tied exclusively to the sphere of the private and domestic. Rarely have women been characterized as engineers of social change and revolution. Lately, a growing concern with gender issues has led some contemporary writers to criticize the virile assumptions underlying previous writings on resistance which considers strikes, wars and other more obvious manifestations

> Power is ...constantly being fractured by the struggles of the subordinate. Social structure, rather than being a monolithic, autonomous entity, unchallenged except during dramatic instances or revolt, appears more commonly as a constellation of contradictory and contestatory processes...[E]pisodes of resistance themselves rarely mark pure forms of escape from domination; struggle is constantly being conditioned by the structures of social and political power (Haynes & Prakash, 1991: 2-3).

The exclusion of women from previous discussions of resistance has been a consequence of looking at resistance largely in terms of violence and rebellion (Adas, 1991: 290-304).

Songs and Other Forms of Everyday Resistance

The social movement theories of historian James Scott, rather than focussing on dramatic confrontations, examine more enduring 'everyday' forms of resistance constantly present in the behaviour, traditions and consciousness of the resistant or subordinate groups. Emerging research, such as that done by the Oxford-based 'Subalternists' who consider the subordinate or 'subaltern' perspective, investigates the interdependent construction of class, gender, race and colonial relations. Taking their cue from Scott, these writers project power as fragmented and tenuous, depicting the cultural practices of resistant groups as "ever-ready to tear through the fabric of hegemonic forms" (Haynes & Prakash, 1991: 1).

Folk songs that evoke women's distress, anger and confusion with existing norms and traditions constitute instances of cultural practices that break with the dominant voice, yet do not necessarily lead directly to an active political resistance. Nevertheless, many examples demonstrate how these everyday forms of resistance create a kind of reservoir system, in which energies and ideas may gather to fuel more practicable forms of protest later on. A recent study of a famous *adivasi*, or tribal, revolt in Gujurat showed how the protest against Parsi owned liquor shops was "shaped and legitimized in the idiom of Goddess worship" (Hardiman, 1987). Social activist Parita Mukta tells the following story of how song was used by one woman as a shield against discrimination:

> The passengers who held reserved seats on this train had colluded with the police in locking all entries into this train, in order to stop the dalits exercising their right to travel to Bombay in time for the celebration of Ambedkar's anniversary. The dalits asserted force in gaining entry, causing anger amongst passengers who held reserved seats. One of them, a Marwari business man, mocked an older dalit woman, addressing himself to the middle class passengers: "They carry their *rotla* (bread) with them, he taunted, they'll sleep on the pavements or

> in Shivaji Park the night before their anniversary! Ha! They'll soon go running back to their villages the next day, as their *rotla* will run out! *They* can't afford to buy restaurant food!"
>
> At this point, the older dalit woman broke into a Mira song...about the dignity of eating stale and dry pieces of *roti* (bread), nullifying in song the grotesque class arrogance of the Marwari businessman. The effect of this song on the other passengers was remarkable. It evoked a laugh that the businessman had been bested by a poor woman, and it created respect for the dalit woman who travelled the rest of the journey without harassment (Mukta, 1994: 109-10).

In this instance, a contemporary woman used a song of Mirabai, a 16th century queen who became an itinerant singer, to both shield herself and eloquently express her retaliation to insult. Such an incident, along with the previous example, in which a modern political protest was rooted in ancient metaphors of the goddess, is typical of a culture whose connective threads to the past have not been severed but are still strong and binding.

Traces of the Past in the Present: Songs as History

In the forest Seetharamma gives birth
No water to wash her thighs, and
Hannumanta
Builds a bridge over the ocean
(Kannada folksong)

Women's folk songs in nearly every region of India are sung especially to celebrate, not only the cycles of life, but the cycles of the agricultural year (Tharu & Lalita, 1991: 52), tracing their sources to agrarian, goddess worshipping cultures that preceded the arrival of the Aryans into the Indus valley. Scholars continue to unearth suggestions that folk traditions in India have only been superficially overlaid by Sanskrit and contemporary forms, the beliefs of earlier world views still showing strongly through. The continuity with the past which Indian women feel and value is evidenced by the preservation of folksongs that, without trancript, have been passed down through the centuries. As such, it represents a potentially powerful historical

record of women's struggles that survives in the present. Gramsci makes the following argument:

> every real historical phase leaves traces of itself in succeeding phases, which then become in a sense the best document of its existence. The process of historical development is a unity in time through which the present contains the whole of the past and in the present is realized that part of the past which is 'essential'--with no residue of an 'unknowable' representing the true 'essence'. The part which is lost, i.e. not transmitted dialectically in the historical process, was in itself of no import, casual and contingent 'dross', chronicle and not history (Gramsci, 1976: 409).

The implications of such an all-encompassing and, I think, promising statement are profound for feminist scholarship. In an age where we are bent on recovering our missing past, it alchemizes the idea that 'so much of women's history has been lost' into the belief that what is vital and essential is very much present within *us*, the women and societies of today, in our own metaphors, beliefs, superstitions, prejudices, hopes--and certainly in the songs and stories that we remember and repeat.

In the words of many of the songs sung by women at marriages, festivities, births or even during the more homely everyday tasks such as washing, spice grinding, or cleaning and cooking, are very vivid manifestations of the struggle against oppressive cultural dictates. As Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash, in their study of social relations in South Asia, write:

> Resistance...should be defined as those behaviours and cultural practices by subordinate groups that contest hegemonic social formations, that threaten to unravel the strategies of domination; *'consciousness' need not be essential to its constitution.* Seemingly innocuous behaviours can have unintended yet profound consequences for the objectives of the dominant or the shape of a social order (Haynes & Prakash, 1991: 3, emphasis mine).

Many women who sing songs that ridicule the weakness of men and the tyranny of mothers-in-law, would consider the imitation of such insolence in their day-to-day lives as unflatteringly rebellious and worthy of contempt. Whether this is due to lack

of consciousness as to the rebellion their singing entails, or whether we always voice unconscious desires in our communications, they are part of the inevitable contradictions that inform the lives of women who must, more or less schizophrenically, live within patriarchal cultures that too often oppose their interests and desires. Popular culture, referring to those activities that texture people's daily lives, provide revelatory glimpses into how everyday activities constitute forms of resistance. It is in "such cultural forms as work, ritual, speech, gossip, oral tradition, lifestyle and behavioural codes, dress, and entertainment that domination is constantly being forged and fissured"(Haynes & Prakash, 1991:16). Oral traditions provide insights into which contradictory beliefs, born out of the conflict between culture, traditions, and personal desires and ambitions, intertwine and marry to form self-identity.

