

FOREWORD

On Life, Language, and Lore: The Writings of Ved Prakash Vatuk

Most academics would consider it a truism that the topics of scholarly inquiry are rarely arbitrarily chosen. But the themes of language and lore that frame the collected academic writings of poet, linguist, and folklorist Ved Prakash Vatuk are intimately and cohesively grounded in the author's life-long quest for social justice. What Vatuk realized early on as a child coming of age during the final years of British-ruled India is that this quest requires travel not through the elite corridors of legislators and politicians, but through the common hallways of everyday folk: the tired sugarcane workers of Western Uttar Pradesh who take 24-hour turns at the presses during harvest (Chapter 7); the highly skilled yet overlooked performers of local folk operas in eastern Meerut (Chapter 8); the poor women of a North Indian village who secure their futures by secretly stashing goods with a Brahman neighbor (Chapter 11). It is the collective voices of these ordinary actors—their songs, their dramas, their conversations—that fill the pages of this volume and provide the data for Vatuk's ongoing exposition and critique of social hierarchy, whether it surfaces in the dirty jokes of Hindi-speaking children (Chapter 10) or in the misguided assumptions of English-speaking academics (Chapter 4).

Vatuk's understanding of the intimate relationship between folklore studies and social activism no doubt finds its origins in a childhood infused with anticolonialist energy and unrest. The youngest of thirteen children, Vatuk was born on the thirteenth of April, 1932, fifteen years before India won its independence. Although his home village was far removed from the bustle of its closest neighboring city Meerut, the struggle for freedom impacted the lives of even the most isolated, fostering the development of diverse grassroot activities that permeated everyday life. Vatuk's father, for instance, had long engaged in freedom fighting at the local level, particularly with respect to caste discrimination.

Foremost to this effort was his founding of the first Arya Samaj temple in the area, which he established in opposition to the local Shiva temple's refusal to allow low-caste dalits to worship alongside other villagers. It was in this temple that a young Vatuk first encountered the inspirational poetry of the *bhajnopdeshaks*, professional folk composers and performers who sing social critiques in order to encourage reform. The very title of Vatuk's (1967) article "The *Bhajnopdeshak* as an Agent of Social Change," reprinted here as Chapter 18, reflects his conviction that something as purportedly "simplistic" as folksong can produce radical change with respect to systemic inequities: "The *bhajnopdeshak* is religious without being sectarian; he is an advocate of change, radical change, while insisting on the preservation of what he sees as the essentials of Indian traditional values. A study of his message and of the techniques he uses to communicate it to the people is an invaluable guide to the complexities of the course of social change in India." In fact, as Vatuk asserts in his autobiographical essay "Still Dreaming," it was precisely the spread of this "singing"—or rather, the jointly vocalized hope of a world based on social justice, equality, and freedom—that made his pre-Independence fellow Indians "free even in bondage, rich even in abject poverty" (1998a: 31). As the words of political activists ranging from Martin Luther King, Jr. to Mahatma Gandhi have so elegantly reminded us, social reform is always precipitated by hope.

While Vatuk is highly interested in the local folk performer, he is also crucially intrigued by the less celebrated "folk" who circulate oppositional stances through everyday interaction. His writings in the 1960s and 1970s illuminate an understanding of history that only in the 1980s came to be identified as *subaltern*: a theoretical perspective initially developed within South Asian studies that places non-elites at the analytical center as agents of social and political change. In Vatuk's own words, the true history of any people lies not with leaders like Nehru and Gandhi, but with the "the thousands of little Nehrus and Gandhis spread all over in the villages and towns of India" (Vatuk 2003). The origins of Vatuk's formulation of this perspective can again be traced back to the village of his youth, where his father, one of the village's few educated men, would read aloud the national Hindi weekly *Pratap* before a crowd of listeners every day at noon. It

was here "at the knees of my father and brother," as Vatuk remembers it, that he became aware that there are two distinct types of history: the master narratives learned through the literature associated with the educational system and the more localized subaltern narratives learned through the everyday exchange of story and song. His childhood memory of how villagers would circulate portraits of political reformers—among them Nehru and Gandhi—provides an apt metaphor for why he later came to embrace the study of folklore. "Through [the exchange of these portraits]," Vatuk recalls, "we learnt the history that was never taught in our school system" (1998a: 30). History in Vatuk's conceptualization is both learned and lived, the inevitable social result of everyday transaction. The essays in this book thus feature the voices of the little Nehrus and Gandhis whose memories of the past rarely make the pages of a textbook, ranging from villagers in northwest India who critique Western institutions in their tales and proverbs (Chapter 15) to East Indians in British Guiana who sing against the abuses waged by a century of indentured servitude (Chapter 16).

