

Origin tales: Komalda, Goddess Shrines, Breathing Space

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I am honored to be here, but I feel very diffident. Many of you knew Komalda far more intimately than I did. Most of all I am thankful to have this chance to share my memories and acknowledge my deep debt to this amazing scholar, teacher and human being who quite certainly transformed my life course, just by being who he was.

The first half of my title has a double meaning; we'll get to the post-colon parts of it later. Regarding origin tales I mean not only the stories about how certain goddesses come to reside in certain localities, but also my own origins as an anthropologist and folklorist and religionist who has worked for nearly a quarter-century in Rajasthan. Because, as many of you may not know, Komalda was the reason I went to Rajasthan. My formative memories of Komalda date from the late seventies and our first few encounters.

Memory is a very weak and fickle faculty, as we all know, but here are a few things I believe happened: I met Komal Kothari in Chicago during academic year 1977-1978 at the home of my third-year Hindi teacher, Professor Kali Charan Bahl. At that time I was vaguely planning to do my research in the Hindi heartland. That evening at Kali Bahl's house, I fell fully under the spell of Komalda's storehouse of knowledge. Shail Mayaram has dedicated a paper she recently completed to Komalda as "the storyteller of the storytellers." That evening in Chicago, as do a storyteller's words, his conversation seemed to beckon me into possible worlds. I began to imagine Rajasthan as a place where folklore was thoroughly alive; where, as Mayaram writes in her paper of India in general (as opposed to Benjamin's Europe), "the role of the storyteller has been reinvigorated, as also reinvented in contexts of modernity."

Next, as fate (or kismet, takdir, karm, lekh) would have it, I traveled to India in the summer of 1978 with a Fulbright teachers' tour under Joan Erdman's leadership. We visited Borunda, and there Komalda hosted our group (maybe 12-15?) at Rupayan Samsthan, providing many hours of wonderful music and much more. *(Being greeted by Inder Dan Detha bareback on a white horse also made a strong impression on me and many of the women!)*

The next day Komalda sent us into the village of Borunda for meals at people's homes. What can I say? Though many of the teachers weren't happy with village accommodations or fare, for me the visit to Borunda – the first village into which I had ever set foot -- was the absolute highlight and pinnacle of that memorable journey. Perhaps I was a villager in my last life (as has often been suggested to me over the years). For in Borunda I ate bâjarâ ki roti and I thought it was the best thing I had ever tasted. I wanted more. I knew I would do my fieldwork in rural Rajasthan. (And however romanticized this first vision sounds, there is a way it has never lost its hold on me.)

The following academic year found me studying Rajasthani as well as Hindi with Professor Bahl and writing research proposals located in a hypothetical Rajasthan village. Komalda agreed to be my Indian academic advisor, with Rupayan Samsthan, the Rajasthan Institute of Folklore, as the institutional affiliation for my doctoral research. What a blessing this was to prove.

In July 1979, a heavy monsoon season with many roads closed, I was quite literally deposited by a taxi – bag and baggage -- on Komalda's doorstep at Paota B/2 Road -- hapless, forlorn, anticipating fieldwork with equal parts of ambition and terror. I know many of you have had the extraordinary experience of being embraced by the graceful hospitality of this family . . . I can't remember how long I stayed there. What I do remember was being very well fed, and also the patient hours that Komalda spent with me in spite of all the other demands on his time. He even helped me build confidence in my shaky language skills, as we waited for the rains to let up so we could reach Borunda.

Some weeks later I had settled on a field site in Ajmer district, a fair distance from Jodhpur and the Folklore Institute. I think I arrived in Ghatiyali, my home for the next 18 months, sometime in August; Joe Miller had already been living there for half a year. I know that Komalda came for a visit not too long thereafter – 1 October 1979 according to Joe Miller's field notes. He came to record some of our local musicians, but also, I suspect, to make sure I was doing all right. I had struck him and his family as a rather fragile type, different from other foreign females who had passed their way.

At this point I had been in Ghatiyali not much over a month. I was still, mostly watching and learning by osmosis; still a novice at fieldwork; my Rajasthani still very weak. I wasn't even keeping much of a diary at the time. Thus I have no written record of my one vivid singular memory from Komalda's visit – a story I would like to tell you.