These contradictions are most clearly evident in what Scott terms "the hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990), the unconscious statements and activities that take place away from the gaze of the dominant. Women's singing, that often takes place during activities where men are not present, inhabits a world apart in which woman can vent their innermost thoughts. Consider the following account, which appeared in a letter written in 1863 by a Bengali groom, about his wedding night spent in the company of the bride and her female coterie:

> There were only women all around...First they received me with much welcome, but gradually they began to use their hands...They slapped me, they pulled my ears, and my beard and moustache were about to be plucked out. The war ended after some time. Then, the ladies asked me to take my wife on my lap, and they began to hurl taunts at me. I cannot reproduce them. You...can well imagine what sort of jokes they were. I somehow managed to escape and was thanking my stars, when the younger ladies asked me to sing (Bannerjee, 1989: 159).

Sumanta Bannerjee writes that such ceremonies

> not only freed the members of the *andarmahal* [literally inner sanctum, but referring to the women's quarters] from the censorious frowns of the male patriarchs, but also offered them an opportunity to wreak a sort of vengeance on male superiority. The newly married husband, who for the rest of his life would dominate the wife, on this particular evening had to play a reverse role--that of the beleaguered male (Bannerjee, 1989: 159).

Rather than extended chords, it is rather such *moments* of rebellion that have dotted and patterned women's lives. These moments are vessels to the ideas that do, in greater or lesser amounts, spill over into the daily lives of women.

Different points of view

You will become the roadside blackberry tree, O Beautiful,
I will pluck and relish your berries day after day.

You will pluck and eat the berries every day, O Handsome,
And I will become the star near the moon.
You will become the star near the moon, O Beautiful,
And I will look on straining my neck.

You will look on straining your neck, O Handsome
And I will hide in the dark clouds...
(Oriya Folksong)

Women's songs are rife with conflict and contradiction, representing a diversity of opinion which, rather than weakening their collective impact, makes them stronger sources of resistance to patriarchal bonds. As anthropologist Susan Gal points out:

> the resistance found in women's linguistic genres is often contradictory and ambiguous; but this heterogeneity within women's speech practices does not prevent them from becoming sites of struggle about kinship, gender definitions and power (Gal, 1992: 3).

Women speaking as daughters on the one hand, and wives and daughters-in-law on the other, comment differently on the ways in which their social and familial bonds dictate their lives. The contradictions that evolve represent the many splinterings of

voices from the dominant voice of authority that seeks to assert itself. Gloria Goodwin Raheja, who writes about the narratives of North Indian women, remarks

> women's ritual songs and proverbs make visible the contradictions within dominant North Indian discourses concerning kinship, marriage and gender, and in doing so begin to subvert the authority of those discourses (Raheja, 1994: 49).

The most important factor is that these songs do voice women's criticisms of their societies' norms. It is these voices of discontent that need to recognize each other, despite their varied permutations, before the women can galvanize themselves into collective action resulting in change.

The Song Fenced In: Some Problems Concerning Action

O how I was afraid of the dark, O Mother
But now I have freed you from my care, O Mother
And when the first hibiscus blooms, O Mother
Darkness shall reign on your hearth, O Mother
The camel drinks with its long neck, O Mother
But you have none to caress, O Mother
(Oriya Folksong)

One of the central questions arising from the study of everyday rituals is, as I have touched on before, whether these forms of resistance can provide these means of actively changing social relations, or whether these rituals, like a stagnant lake, remain self-contained, never flowing out to influence the social environment. Rituals, it has been argued, though they may superficially protest against the established order are ultimately intended to preserve and strengthen that very same order, by creating a safe outlet for potentially subversive impulses. Natalie Davis, in her study of early modern France, concludes that the ritualized expressions of rebellion against the overriding social codes

> are ultimately sources of order and stability in a hierarchical society. They can clarify the structure by the process of reversing it. They can provide an expression of, and a safety valve for, conflicts

> within the system. They can correct and relieve the system when it has become authoritarian. But...they do not question the basic order of the society itself. They can renew the system, but they cannot change it (Davis, 1965: 214).

According to this theory, the fact that women have carved out an enclave within both the public and private domain in which their songs are valued, encouraged and customary, undermines the often subversive meaning of their lyrics. I would disagree, saying rather that such rituals represent forms of protest that have *not yet* reached outcomes of action. I will come back to this later, but first I need to speak briefly about the long history of women and singing in India, to demonstrate the tenacity of women's oral culture. Women's songs, though they may be sung in ritualized, restricted settings, have often been viewed as dangerous, forming the subject of attack and destruction.

Women's singing and lyric-composing in all strata of Indian society has long roots that go deep into the past. The connection between women and singing is so old that one Hindu proverb, declaiming almost all that it is to be a woman, states

> Woman, you have 400 000 bad attributes, but three good ones: singing auspicious songs, maintaining virtue, and producing sons.

Important historical examples linking women and song include the ancient cult of the *Devidasis* (temple maids), which today has eroded into a form of cheap prostitution, but was once famed for developing the arts of singing and dancing, as were the courtesans of Lucknow and Hyderabad later during the colonial and pre-colonial eras. A modern day devolution of this culture is the contemporary mainstream Hindi film, which would automatically flop at the box office if the heroine didn't sing and sway to several catchy numbers. At the other end of today's cultural spectrum, are women *bhajniks*, or mendicant-singers, who have sung the same devotional songs through the centuries, and even today wander the rural areas earning their daily bread in exchange for a song that is one of hundreds emblazoned on their memory. The songs

can be likened to the coloured threads of an embroidery, the stitches of which the women unravel and work, again and again, into new patterns to suit their changing situations.

Rooting Out the Bad Song : Historical Destruction of Women's Narratives

Now the wild *kash* flowers have made the river
festive all the way,
But who will take me home across the river?
The one who will take me home,
I'll lay down my necklace and my youth at his feet.
(Bengali Folksong)

Block and Messick, in their study of women's discourse in Madagascar and Morocco believe, like Davis, that though some songs may have alternative moral perspectives encoded within them, they ultimately "pose no potent threat to patrilineal ideology, and effect no transformations in women's everyday lives"(Block & Messick, 1987:17). Terry Eagleton develops this line of thinking in his criticism of Bahktin's upholding of the political potential and meaning of Carnival:

> Indeed carnival is so vivaciously celebrated that the necessary political criticism is almost too obvious to make. Carnival, after all, is a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art. As Shakespeare's Olivia remarks, there is no slander in an allowed fool (Eagleton, 1981:216).