An alternative understanding of power is thus necessarily implicit behind the inquiries that frame this set of essays. For Vatuk, power is not the top-down prerogative of a select elite, but rather something that is available to all through the workings of social practice. This was clearly the philosophy behind the political activism of his oldest brother, who before Vatuk was even born had been sent to prison three times in his fight for Indian independence. In one of his autobiographical essays, Vatuk (2003) recalls a childhood moment when he watched his brother, Sunder Lal, rallying support from atop an elephant. His brother sat together with Chaudhari Charan Singh, the renowned farmers' leader from Meerut whose political convictions later won him notoriety, albeit brief, as India's first "peasant" prime minister. Boosted by a sound system and loudspeaker, the two freedom fighters were singing out songs of protest in the hope of inspiring their listeners to join the fight for Indian independence. "You have the power to bring the world to its knees," they sang, "if only you rise." It is telling that this is the phrase Vatuk chooses to remember in his essay, for the power his brother speaks of is the very kind of bottom-up power that is the focus of Vatuk's

academic writings. In many senses, his work stands as a forerunner to the expansive body of scholarship that in the 1980s and 1990s came to be known as “resistance studies,” an intellectual perspective that arose in tandem with subaltern studies and drew its inspiration from Foucault’s (1972, 1978) and de Certeau’s (1984) concern with everyday forms of resistance. Paralleling his brother’s activism, Vatuk’s scholarship focuses on the disenfranchised who counter injustice by using whatever they may have to express dissent. And what all people have—even the poorest of the poor—is a voice. The dominant dismissal of localized expressive genres as both trivial and common is precisely what gives these “weapons of the weak” their potential, to borrow a phrase from James Scott’s (1985) influential account of everyday peasant resistance.

Vatuk’s adult experiences in Britain and the United States also share important responsibility for the development of his interest in subaltern history and everyday resistance. After earning an advanced degree in Hindi literature from Punjab University in 1953 and an M.A. in Sanskrit from Agra University in 1954, Vatuk, lacking the usual elite connections, found himself without a job. Inspired by the traveling scholar Rahul Sankrityayan’s (1949) book *Ghumakkar Shastra* (Science of Wandering), he borrowed a bicycle from a friend and rode fifty miles a day to collect money for a world adventure. Although before this time he had hardly even travelled through India, it was only a matter of months before Vatuk boarded a Polish ship headed for Britain. He arrived in London eighteen days later with half a pound in his pocket, eager to take work wherever he could find it—grocery stores, offices, restaurants, factories. It was here that he eventually met his wife Sylvia Vatuk, an American anthropologist who coauthored several of the articles in this volume and later became the mother of his four children. But he also breathed in a hefty dose of Western-style racism, even at London University’s School of Oriental and African Studies, where he began work on his Ph.D. dissertation. The realities of London daily life compelled Vatuk to rethink his previous imaginings of both home and abroad, providing the creative impetus for the writing of hundreds of political poems. When he came to the United States to pursue graduate studies at Harvard University in 1959, he was already well on his way to becoming one of the most prolific and well-respected Hindi poets

writing today. An early 1960s American climate provided even more fuel for Vatuk’s rebellious artistry, especially when coupled with a burgeoning academic interest in the field of folklore. Most of the articles that appear in this collection were written during this decade, a time when a folk singer like Pete Seeger could wage as much influence as a racist governor in Alabama.

What is especially rebellious about the work collected in this volume, at least from the hypothetical perspective of a securely situated Western academic, is Vatuk’s own resistance to the elitist assumptions that guide academic scholarship. He is in this sense a protest singer in his own right, articulating ongoing challenges to a hierarchical institution that nurtures an inflated sense of its own benevolence. His attraction to folkloristics is clearly consistent with the kind of anti-elitism he espouses in these essays, particularly since the field emerged through the rejection of academia’s preoccupation with so-called ‘high’ forms of literature and poetry. But the heart of Vatuk’s rebellion lies in the details—for instance, in his exposition of the metrical complexity of Hindi folk riddles as rivaling what is found in classical Sanskrit (Chapter 4); in his critique of Sahlin’s (1965) cross-cultural account of gift-exchange in so-called “primitive” economies for relying too heavily on Western concepts of self-interest (Chapter 13); or quite simply in his decision to analyze the riddles of a 13th century writer like Amir Khusro, whose work has been overlooked by academics because it is written in “the language of the layman” (Chapter 3).

One of Vatuk’s primary strategies for challenging intellectual elitism is to incorporate marginalized perspectives into his scholarship. The most overt instantiation of this tactic surfaces in his deconstructions of the Western historical record, particularly with respect to academic accounts of the making of modern-day India (Chapter 15). By including everyday voices that counter dominant narratives of British rule in India, Vatuk situates the historical scholarship on India as fiction rather than fact, or at the very least, as just one of many perspectives. In short, Indian history as written by Westerners betrays a self-congratulating perspective that hardly reflects the experiences of a colonized “folk”:

At no point does the chasm between East and West seem more unbridgeable than when we compare the history of British rule in India as written by Western historians (and by some Western-educated Indian historians) with the same history as retold by the folk. Whereas the emphasis of the former is on the advantages of education, economic development, and modernization brought to the subcontinent, on the reform of the evils of a backward Indian society by enlightened representatives of a great civilization, the latter describes the mindless eradication of revered traditions and the destruction of a prosperous and highly advanced culture by greedy and immoral invaders. While the Western historian accedes to the British claim to have brought justice, peace, and the concept of social inequality to the Indian populace, the folk tell of British atrocities, injustice, and racism. (Vatuk 1969, reprinted as Chapter 15)

Yet Vatuk, ever the activist, does not position his critique only within the realm of scholarly inquiry. As he intimates in several of these essays, the interpretive discrepancy outlined in this passage is fostered by an educational system that maintains its own hegemony. For Vatuk, academia as practiced in the West creates its own kind of symbolic violence by suppressing the potential of dissident voices. His political activism in the early 1990s with respect to the Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of California at Berkeley provides a lived example of his drive to diversify the academic canon. Having held teaching positions at six different American universities, among them Colorado State University, University of Chicago, and University of California Berkeley, Vatuk was well positioned to notice systemic discrimination against Indian scholars in higher education. In a series of newsletters, articles, and public talks, Vatuk exposed the fact that Berkeley's program in South Asian studies had for thirty years tenured only white male professors to teach Indian languages, relegating persons of South Asian origin to temporary positions (e.g., Vatuk 1991, 1992). Although this highly controversial "protest song" no doubt won Vatuk a number of academic enemies, it ultimately propelled into motion a new

awareness of structural inequities at the institutional level, facilitating the introduction of subaltern voices into the established upper tier of South Asian scholars at Berkeley.

Part 1: Method And Interpretation

The voices featured in this collection thus challenge dominant narratives associated with varied discursive systems, whether within British colonialism or Western academia. The book is divided into five parts, each of which addresses a central theme in Vatuk's work. The two chapters in *Part 1: Method and Interpretation* set the stage for the sixteen chapters that follow in that they carefully outline a methodological approach to the study of social life. "Without initial preciseness," Vatuk warns, "all subsequent work lies on a foundation of sand." For Vatuk, this initial preciseness hinges on his conviction that the interpretation of society must be grounded in ethnographic method as opposed to armchair theorizing. But these methods must be carefully pursued. In Chapter 1, for instance, "Method and Interpretation in the Study of Folklore in India" (originally published in 1966 in the *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society*), Vatuk illustrates how the data collection methods of early Indian folklore have led to incorrect accounts of metrical patterning in Hindi folk songs. Scholars, catering to an ideology of linguistic purism that assumes the superiority of standard Hindi, analyzed not the messiness of actual oral transmission, but the more pristine edited transcripts that were intended to approximate such transmission. But because these transcripts were "cleaned up" to meet the expectations of standard Hindi, they failed to reflect the complicated rhythm and prosody of oral transmission. Folklorists thus mistakenly asserted that Hindi folk songs "lack meter," affirming a long-held, and markedly elitist, assumption that the only "true meters" are those that conform to the classical prosodic categories of *vāṁika* or *māṁrika*. Here, Vatuk brings to folklore an idea basic to the field of linguistics as it developed within Europe and the United States. "There is no such thing as pure speech, from a linguistic point of view," Vatuk argues. "The 'correct' form of any language is simply that form which is actually spoken by the members of a speech community, regardless of its diverse historical origins." Indeed, Vatuk's subsequent analysis of tape-recorded riddles collected during an

evening riddle session reveals that Hindi folk meters are in fact highly regular and structured, comparable to the most complex of meters in Sanskrit classical literature. Always attentive to the opinions of his informants, Vatuk adds that these riddlers share their own critique of linguistic purism, perceiving the *shāstrī bāt* ('scriptural riddles') of the educated man—necessarily articulated in standard Hindi—as both affected and prudish.

The articles in this section thus call for rigorous ethnographic sensibility with respect not only to linguistic transcription, but also to the subjective stances of the informants from whom the data are collected. This too is inherently an anti-elitist stance, for it places the perceptions of ordinary folk on equal footing with that of academic researchers. Chapter 2, for instance, entitled "Poetics and Genre-Typology in Indian Folklore" (originally published in 1967), offers a highly productive incorporation of what linguists now identify as "metalinguistic" interpretation. Building on his subjects' delineations of folksong into specific types (e.g., *ālhā* 'war songs', *chōpī* 'songs sung by school students at Ganesh festivals', *bhajan*, *holī*, *sāngī*), Vatuk uncovers the complexity of metrical range and rhythm as a feature of genre. Where previous scholars dismissed "village people as blank when it comes to knowledge of the science of metrics" (Yadava 1960, quoted in Vatuk 1967), Vatuk here illustrates how attention to villagers' own folk categorizations reveals a sophisticated alternative metrics.