While women's songs may be 'allowed', and interwoven into the tapestry of daily life, the views expressed in these songs have, at different points throughout history, aroused both vehement outcries, as well as more stealthy forms of opposition, suppression and destruction. While Messick and Block conclude that women's discourse is "not likely to be noticed, much less elicit active suppression" (Messick & Block, 1987:217), Raheja and Gold find, in the context of North India, that

> songs that define women's sexuality in positive and celebratory terms (rather than as dangerous

> to males and their solidarity) may be viewed by men as 'bad songs' (*bura gil*) that should no longer be sung (Raheja & Gold, 1994: 51).

That women's discourse is generally viewed as benign and an unlikely source of social disruption is easily disproved by a host of instances in which women's oral culture has been the subject of direct attack. The as-yet-untold stories behind these occurrences are slowly being pieced together, from personal correspondence, statistics, newspaper articles and sources peripheral to the documented histories of the time. Songs, for unlettered women throughout the world, are greater than an expression of self for they also form a repository of common histories. Stories, songs and proverbs represent encyclopedias, containing their knowledge of medicine, agriculture, weather, birthing, child-rearing and cooking as well as psychology and social relationships. Such knowledge, however, has often been perceived as posing a threat to the institution of patriarchy, whose claim to power has been mainly justified through its assertion to being the sole legitimate source of knowledge--exclusive and incontestable .

Song Versus Structure: A 19th Century Case Study in Bengal

A vivid historical example of the systematic suppression and destruction of women's oral narratives can be found in mid-19th century Bengal. At that time "the Woman Question", as the famous Victorian debate on woman's role in society has come to be known, was as heatedly discussed in the drawing rooms of India's elite as it was in the cities and campuses of Great Britain. Staking its claim as a major issue, the role of women was considered from many, mostly male, vantage points. Topics of concern included a suitable curriculum for women's education, the abolition of child-marriage and *sati* (widow immolation), the remarriage of widows and bringing women out of *purdah* (the veil). The Bengali *bhadralok* (British system educated sons of absentee landlords, East India Company agents and traders who made fortunes in the 18th

century, as well as various professionals and government servants), themselves often aspiring to the ideals of their colonial masters, were much concerned with the creation of the *bhadramahila*, the new respectable middle class woman. As Koylaschandra Bose wrote in his 1846 treatise "On the Education of Hindu Females":

> She must be refined, reorganized, recast, regenerated (as quoted in Sangari & Vaid, 1989: i).

Essential to this process of refinement was the extermination of songs and other forms of women's popular culture that openly criticized the puritanism of brahmanic laws and the confined place of women within Bengali society. Writes Sumanta Banerjee,

> 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: 131-2).

Take for example this *kheur*, a verse that speaks of love in a merry, ribald manner:

> Come hither, my black-bee
> If you want to feast on my honey! (Banerjee, 1989: 137)

Other *kheurs* jeer at the dignity of Hindu deities by retelling stories from the Mahabharata. For example, one such *kheur* tells the story of a young widow, Ambalika, being prodded by her mother-in-law into sleeping with the woman's eldest son--an old, lecherous man, in order to perpetuate the family line. Ambalika, reminding her mother of her own disreputable past, retorts:

> People say--
> As a girl you used to row a boat in the river.
> Seeing your beauty, tempted by your 'lotus-bud',
> The great Parashar stung you, and--
> There was a hue and cry:
> You've done it once,
> You don't have anything to fear.
> Now you can do it as much as you want to,
> No one will say anything.
> If it has to be done,

> Why don't you do it, mother? (Banerjee, 1989: 139)

The women who made their living by singing these songs made frequent visits to the *zenanas*, or the women's quarters of middle-class homes, to entertain the women with performances. The bhadralok, influenced by their colonial education and convinced by prudish Victorian standards that modesty was essential to true womanhood, became incensed by the frank and hearty appetites expressed in these songs. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, these critics made a concerted effort to denigrate and suppress such expressive genres, sometimes calling in the police to break up public performances. Folksongs were labeled as corrupting, indecent, and unsuitable for the proper Hindu woman, and were replaced with didactic woman's literature in the form of magazines and papers which were devoted to the cause of inculcating genteel virtues and Victorian norms. For example, in one such magazine, *Antahpur*, a woman writer advised:

> Even if the husband uses abusive language out of blind anger and behaves rudely, the wife's duty is to accept it in silence. It is extremely improper to show disobedience before the husband. Even if you are at the point of death you should never speak ill of your husband to others (Banerjee, 1989: 165).

According to such magazines, directed towards the middle class woman who engaged professional singers or sang these songs herself, the singing and enjoyment of folk songs could be imputed to women's lack of formal education.

Before this backlash, in the years between the 1820s and 1830s, female *kabiyals*, or singers, were at the height of their fame. Their *jhumurs*, a form of tribal song mixed with dance performances, reflected the life and problems of the poor. More specifically they touched, in an unabashed and unhypocrytical fashion, on themes that concerned women. Jogeswari (c. early 19th cent.), a famous Bengali kabiyal, sang about a philandering husband's infidelity:

Neither spring nor monsoon brings you back.
You have trampled on the hopes
Of an honest woman's heart
And showered your attention on the whore.
This empire of yours shall fall, my lord,
You know not how to love. (Tharu & Lalita, 1991: 188)

Another famous Bengali kabiyal **Bhabani** (c. early 19 cent.) turns the above situation on its heel, and writes of a woman's infidelity to a dull husband:

Ram's real sweet,
Shyam's the same;
It's only my husband who's sour
Too boring to suffer for an hour
Except when we're having a fight.
There's someone at the door
In the middle of the night,
What a fright!

Shyam's uncle's father-in-law
Is one hell of a man
Jadu's cousin's brother-in-law
Now he's my latest fan...(Tharu & Lalita, 1991: 189-90)

Such compositions, whether humourous or serious, attest to a strong tradition of women's art, and a line of independent-minded women artists. By the middle years of the nineteenth century however, these women's livelihood and art forms were being consciously converted into "an illegitimate Other and eliminated, not without violence, as the new middle-class writing took shape (Tharu & Lalita, 1991: 156)."

Other Casualties of Women's Folk Culture

Your Seven Sons with Seven Wives
can be with you forever;
But a daughter stays as long as a dream
So grieves the daughter's mother
(Bengali Wedding Song)

Colonialism also took a heavy toll on Indian folk cultures. Though British administrators may have claimed a "hands-off" policy when it came to some of India's cultural traditions, the effect of the many laws it imposed on its subjects was widely felt. Administrative strictures enacted by the British government that had direct

bearing on the lives of the poor often form the themes of these compositions. For example, when Britain began imposing exorbitant tariffs on imported Indian goods, at the same time allowing virtually free entry of British goods into India, the effect on all strata of society was devastating. Most severely struck were the people involved in the textile industry, but those who produced iron, glass, paper and jewellery were also seriously affected. Numbers of people starved to death. The Governor General himself wrote in 1834 that

> The bones of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India (Tharu & Lalita, 1991: 148).

Among the peasants and artisans, women, being already at the furthest margins, suffered the most. Women's traditional role in the economy--in the processing of grain, in the service sector, or cottage industry "slowly became redundant, while their gains in the modern sector remained negligible (Banerjee, N., 1989: 269)." In rural areas, small farmers were being forced to shift from growing food to cash crops, in order to provide raw material for British industry. The abandonment of traditional ways, apart from taking a horrendous toll on lives and livelihoods, also destroyed, within a few decades, the ancient folk practices and knowledge of those peoples, developed through the centuries. This

> meant that 'agricultural knowledge preserved and practiced by women, now illegal and vestigial, shrivelled from disuse, as did knowledge in other areas: medicine, forest conservation and song and story-telling (Tharu & Lalita, 1991: 149).

Imperialist policy did not only wreak havoc on the fortunes of the poor, but it trammelled the fortunes of the wealthy indigenous families as well, and with them the surrounding nebula of social and cultural groups that relied on their patronage:

> As flourishing textile cities of Dacca, Murshidabad, Surat and Madurai declined in importance and the old urban aristocracy lost power, a whole community of women court artists, poets, singers,

> musicians and dancers was displaced (Tharu & Lalita, 1991: 148).

The Bengali census of 1891 counted 17 023 women who claimed professions in the arts as either singers, dancers or musicians. Only a decade later in 1901 that number had dropped to a scant 3527 (Tharu & Lalita, 1991: 156). Social and economic displacement both claimed their shares of women artists. Like a Russian *matrushka* doll, each successive cycle of women artists was smaller and smaller, reduced to almost embryonic size.

The community of women artists was being attacked from so many different directions: as colonial subjects, as outspoken critics who were in danger of polluting the purity of the women of the middle-class, and finally, as economically vulnerable women whose bodies could provide the highly demanded service of cheap prostitution. While some women, ousted from their former professions, may have found work in the mills or as teachers in new schools (ironically, despite the trumpeting of mid-century social reformers, less teachers were being hired at this time than previously), most likely the work they found was in prostitution which was "spreading like the plague in Calcutta" (Kopf: 92). In contrast to the dwindling numbers of women folk performers, Calcutta, with a population of about 400 000 people, supported 12 419 prostitutes in 1853. More than a decade later, in 1867, although the city's total population had slightly decreased, the number of prostitutes rose to more than 30 000 (Banerjee, S., 1989: 142-3). At the expense of the women labourers, artists and artisans, who had always lived on the fringes of society, prostitution--as in other parts of the Empire--flourished.

These prostitutes developed their own genre of songs, *bashya sangeet* (songs of prostitutes), where they poked fun at their male clients and also laughed at themselves. Women's oral narratives, despite the assaults of society, prove themselves to be resilient and continuously in touch with the nerve and core of women's experiences simply by the fact that they have continued, despite adversity, to be sung. While they may shape

the perceptions of individual women's lives, they may not have as yet found their full realization in the proceedings of direct collective action. This should not, however, discount the power of such songs--a power that derives from honesty, frankness, humanity and the strength and emotional outlets that they have provided to women over the centuries.

The Song Untied: Moving towards Action

Elder sister, Elder sister
to have a talk heart to heart
let's push open the attic door
then untie our hearts
(Marathi Folksong)

Women's folksongs embody a form of protest that must not be disregarded or undermined because direct lines cannot be drawn from the songs to points of confrontational protest. As Jean Comaroff, an anthropologist who worked within the violently repressed communities of the Tshidi of Southern Africa, remarks:

> while awareness of oppression obviously runs deep, reaction may appear erratic, diffuse, and difficult to characterize. It is here that we must look beyond the conventionally explicit domains of "political action" and "consciousness"; for, when expressions of dissent are prevented from attaining the level of open discourse, a subtle but systematic breach of authoritative cultural codes might make a statement of protest which, by virtue of being rooted in a shared structural predicament and experience of dispossession, conveys an unambiguous message (Comaroff, 1985: 217).

In and of itself, communal singing and storytelling provides women an opportunity and a means for expressing their thoughts. It does constitute a form of resistance when

in so many cultures and communities across the world, the very act of thinking, and even more so its tangible results, constitutes for women a subversive activity.

Michel de Certeau writes,

> As we increasingly, and from differing perspectives,
> examine ordinary life, the fixtures of ordinariness
> give way to fractures and we see that struggle
> is everywhere, even where it is least dramatic,
> and least visible (de Certeau, 1984: 218).

Of the songs and narratives that arise out of these fissures, Susan Gal suggests that

> women's speech practices may be seen as
> resistance to a dominant cultural order
> when they propose alternative models of
> the social world and when these strategies
> of verbal expression are practiced and
> valued despite denigration or attempts
> to suppress them (Gal, 1991:51).

Denigration and suppression, varied with exclusion and disregard, are all points on the compass that signify that the voices within these songs, the things they say, are not being listened to. Women's songs, coloured by their experience, have survived because the women who sing, compose and listen to them need to express themselves as the many faceted personalities that they are: angry, frustrated, joyful, doubtful, sexual--but which their social roles often bar them from showing or exploring. Mirabai voices such a dissatisfaction with the ways of the world when she sings

> Strange are the ways of destiny,
> The fools reign on the throne,
> The wise men are destitutes.
> The sweet water of the rivers
> is polluted by the salty sea
> (Nilsson, 1969: 30).

Songs such as this one are created from consciousnesses that tear violently out of the designs of the social fabric; the question remains as to how women, working out of the strength of their long history of struggle, can viably change the social relations that may thwart them from a fuller realization of themselves and their chosen destinies.

III. Song Traditions and Education

Working Hand in Hand

> I turn the stone flour mill with the swiftness of a running deer;
> that is because my arms are strong with the mother's milk
> I drank. (*tappa*, or couplet, sung in Northern India)

Any present day educational scheme for women that overlooks, or indeed does not grow out of the ways which women may already have developed to counter the dominant beliefs that constrain them, cuts itself off from the vital, nourishing history of those particular women's struggles. Educational programs, however, that preach literacy as a panacea to the widespread problems that afflict Indian women--problems of health, nutrition, infant mortality, and economic distress-seem to work out of the unrealistic premise that information artificially grafted on will provide quick answers. As Hakribai, a village woman who didn't see the point of literacy classes for adults, remarked:

> You can't stick clay on a glazed pot (Reddy, 1994: 35).