The tendency of Vatuk's contemporaries to focus on text instead of talk—or rather, on standardized transcriptions instead of the lived speaking event—led to a number of fundamental oversights, including the now well-researched finding that social factors such as age and gender contribute to linguistic variation. Although Chapter 2 was published long before gender became a vogue area of study in either folklore or linguistics (after all, Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* was not published until 1975), Vatuk hypothesizes that the primary reason his contemporaries characterized folk poetry as "without rhyme" is because they had examined only women's songs, which at the time constituted the bulk of Indian folklore collections. This archival imbalance was hardly arbitrary, as Vatuk notes, falling out from a prejudicial ideology that associates men with the "great" texts

of literature and women with the more mundane texts of everyday life. Analyzing a corpus of songs that he himself collected from men as well as women, Vatuk illustrates how rhyme operates differently across gendered genres. While women's folk songs do appear to rely more on repetition than on rhyme, employing rhyme only across stanzas (and thus leading to the academic perception discussed above), men's songs tend to feature heavy use of end-rhyme within a single stanza. Few studies of this time period so poignantly illuminate the importance of developing ethnographic methods that are sensitive to social as well as linguistic diversity.

Part 2: Riddles

The chapters that follow provide on-the-ground demonstrations of the methods and interpretive techniques set out in these two initial articles. In *Part 2*, Vatuk turns his attention to a genre that was instrumental to the early development of folklore studies: riddles. In the first article, "Amir Khusro and the Indian Riddle Tradition" (originally published in 1969 in the *Journal of American Folklore*), Vatuk analyzes what he identifies as "the earliest collection of secular folk riddles in a modern Indian language." Khusro, a court poet closely allied with the 13th century courts of the Delhi sultans, was a people's poet who bridged the gap between folk and literary traditions: "Whereas the riddles of the Sanskrit texts are obscure and complex, incomprehensible except to the literati, the riddles of Khusro are in the language of the layman, of the folk riddler." Vatuk illustrates how Khusro's riddles, because they incorporate locally specific elements, resist the universalizing structuralist classifications of folklorists such as Taylor (1951) and Georges and Dundes (1963). Vatuk thus questions the way in which the elite Sanskrit literary tradition has been held up as representative of the Indian art of riddling. But even more importantly, he characterizes Khusro's hybridizing of literate and folk riddle traditions as the norm and not the exception, predicting one of the mainstays of postmodernism when he calls for a more dialogic understanding of authorship.

In Chapter 4, Vatuk brings this critique to living folklore when he and his coauthor, the late Alan Dundes (1934-2005), analyze contemporary riddles from the Bulandshahr district of western Uttar Pradesh. It is not at all surprising that Dundes, one

of America's most accomplished and innovative folklorists, would find in Vatuk a special kind of intellectual camaraderie. The two published the article that appears here in 1974 in the journal *Asian Folklore Studies*, approximately a decade after Dundes joined the Department of Anthropology at Berkeley, ushering in a long and highly productive friendship. In fact, just four years later Vatuk published Dundes' (1978) book *Essays in Folkloristics* with the Folklore Institute, founded by Vatuk that has now published over twenty books by well-known social scientists. While Vatuk is at times critical of the universalizing structuralist and psychoanalytic perspectives that Dundes embraces, the two nevertheless share much common ground, particularly with respect to their ideological commitment to the importance of folklore. In this article, for instance, which carries the title "Some Characteristic Meters of Hindi Riddle Prosody," Vatuk and Dundes jointly criticize the way in which "metrics as an area of inquiry has been almost exclusively limited to literary materials." Their project is thus to establish the complex metrical features of these folk riddles, which they do in meticulous detail. The chapter's concluding sentences gets to the heart of why Vatuk and Dundes see this as a necessary undertaking: "Intensive metrical studies of folklore are bound to illuminate and enhance man's total comprehension of his poetic products."

Even though the focus of the chapter is on formal metrics, it also forwards several important observations regarding the interconnectedness between language and social life. For one, the authors stress the importance of examining these riddles within their natural context, explaining, for instance, how members of a group signal the beginning of a riddle session and make subsequent contributions. The attention they give here to the discursive norms of the speech event is methodologically consistent with the early subfield of linguistic anthropology referred to as *ethnography of speaking*. Research in this tradition, as set out by Dell Hymes (1962) in his foundational essay, seeks to oppose universal accounts of language use by providing more localized descriptions of linguistic behavior as practiced within particular speech events and communities. Vatuk and Dundes thus attempt to illustrate in this chapter how formal aspects of riddle structure correspond to norms in the native value system. With their combined strengths in the field of linguistics and folklore, the authors point out the

weaknesses associated with a linguistic analysis that ignores culture on the one hand and a folklore analysis that ignores linguistics on the other.