Programs that are not tailored to meet women's particular needs will not have the desired effect of helping those women (Bhog, Ghose & Mishra, 1994). Many Indian women may not know how to read and write, but that does not suggest that they have not evolved complex ideas about their societies, nor does it mean that they have no idea as to what tangible changes may be needed to improve their lives.

Songs and myths, bursting with portrayals of resourceful and rebellious women, belie the assumption that Indian women have internalized without question the inferior status that society habitually confers upon them. Unschooled women know the power of words, and feel the necessity of voicing their grievances and ambitions.

> We write in our brains, for we never learned
> to read and write (Jung, 1987: 105),

remark Hasna and Saadu Bai, two dalit women who compose songs. Educational programs that define their aim as helping women improve their lives need to build from the strengths that these women and their mothers may have worked to earn. The worth of folk and oral traditions must not be farther devalued by branding the upholders of these traditions as 'illiterate'. The single axe-stroke of such a word rings with the meaning that the highly evolved and complex ways of knowing of such women are nothing in comparison to the forests that have fallen to become books and ledgers.

Communicating with Wisdom

I am all yours!
I would die for you, my beautiful child...
A pair of toy parrots hangs on the rod of your cradle,
I am all yours
(Gujarati Folksong)

Valuing poetic and ritual forms of protest, and encouraging the proliferation--rather than turning a blind eye to the rapid erosion--of expressive traditions, can enable women to articulate more clearly their needs, and then take action when more practical forms of protest become possible. "Only through communication can human life hold meaning," (Freire, 1972: 50) writes Paulo Freire. Songs and stories, the spoken word, are at the epicentre of human communication. Folklore represents human kind's earliest and most lasting repository of wisdom. It has been

> used not only to entertain and enlighten, but to piece generations together (Metting, 1995: 285).

In an age when traditional ways of living are being disrupted by land disputes and mushrooming industries around the globe, oral traditions are often the strongest link that unlettered peoples have with their history. Folk traditions lay bare the cultural underpinnings, the mythologies and legends, that inform the practices of daily life. The life we show to the world--the way we behave, interact, choose to spend our time-

is the upshot of the root and the bulb of our own beliefs as to what life is; and the question of 'what is life?' is the persistent theme of folklore.

The heart of this question, I believe, concerns relationships: our relationship with god, with nature, with our inner self, our outer life, our families and our society. Folklore reaches deeply into human consciousness, and oral lore that has survived, in the folds of human memory, does so because it is still meaningful. Education programs, in turn, can become more immediate and meaningful by tapping into this rich source for energy and direction. Freire writes,

> knowledge emerges only through invention
> and re-invention, through the restless,
> impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry
> men [and women] pursue in the world,
> with the world, and with each other
> [Freire, 1972: 46].

Spinning education programs out from the ideas and the knowledge women already have, as embodied by their songs and stories, is just such a generative and a regenerative act. As Metting points out,

> folktales, riddles, games, songs, proverbs,
> spells, rhymes, remedies, recipes have
> been the schools and texts for most people,
> and most human wisdom has been shared
> by seeing and imitating, hearing and
> remembering...when we rely solely on
> conventional written literature in the class-
> room we risk going no further toward
> human underst .nding than "twice around
> a tooth-pick and halfway back" (African
> folk-saying).

Bud and Leaf: Growing education programs out of Narratives

Education that meaningfully intersects people's lives can be likened to a boat, the means to a destination, that can only carry people aboard if it leaves from the pier, or the place of departure, which those people occupy. If the boat leaves from any other port, or if education builds on premises or experiences which are not the

students', then it cannot hope to take them anywhere. As activist-researchers working within the context of government-directed Total Literacy programs for rural women in India noted:

> Women's education cannot be related to the classroom like progression of one grade to another...[It] is only a moment in the process of learning and not necessarily the first (Mishra, Bhog & Ghose, 1994: 132).

I would go even further and say that a class consisting of women who have raised families and spent hours in wage-earning activities should be recognized as having spent a lifetime learning. Educational programs need to first realize such strengths before helping non-literate people overcome their own self-prejudices about being uneducated and therefore, incapable of meaningful ideas and work.

This kind of education, that evolves directly out of the felt needs of a people, has been termed by Freire as 'libertarian' or 'education for liberation' (Freire, 1972). He describes its process as

> a childbirth, and a painful one. The man [or woman] who emerges is a new man [or woman]...no longer oppressor or oppressed, but man [or woman] in the process of achieving freedom (Freire, parenthesis mine, 1972: 25).

Education according to Freire, is the process whereby people begin to conceive of their social predicaments as a result of existing social structures and not as an outcome of circumstance or fate. Doing so will enable them to better understand and penetrate these structures in order to engender more practical changes in their world.

> In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggles for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression, not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform. This perception is necessary, but not a sufficient condition by itself; for liberation it must become the motivating force for liberating action (Freire, 1972: 26).

This 'motivating force', which implies a realization of one's voice, one's desires and self-worth, can be fostered by encouraging women to examine their songs and stories, and continue with the creation and adaptation of such narratives. To draw from women's wide repertoire of songs, to ask them to compare the situations and people described in these songs with those in their own lives, and to ask them to reinterpret these stories and evolve new ones, will foster a more consciously critical outlook that, as Freire points out, is the crucial first step towards self-liberation. As Freire writes,

> the point of departure must always be with men [and women] in the here and now; which constitutes the situation within which they are submerged, from which they emerge and in which they intervene. Only by starting from this situation--which determines their perception of it--can they begin to move (Freire, 1972: 57).

Education for liberation must view *the social and political structures as being in need of change, not the people.* The people need to be encouraged to develop ways in which to realize these changes. This philosophy of education, however, is not the one which motivates most of the programs set up in Indian towns and villages. Many education initiatives, concentrating on the more easily measured objective of functional literacy, fail in helping women to actually engender ongoing change in their own worlds. Activist Tahera Aftab writes about educational programs in Pakistan,

> The reality of the situation is that adult women, who have been bypassed by educational schemes, are not weak, powerless, women. On the contrary, they are strong, hard-willed persons, tenacious as grass, with an intensity of determination to survive and combat all those forces of dogma, patriarchy and fanaticism which raise their hydra strings to annihilate them. The very survival of these women, deprived, marginalized and violated, stands as evidence of their combatting mechanism and marvellous built-in reservoir of courage and energy. If, after more than 18 hours of unending, unpaid, unrecognized labour they

> are encouraged to join night literacy classes, it is their privilege to ask "literacy for what?" (Aftab, 1994: 29).

Development and Developing Long Term Plans

We are a couple now, and you'll leave me all alone.
And you'll leave only darkness where the moon once shone
(North Indian dancing song)

Education for poor women in countries such as India, that attempt to realistically help women in their own efforts, needs to be the outgrowth of development policy that is long-term in its outlook. The social inequalities that are at the root of these women's poverty can be altered, but not overnight, and not merely by the elegant formulae of statisticians. Almost twenty years ago the World Conference of the UN Decade for Women (held in Copenhagen in 1980) put forth a philosophy of development that we are still far from reaching in our practical programs. It reads as follows:

> Development is here interpreted to mean total development, including development in the political, economic, social, cultural, and other dimensions of human life as also the physical moral, intellectual and cultural growth of the human person. Women's development should not only be viewed as an issue in social development but should be seen as an essential component in every dimension of development (Wadley, 1988: 14).

Education for liberation, however, is often at odds with the aims of educational incentives financially fuelled by concerns that are Westernized in outlook, and that have vested material interests. Development theorists today speak of the necessity of sustainable development, centred around environmental and economic regeneration and renewal (Daly, 1991: 19), similarly education for development must aim for programs out of which the students are ultimately able to take education into their own hands. If this is to be possible neither governments nor outside sources of funding

can have as their ulterior motive the creation of new markets or the channelling of people into emerging economies that depend heavily upon consumerism and technology. As Rashmi Mayur, Director of the International Institute for Sustainable Development, writes

> At the human level, we must preserve our humanity and the integrity of society--a human society based on a rich diversity of cultures. For that, we must challenge the obscene homogenization of the world by Westernization in the name of development (Mayur, 1996: 3).

Different Birds: Songs as a Means to Encouraging Cultural Diversity

Essential for our survival is not only the biological diversity of plants, animals and marine life, but the diversity of human societies as well. The reasoning behind this is, I think, most easily explained by an example of how we are ultimately protected by such diversity. At the moment the world is dependent almost entirely on five different types of harvests--rice and wheat ranking among the highest. Should some sort of rampant disease afflict one of these food crops, an ominous possibility that is growing more likely in this era of re-emerging, drug-resistant strains of viruses, massive famines throughout the world would result. This however, could be prevented if there were a much wider diversity of food crops that made up the staple diets of the world's peoples, as there had been originally. A virus that damaged one particular kind of crop then would not ravage the entire world's food supply. Our reliance upon these few food crops has been artificially created, the result of 'green revolutions', economic interests, and other factors. Homogenization, resulting in a destruction of different ways of doing things, of multiple ways of thinking, makes us extremely vulnerable. Our number of recourses becomes fatally limited. This becomes particularly true in a world--a world of limited resources-- that seems to be growing increasingly blind to everything but its own materialistic impulses.

Non-Literate Peoples and the Powers that Be

Don't! Don't go away.
don't take a job somewhere
Far from home! My friend
You yourself are my treasure
The chain of gold around my neck
(Bengali folksong)

Educational programs that grow out of a philosophy that values diversity need to allow people to express their differences outside the framework of traditional, often post-colonial, elitist judgments of inferiority and superiority, developed and undeveloped, literate and illiterate. I don't think that there is any society in the world that is not 'developed'. Non-literate societies throughout the world are complex, highly developed cultures, having evolved their own moral and ethical codes, customs, laws, cultural activities and sophisticated ways of working the land and the sea.

Nonetheless, many non-literate peoples have absorbed a very deep sense of inferiority. One self-disparaging tale that is told in several different Indian tribal cultures traces their lack of a written script to a foolish or unlucky ancestor who, while travelling with the precious script incised on an animal hide, got lost and, in order to escape starvation, ate the skin, script and all. This traveller's brother, sometimes depicted as more favoured by their mother, was gifted with the same alphabet, but carved on a stone tablet. This was passed down through his children who are today's literate peoples. The history of the written script versus the spoken word is no different in India than in many parts of the world where the common man and woman, through their inability to read, and their forced exclusion from formal learning, has been barred them from making and interpreting the laws, be they social, religious, or political, that govern them. In India, this still holds through for non-literate women who are dependent upon their male family members, doctors, civil servants, and priests for the most basic information. I don't think, however, that

literacy alone can answer this problem. As Nayyar Javed, writing about Moslem women, elaborates:

> In reconstructing a self-definition that liberates women, they need to know the power their fore-mothers enjoyed that got lost, because of the western imperialist notion of literacy. Women in the traditional...societies relied on oral traditions for acquiring and disseminating learning. Skills in narratives gave them power. They were looked up to for folk wisdom and healing remedies. Women passed on their wisdom and knowledge through narratives (Javed, 1994:65).

Work Like Queen Bees: Misogyny in Oral Traditions

While such wisdom and knowledge is passed down through oral narratives, prejudices against women are deeply embedded as well. Negative and harmful stereotypes of women persist alongside powerful images of folk heroines and goddesses. Any education for women that evolves out of a reinterpretation of folkloric traditions will have to grapple with the misogynist portrayals of women that also proliferate. One of the major tribes in Tamil Nadu, the Irula have a history of

> oral art and folklore...[that] educates, through lullabies, songs and stories that women work like queen bees, look like peacocks, smile like tea leaves, walk like wild cats and so on. Their folklore maintains conformity to the accepted pattern of sex-based behaviour and moulds women to be soft creatures and hardworkers (Parthasatthy, 1988: 146).

The Garos of Meghalaya have a saying *me chick suri qisik gri*, women are like useless garments, meaning that they are bereft of conscience (Mazumdar, 1965: 158). The Mizo of Mizoram hold that *hmeich ho thu thu ni suhi chakai sa sa ni thuh*, that as the crab meat is no meat nor does the word of a woman have any value; or again that *hmeichho finin tuikhu ral a kai lo*, a woman's wisdom does not run beyond the threshold of the village water source (Bandyopadhyay, 1985: 159). Perhaps the most direct and clearest way of discrediting these kind of abusive folk sayings is to contrast

them with actually happens in the arena of daily life, in which these same women play indispensable roles within the life of the tribe.

The discrepancy between the worth patriarchal society places on woman's life and labour, and the actual contribution of what a woman gives to that society is enormous in most Indian cultures. In Rajasthan, where a dalit woman may walk 16 miles a day to draw water for the family from a well, the women withdraw behind their veils and wail if a girl is born. And yet, writes Ann Grodzins Gold, of her observations of life in rural North India:

> Most little girls in Ghatiyali were cherished... Metaphorically, they were little birds destined to fly away--as one poignant wedding song puts it. But this departure is mourned rather than welcomed. Messages of love and yearning follow daughters when they go, and summon them home again (Gold & Raheja, 1994: xxxii).