The fifth chapter, "Punjabi Riddles from the West Coast" (originally published in 1970 in the journal *Western Folklore*), serves as a companion piece to work published by Vatuk on the protest songs of first generation Indian immigrants in rural California (Chapter 17). Here, Vatuk's focus is on riddle-telling, specifically as practiced by Indian families in Yuba City and El Centro, California. While Vatuk is again concerned with establishing the existence of poetic meter for folk riddles, a second strength of the article lies in its focus on the sociolinguistic 'setting' of the speech event—a focus in keeping with the conviction expressed in previous chapters that folklorists must be attentive to oral renderings, not just written ones. As such, this chapter provides a compelling bridge between the microlinguistic claims of *Parts 1* and *2* and the sociological claims of the chapters that follow. Even more so than their technical prowess, Vatuk is interested in the ways that these speech genres create community. He notes that riddles, even obscene ones, are exchanged between grandparents and grandchildren in intimate after-dark settings, reflecting a larger cultural pattern of "freedom and intimacy" between persons two generations removed.

Part 3: Folksongs and Culture

The articles in *Part 3* directly address the interrelationship between language and community. Chapter 6, "Craving for a Child in the Folksongs of East Indians in British Guiana" (originally published in 1965), establishes this theme in its focus on ideologies of fertility in the folk songs of British Guianese Indians. But the community under study here is a transnational one, involving immigrants from Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Western Bihar together with their descendants. Because the majority of these immigrants were brought from India to British Guiana between 1838 and 1917, Vatuk is especially interested in the potential of folk songs as "carriers of cultural values." Even though most of these singers have little to no connection with the Indian subcontinent, their songs articulate dominant Indian ideals regarding the necessity of children, and in particular the necessity of sons. This "craving for

a child," as Vatuk identifies it, has a distinct logic that materializes in the tropes that circulate through the songs. Drawing on a corpus of 900 tape-recorded folk songs that he collected in 1962, Vatuk identifies and explains these tropes: for instance, the *tight bodice* (indicating a woman's failure to conceive), the *mango blossom* (referencing the unborn child), the *coconut* (symbolizing fertility), and even the *pipal tree* (a sacred tree that is not found in British Guiana). While the article is largely descriptive in spirit, Vatuk seeks answers to a question that has become fundamental to contemporary transnational theory: How do diasporic communities maintain these kinds of ideological linkages across time, space, and place?

Chapter 7 again explores what Vatuk calls the "cross-fertilization of folk and literary traditions," but this time with respect to a genre of work song known as *malhor*. These loud and energetic songs, sung by sugarcane workers in Western Uttar Pradesh as they turn the presses throughout the long winter months, are structurally consistent with a traditional literary Hindi 'couplet' meter called *dohā*, which is itself consistent with the *shloka* couplets of Sanskrit philosophical riddles. After uncovering some striking parallels between the content of these songs and their two-thousand year old predecessors, Vatuk turns his attention to an unexpected use of gender in a specific subgenre of these *malhors*: love songs. The *dohā* meter of Hindi folk poetry has long been associated with male songs, but these love songs are sung in the first person feminine, producing questions for traditional understandings of authorship. Yet by referencing cultural as well as structural information, Vatuk is able to explain why these highly emotional songs must be sung in a feminine voice, even if authored by men. Dominant understandings of masculinity are simply inconsistent with the kinds of lovesick "cravings" vocalized in these laments, where singers express pain and torment at being separated from a lover.

The folk operas that are the focus of Chapter 8, "The Ethnography of *Sāng*" have much in common with these work songs. For instance, the male actors known as *sāngī* not only recite their lines in *dohā* meter, they also use feminine voices when performing love stories. But what particularly interests Vatuk in

this article, which he coauthored with Sylvia Vatuk in 1967 and published in the journal *Asian Folklore Studies*, are the ways in which the folk opera performer acts as a kind of "cultural broker" between the modernizing forces associated with Westernization and the more traditional forces associated with orthodox Hinduism. This is Vatuk at his ethnographic best, as he and his coauthor uncover the social processes involved in becoming a *sāng* performer and expose the diverse social functions of *sāng* performance. Crucially, they illustrate how the long-practiced folk tradition of performing scenes of love and desire has now been rewritten as a Western import, fueling new forms of resistance from varied Hindu nationalist movements.

The remaining two chapters of *Part 3* extend the analysis of expressive "craving" to two other genres: folktales about the "lustful stepmother" in northwestern India (Chapter 9) and sexual joking among children in Western Uttar Pradesh (Chapter 10). Both of these discussions are positioned as countering certain universalizing theories prominent in the analysis of folklore. Chapter 9, also coauthored with Sylvia Vatuk, examines the materialization of the "lustful stepmother" motif in Indian folk literature in order to critique the structuralist classification of folktales in so-called "world literature." While acknowledging the similarity of this motif to the "evil stepmother" story of these folklore categorization systems, the authors expose the motif's more localized aspects, situating its meaning with respect to local ideas of womanhood as well as indigenous understandings of the conflict of society against nature. Chapter 10 is directed more towards Indian folklorists, who have tended to stereotype children's folklore as innocent and obedient. Vatuk throws a decisive wrench in this romantic characterization when he demonstrates the "triad of sex, shit, and sadism" that underlies children's joking practices. Ultimately, he argues that these kinds of verbal transgression represent a special kind of protest against the "authority and strictures" associated with adult morality. As in all of the articles in this section, Vatuk calls for a "fresh approach" to the analysis of language and lore that has ethnography as its analytical center.