If folk traditions are to be drawn into education for empowerment initiatives for women, then they need to be explored not as immutable truths, in which women's identity is carved in words of stone, but as social entities that may have been devised with express political purpose in mind.

Making New Songs Out of New Hopes

Again, this brings up the urgent need for women to be encouraged to create continuations to these myths, new myths that are more accurate ciphers of their current realities, beliefs and desires. Taking the language into their hands, women can begin to create legends that they can hope that they or their daughters may one day live. Vivid instances of women renegotiating language today are apparent not only in songs and stories, but in the goings-on of daily life as well. For example, in many Indian cultures

> the language of the seed and the field is used for stressing the man's rights over the

> woman's sexuality and the women's lack of rights over her children in the event of separation or divorce. In the villages of Andhra Pradesh ...a father claims his children by saying that they are his seedlings or plants grown out of his body particles. The Gond and Hindu women in the villages of south-eastern Madhya Pradesh express their helplessness thus: 'They are born of our womb for nine months and we nourish them with our blood, but the man claims them saying that after all they are born of his seed' (Singh, 1988: 7).

However, this comparison of woman being like passive earth has been transformed by Suman Bai, a Jamkhed health care worker who encourages women instead to grow conscious of their great power as mothers and family planners. She tells them

> A woman is like the land. When a seed is sown, it needs to be nurtured and watered before it can bloom. It is the same with women. When we plant paddy we space it so that it has room to breathe and grow. It is the same with children (Jung, 1987: 103).

Words are not static articles, but they are enriched and deepened by the multiplicity of their meanings. Reinterpreting folkloric traditions inevitably involves reconsidering and altering the senses that some metaphors have accrued over the centuries. Like a grain of sand that winds itself in layer after layer of skins to become a pearl, we need not destroy or throw away the words, but find new settings for them in ways that do not weigh women down. This will revitalize and add new dimensions to many of the tribal languages and dialects that are, at the moment, on the brink of peril and extinction. The beating heart of oral traditions are the living, spoken languages that should not be endangered by education for development, for the erosion of language in itself entails the destruction of a highly evolved way of understanding, thinking about, and expressing our human concerns.

Folk traditions do not stay within the boundaries of fictional worlds. They can and do permeate into the daily lives of women, shaping understandings and influencing actions. The famous Chipko movement that began in Uttar Pradesh

employed poetry and song as a unifying force in the women's *satyagraha*, or non-violent resistance. Sings Chipko poet Ghanshyan Shalland:

> Our mountains and forests
> They give us life
> Embrace the life of the living trees and
> streams
> Clasp them to your hearts
> Resist the digging of mountains
> That brings death to our forest and
> streams (Rodda, 1991: 110)

In India, protest and tradition often work hand in hand , rather than being at odds with one another. Evolving educational strategies that encourage women to explore the social structures that ensnare them, hand in hand with valuing those women's voices, cultures and histories will give human life and diversity a chance to bloom and bear fruit.

Implications for Education

Examining in depth the songs and stories that constitute collective histories provides the framework for an organic educational system that consciously links the present to the past and future. It does this in part by encouraging critical thinking, and thereby challenging the existing norms as it raises the consciousness of individual students. Using traditional songs, as primary resource material, will help different cultures nourish bonds with their world-views, albeit in a fluid, changing form that is born out of self-examination. As nature is constantly re-examining and learning from itself, making adjustments where beneficial or necessary, so should education programs evolve to answer the changing concerns of their students. Education, in this sense, can nurture the seeds of change--the seeds of the student' ideas--that can then be disseminated throughout society to bring about wider changes. If such educational programs are rooted in the voiced needs of women, then it follows that the changes brought about will directly stem from women's deepest concerns; namely, the physical

and emotional welfare of the family, children and their upbringing, health, more egalitarian relationships between men and women, and the list goes on.

These problems number among the most frequently voiced concerns of women from both rich and poor countries. They are fundamental issues vital to the happiness of any society. Throughout the world, however, they have been put on the back-burners, ignored entirely, or painted as concerns peripheral to a society whose preoccupations are material, industrial and technological. Women make up the most oppressed peoples in our world today. No matter how poor the community, women are always among the poorest of the poor--eating last, doing the most ardous labour, selling their bodies (often their only possession) as children or adults in order to support their families. Listening to their voices means facing the most serious, but often most covert, illnesses of our society. If we can begin to cure these cancerous social evils, we will improve the health of the entire organism of our society.

Folk Culture as Co-operation and Sharing

Perhaps one of the strongest and most radical protests that shared oral and folk cultures make against the existing norms is one against materialism, ownership, and the isolation that results from self-concerned, individualist ideologies. Living in a time and a place where every utterance, every sentence, song and story is tied up by copyright, banned from reproduction, and stamped with an owner's name, the need for ownership of ideas answers to a capitalist demand that everything have its price, for that is ultimately what determines its worth. This, in turn, seems to me to degenerate language and communication into an economic currency, rather than a means for communication. Folk cultures are meaningful because they speak of the lives and stories of individuals within histories and cultures. Mythologies are original in the sense that with each birth, each new life, an ancient story is played out again, *as if* for the first time. Materialism's most pernicious hold is when it tentacles reach into

our imaginations, when ideas and songs become things to be owned, rather than infusing with colour a greater, collective consciousness. Songs and ideas still, of course do this, for finally what is meaningful will not be bound, but what is important for us as the creators of our societies is to reflect upon which of these aspects of communication do we place most value and emphasis upon.

Values Inherent in Educating through Folksongs

Human languages, as varied and diverse and everchanging as they are, are among the hundreds of thousands of languages that have evolved on the earth. Bees, with their intricate dances, communicate to each other the exact locations of flowers and nectar. Elephant herds, the moment they discover water in the African scrublands, send out mysterious signals to other elephants all over the country, bringing them in quickly and directly to the vital water source. Wild geese fall into their shifting V patterns, peacocks dance and birds sing; at the microscopic level our cells hold codes that also constitute a form of communication. The thread that runs through all these languages, drawing them together, is that they are the means of communicating things which are essential to the life and survival of their speakers. An education program that grows directly out of the language and embedded world-views of a people, and then at that level is combined and contrasted with those men and women's observations and criticisms of their society as it currently exists, creates an evolving society in which desires can coincide more closely with possibilities. The values on which such a culture would depend upon, as voiced in the many folk songs from which I have quoted, centre around honesty, truth, co-operation, companionship, trust and a strong commitment to understanding through communication.