Part 4: On a System of Saving

The chapters that constitute *Part 4* represent some of Vatuk's strongest ethnographic essays, seeking to expose the logic of diverse sociocultural "systems" ranging from gift exchange to sweet-addiction. There is a distinctive feminist subtext that runs throughout these articles, particularly in their attention to social hierarchy. Chapter 11, for instance, "On a System of Private Savings among North Indian Village Women" (coauthored with Sylvia Vatuk and published in 1971), attributes the village womens' establishment of private banking relationships to the insecurity and dependency created by discriminatory kinship practices. Chapter 13, "The Social Context of Gift Exchange in North India" (coauthored with Sylvia Vatuk and published in 1976), outlines the asymmetries that characterize gift-giving relationships in rural western Uttar Pradesh, among them age, sex, kinship, and status. Although Chapter 14, "The Position of Women in Hittite Laws and Manusmrti" (originally published in 1967), is necessarily text-based as opposed to ethnographic, its exposition of the rules governing women, marriage, and inheritance in two classical societies provides vital data for the sociohistorical study of women and law. Even Chapter 12, which focuses on the north Indian phenomenon of sweet addiction, references "the conventional authority structure within the Indian family" as an explanation for why this addiction is considered a male, not female, disease. Women simply lack the luxury to become sweet addicts, their activities being more subject to surveillance within the extended family.

Chapter 12, coauthored with Sylvia Vatuk and published in 1967 in the *International Journal of the Addictions*, incorporates some particularly innovative research methods for work of this time period. Many of these methods fall from the authors' decision to discuss this addiction—known in Hindi as *chatorpan*—as a product of cultural perceptions. Referencing Hymes' (1962) call to expose "native contexts of use," Vatuk and Vatuk investigate the form and meaning of *chatorpan* as it materializes in interviews, proverbs, folk sayings, and folk beliefs, going so far as to ask members of a ninth grade class to write short essays in Hindi about the concept. While much research on addiction had been written from the perspective of psychoanalysis, including

Obeyesekere's (1963) early work on pregnancy cravings in Ceylon, the authors turn to ethnography to illustrate the ways in which addiction is ultimately social. It is no wonder that this article has captured the interest of hundreds of psychologists from Australia to the United States ('Prabhakar' 1992), given its more general import for the cross-cultural understanding of human addiction as a social construct.

Part 5: Thieves in My House

The final section of this collection, *Part 5: Thieves in My House*, features four of the studies that were highlighted at the outset of this introduction. The heading "Thieves in My House," which appeared as the title of an earlier collection involving these same four articles (Vatuk 1969), points to the domestic presence of a sinister and unwanted intruder, realized in these chapters as the colonizing British. As the heading suggests, the perspectives Vatuk explores here are not those of the historian or lawyer, but those of the everyday home dweller who has been "burgled," in a sense, and whose account of the incident no doubt differs dramatically from that of the self-protecting burglar. The "houses" in focus are situated on the Indian subcontinent as well as within diasporic communities, spanning the globe from Banaras to British Guiana to Berkeley. Chapter 15, as discussed earlier, explores how Indians living in Meerut District, Uttar Pradesh and Ludhiana District, Punjab represent the West and Western institutions in their proverbs and folktales. Chapter 16, in an extension of some of the themes addressed in Chapter 6, explicates how East Indians in British Guiana view the British-sponsored indenture system in their songs. A focus on the Indian diaspora is continued in Chapter 17, when Vatuk examines how the San Francisco-based Gadar Party of the early twentieth century viewed the British occupation in their published protests. Finally, Chapter 18 returns us to Meerut and Banaras in an analysis of the political "preaching" of the *bhajnopdeshaks*, traveling performers whose views of governmental and societal ills may well be in part responsible for Vatuk's initial interest in folklore.

Even though all four of these articles were published in the 1960s, as are the majority of articles in this volume, they offer insights on a number of theoretical concerns still in focus today,

especially regarding the relationship between language and culture. The first article is of particular interest in this respect. When outlining the differences between understandings of the historical record by Western historians and Indian folk, Vatuk makes the radically relativist claim that such differences are primarily "a matter of linguistic usage":

It is worthwhile pointing out that much of the difference between the Western historian's and the Indian folk view of Indian history is a matter of linguistic usage. The greater part of the vocabulary which is the stock in trade of the former—and of Western scholars who write about contemporary Indian problems—finds no place in folk recitals of India's past and present. For example, such terms as terrorist, political unrest, free enterprise, capitalist system, constitutional reforms, free world, underdeveloped nations, are either not used at all or are used with connotations opposite to that which the Westerner understands. And in their evaluation of Indian leaders, particularly of those who led them in the struggle for Independence, the distinctions so important to the Westerner between violent and non-violent methods, between extremist and moderate, find no recognition.

While the idea expressed here harkens back to the theory of linguistic relativism associated with early American anthropology (e.g., Sapir 1927; Whorf 1941), it also importantly predicts the poststructuralist interest in discourse as a producer of both subjectivity and reality. Most of today's linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists would readily support the assertion that concepts such as the ones mentioned in this passage acquire meaning only within particular discursive (and hence sociocultural) systems. But when Vatuk was producing these essays in the United States during the 1960s, the discipline of linguistics was busy defining itself against this very sort of approach, holding that language should be studied as a cognitive instead of social phenomenon. The antagonism towards socially oriented approaches that emerged in linguistics during this time period may well explain why Vatuk gravitated towards folklore, even when he held no degree in the discipline. Surprisingly, Vatuk's graduate work was almost entirely

concentrated in more formal areas of linguistics, especially historical linguistics. After earning his M.A. in Sanskrit, he completed two years of graduate studies in Slavic linguistics at Harvard University (1959-1961) and then went on to earn a D. Litt. from Agra University in 1972 with a dissertation entitled *A Comparative Study of Sanskrit and Old Church Slavonic Phonology and Morphology*. But the writings collected here are more closely allied with the pioneering sociolinguists of the 1960s who challenged the American linguistic mainstream, among them Bill Bright, John Gumperz, Dell Hymes, and William Labov. For Vatuk as well as each of these scholars, language is best studied in tandem with the social world that gives it meaning.

In fact, a number of American linguists are still in the business of denying the potential import of social and cultural variability, if the work of cognitive linguist and best-selling author Steven Pinker is at all typical in this regard. Listed as one of Harvard University's hundred most influential alumni (Andrews et al 2006), Pinker focuses on those linguistic features that are common to all human languages as support for his argument that language is an evolutionary adaptation. It is not so surprising, then, that in his widely quoted book *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*, Pinker attempts to debunk relativist Whorfian notions regarding the interrelationship of language and worldview. But he does this in part by asserting the universality of the very concepts mentioned by Vatuk in the above passage. "Since mental life goes on independently of particular languages," Pinker argues, "concepts of freedom and equality will be thinkable even if they are nameless" (Pinker 1994: 82). Yet the meaning of concepts like *freedom* and *equality* vary radically from society to society, as Vatuk insightfully points out, so much so that what is "thinkable" (if this is indeed even at issue) may in fact be something entirely at odds with the Western conceptualization of these terms. The import of this early insight is underscored by the ongoing rhetorical attention paid to both of these concepts in European and American justifications for war against nations perceived to be non-democratic. It is no small claim to say that Vatuk predicts the failure of the so-called "war on terror" here, but his argument regarding interpretive irreconcilability does just that.

Vatuk's analysis of Gadar protest songs in Chapter 16 is a fitting subject for the conclusion of this introduction, particularly since these songs in many ways capture the rebellious spirit behind much of the work reprinted in this volume. The article that appears here, coauthored with Sylvia Vatuk and originally published in a 1966 issue of the journal *Folklore*, represents the first scholarly examination of such songs. The Gadar movement, as Vatuk explains in this article and in several subsequent publications (e.g., Vatuk 1998b, 2003, 2006; see Assisi 2006), is an early 20th century freedom movement associated with Indians in California that seeded a diasporic uprising against British rule in India. Spearheaded by Indian immigrants and university students, its professed goal was to liberate India from British servitude using whatever means possible. As part of their mission to involve the Indian diaspora in the fight for independence, a group of San Franciscans published a number of political booklets between 1915 and 1918, distributing them to Indians everywhere free of charge. Although the protest songs included therein have been viewed as historically significant because they advocate the use of violence, Vatuk chooses to focus on the ways in which these songs inspired community. Specifically, the songs' poetic depictions of the nature of the British regime, the glories of India's past, and the desirability of freedom resonated with Indians at home and abroad, including those who advocated non-violence. Vatuk has since made it his life work to research and publish the histories of several of California's Gadar Party activists, among them Hari Singh Usman, a farmer in Southern California who sold all of his possessions so that he could sail to India and fight for independence, and Kartar Singh Sarabha, a UC Berkeley student who joined the revolution only to be hanged by the British at the age of nineteen. Many of these stories have appeared in *The Gadarite*, a quarterly publication founded by Vatuk in 1998 that is dedicated to the ideas and actions of the Gadar movement.