Our words are meaningful because, like threads, like networks of veins or bloodlines, they connect to others. They do not only move outwards from our hearts and minds to those of others, they also connect into us from the outer sources of the

world in which we live. The liberation that education, that a conscious life, can offer us is essentially one which liberates us in a way that allows us to know and appreciate that which is truly meaningful in this life, that which speaks to us.

At the end of this paper I find that I have raised more questions than I have been able to answer. Women's narratives have shown in their history the possibility of being powerful seeds of social change. Yet, the voices of frustration and unfulfillment heard in so many of their songs and stories have not found their expression in altering the social norms that, with very little change, have continued to hurt them for generations.

Education, in its truest sense, meaning to learn about ourselves and our part in this world, can I believe help galvanise these forces that are latent in women's songs and stories. Like unfolding pine cones that will renew a whole forest, the work that needs to be done, needs to start from within the heart and work outwards: from within the educational projects, the women, and finally the communities.

Education can also help women learn and remember that we have a long and rich history of struggling with the wheeling vicissitudes of our societies. What we need is within us already, and what we must achieve we can find by having the courage to follow the difficult but, I believe, often beautiful and fulfilling roads that our desires set out for us.

I thought to lock you out,

to hide myself in a Cell,
with no passages to Memory
but you, yourself
were the key:

letting me in and out
of my own desires

My Mind is a Sea, in which
every Fish is a thought of you

You are always with me,
but I, for you, am like
the dark geese
that scissor once yearly
across your sky

Even in my Midnight your Sun
burns me: I am
the red pepper vines
clinging round your Mango tree

every wish for you is a
fish that never reaches the shores
of its destiny

When my bonds to you loosen,
they do so only
like the stems of the sallow leaves
from the yellow fall trees,
Soon to grow strong again--

now you know,
now my heart is like a fish
in your hands, flipping and writhing

my secrets are like nuts cracked open

Don't waste this,
O no, don't deny me

Anushree asks you:

Others are rivers,
How can they hold my Sea

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IMAGE EVALUATION
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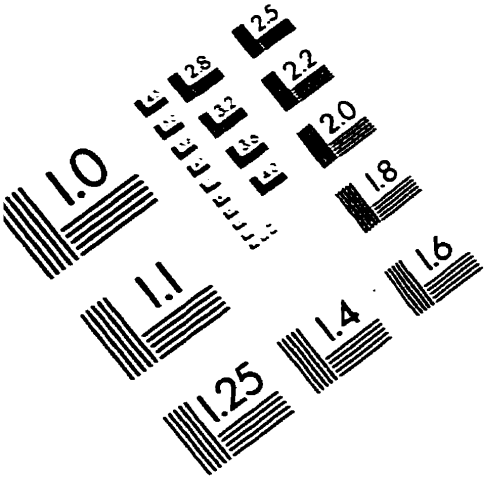

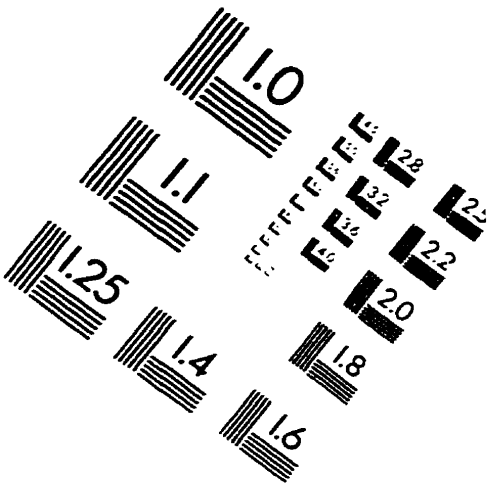

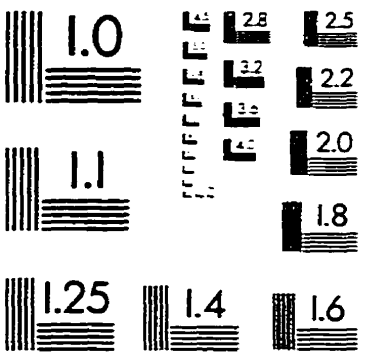

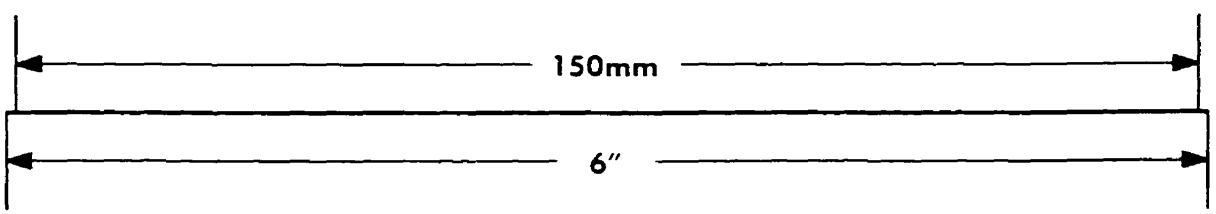

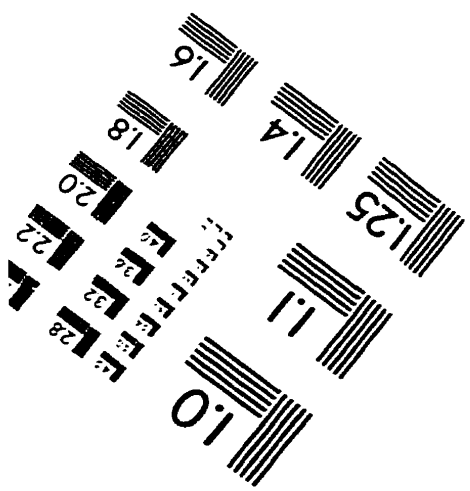

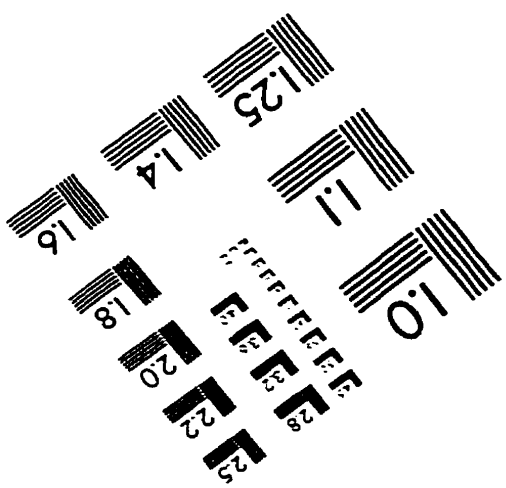

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