It makes good sense that Ved Prakash Vatuk—folklorist, Bay area resident, and author of over twenty internationally recognized volumes of political poetry—would be attracted to a San Francisco group that published folk poems written in revolutionary style for Indians in the diaspora. In fact, the term *gadar*, which literally means 'rebellion' or 'revolt', can be appropriately applied to almost

all of Vatuk's work, whether fiction or non-fiction. Just four years ago, Vatuk completed yet another revolutionary poem, but this time of epic proportions. Reviving an ancient Indian myth for a contemporary readership, Vatuk's *Bahubali* tells the story of two feuding brothers whose path to violence ends only when their subjects rise up in protest against the loss of innocent life. Winner of the Hindi Sansthan's prestigious 'Jaishankar Prasad Award' for the best epic of the year, the poem advocates for an alternative nonviolent society. The eighteen articles that appear in this volume, all written at a much earlier point in Vatuk's life, also offer their own sort of rebellion against injustice, even if only at the everyday level of song and story. In the most profound of senses, Vatuk is himself a modern-day Gadar hero, continuing the fight against social inequity through a shrewd use of pen and paper.

Acknowledgments

I gratefully acknowledge the support of several friends and graduate students who helped me with the writing of the introduction and editing of the volume, among them Donna Goldstein, Adam Hodges, Chad Nilep, Joshua Raclaw, Lal Zimman and Jenny Davis. Special gratitude also goes to Parmatma Sharan at Archana Publications, who shares my enthusiasm for the work collected here. I am honored to have had the opportunity to introduce the academic writings of Ved Prakash Vatuk in this way. I am indebted to him for his integrity, wisdom, and friendship.

REFERENCES

- Andrews, Jesse, et al (2006). "The Harvard 100: The Most Influential Alumni." *The World of Harvard: Premier Issue 2006*. 51-85.
- Assisi, Francis C. (2006). "Digging Desi American Freedom Songs." *Indolink*, September 20. www.indolink.com.
- De Certeau, Michel (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life* (trans. S. Rendall). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dundes, Alan (1978). *Essays in Folkloristics*. Meerut: Folklore Institute.

- Foucault, Michel (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (trans. A. M. S. Smith). New York: Pantheon.
- Foucault, Michel (1978). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (trans. A. Sheridan). New York: Vintage Books.
- Georges, Robert A. and Alan Dundes (1963). "Toward a Structural Definition of the Riddle." *Journal of American Folklore* 76: 111-118.
- Hymes, Dell (1962). "The Ethnography of Speaking." In T. Gladwin and W. C. Sturtevant (eds.), *Anthropology and Human Behavior*. Washington, DC, 13-53.
- Isemonger, F. C. and J. Slattery (1999). *An Account of the Ghadr Conspiracy (1913-1915)*. Berkeley: Folklore Institute.
- Lakoff, Robin (1975). *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Obeyeskere, Gananath (1963). "Pregnancy Cravings (*dola-duka*) in Relation to Social Structure and Personality in a Sinhalese Village." *American Anthropologist* 65: 323-342.
- Pinker, Steven (1994). *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*. New York: Harper Collins.
- 'Prabhakar', Kanhiyalal Mishra (1992). "About the Author." *SACA Newsletter*, January, p. 8.
- Sahlins, Marshall (1965). On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange. In M. Banton (ed.), *The Relevance of Models for Social Anthropology*. 139-236. London: Tavistock.
- Sankrityayan, Rahul (1949). *Ghumakkar Shastra* (Science of Wandering).
- Sapir, Edward ([1927]1995). "The Unconscious Patterning of Behavior in Society." In Ben Blount, ed., *Language, Culture, and Society*, 2nd ed. 29-42.
- Scott, James C. (1985). *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Taylor, Archer (1951). *English Riddles from Oral Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Vatuk, Ved Prakash (1969). *Thieves in My House: Four Studies of Indian Folklore of Protest and Change*. Varanasi: Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan.

- Vatuk, Ved Prakash (1991). UN-Indian *Indian Studies* at U.C. Berkeley. *South Asian Studies Ist Past, Present, and Future: A Collection of Articles on the South Asian Studies Program at U.C. Berkeley*. Berkeley: Punjabi People's Cultural Association. 3-6.
- Vatuk, Ved Prakash (1992). "South Asian Studies at U.C. Berkeley: An Update." *SACA Newsletter*, January, pp. 8, 11.
- Vatuk, Ved Prakash (1998a). "Still Dreaming." *Samar Summer/Fall*, pp. 30-34.
- Vatuk, Ved Prakash (1998b). Foreword. In Isemonger and Slattery's *An Account of the Ghadr Conspiracy (1913-1915)*. Berkeley: Folklore Institute.
- Vatuk, Ved Prakash, ed. (1998c). *The Gadarite*. Inaugural Issue. Berkeley: Gadar Heritage Foundation.
- Vatuk, Ved Prakash (2003). "What Have They Done to the Dream? Remembering the Freedom Movement." *Siliconeer* 4(8), August.
- Vatuk, Ved Prakash (2006). "The Gadar Heroes: A Stirring Tale of Selfless Patriotism." *Siliconeer* 7 (8), August.
- Whorf, Benjamin ([1941]2001). "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language." In Alessandro Duranti, ed., *Linguistic Anthropology: A Reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. 363- 381.
- Yadav, Shankar Lal (1960). *Hariyānā Pradesh kā Lok Sāhitya*. Allahabad.

Kira Hall

University of Colorado