Joe had arranged for Komalda to make some recordings at the shrine, Puvali ka Devji, where Joe's own research was centered. At Puvali on October 2, 1979, besides Ram Narayan the Devji bhopa, Komalda also recorded some Bhil flute-players – known for playing the algoja - a two mouthed flute. These instruments produce a kind of music that can be almost hypnotic, and that sometimes sounded mournful to me; used in some rituals to "call the bhav" (induce spirit possession). Bhils were tribals who gathered and sold honey and herbal medicines; many lived in deeply subservient conditions, working virtually as bonded laborers to the former ruling Rajput families. At the end of the Bhils' recording session, Komalda gave each musician some rupee notes; and they departed - not on the road but straight through the fields - toward wherever they lived. As they walked lightly, a spring in their gait, they played their two-mouthed flutes, holding them in the air over their heads, leaving a trail of cheerful melody in their wake as they receded from view. I watched and listened with pleasure. The music they were making on their way home for their own delight seemed more exuberant than the music they had played earlier for the tape.

Later, after Komalda left, Joe was chastised by Gopi ji, the priest of the shrine where the recordings were made. Joe had done the wrong thing in allowing the Bhils to be so well paid. Joe should have had Komalda give the money to Gopi, who would have kept some, and allotted to the Bhils significantly less. Such was the proper order of things, and Joe had made a bad mistake!

I told Joe this story on the phone last week and he said that he had no memory of any such thing happening. But because he happened to have his diaries and log books from 1979 out to prepare the video, he looked in his diary, found and read to me a notation: "after Komalda's departure, Gopi was angry and told me I had made a mistake in allowing Komalda to pay the Bhils" and so forth.

Now, of course this is a memory of village politics and evokes the uncomfortable politics of fieldwork where gaping wealth differentials are always a source of tensions. But it stands for more than that. For me it is a cherished memory of Komalda whose love of music, and of the people who make music, has given those people many spaces to perform and to be recognized and to be rewarded outside the traditional patron-client hierarchy. In my own memories, Komalda himself, his benevolent presence, is inextricably bound up with those joyful, fluting Bhils who in an hour or so of diversion had earned what was at that time the equivalent of a couple days wages for hard labor.

The other thing I remember about Komalda in the village (or anywhere) was that somehow he obtained the most delicious food. In Ghatiyali it was makki ki roti, lumps of gur, thick yogurt; I had been eating very thin phulki and watery dal and this was a revelation to me.

Every time I returned to India with a new project, and told Komalda about it, it seemed he knew already everything there was to know on the subject -- whether it was Nath jogi epics or whether it was environmental knowledge and regional

biodiversity. Yet he always remained generously eager to hear what I might discover. And he always gave me precious clues that would haunt and inspire me.

I was on leave and in Rajasthan (Winter 2003), and alas did not get to Jodhpur. I ended up becoming deeply involved in a project that was not in my research proposal at all, but that I believe will occupy me for the next several years. It began as the collection of origin stories at goddess shrines around my old fieldwork site of Ghatiyali. But I soon realized I wanted to look at the convergence at regional shrines of origin tales, miracle tales, healing, pilgrimage, and the protection of trees and wildlife. I see all these an organic and dynamic complex, and one where every interest I have ever had converges – including gender, both because many of these are goddess shrines and because, as Komalda has pointed out, so many shrine pilgrims are women.

I pulled off my shelf my long treasured copy of Gods of the Byways; Bhoju Ram Gujar gave it to me as a gift on his first trip to the USA in 1982, just a year after I returned from my doctoral research. My copy is much underlined and lovingly marked, but I confess I had not actually opened it in many years. I found to my awe that just about everything I've ever been interested in for the last two decades is contained in Komalda's comprehensive essay there titled, "The Shrine: An Expression of Social Needs."

It made me think that Komalda's love for and insights into rural Rajasthani culture are embedded in my scholarly self, perhaps like genetic codes, shaping my inclinations and my practice. I did not need to have opened the book to be indebted to it. For those who like me may not have seen this text for some time, let me just read you some lines from the first few paragraphs:

“Let us go to the remote villages of Rajasthan, to discover the wayside shrines. The origins of some are lost in time while others are newly built. They are part of a continuous process, and they are everywhere . . .
A veritable network of shrines holds the fabric of rural society together...

[the shrine] is their court of justice, their hospital and mental home, their guidance clinic as well as the focus of their faith."

All of this -- in spite of TV; other vastly improved communications including phones and roads; widespread increased literacy rates and educational opportunities; and greatly increased use of what villagers call English medicines -- remains as true in 2003 as it was in the early eighties.

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In the section on shrines in Bharucha's Conversations -- recording Komalda's thoughts from twenty years later -- I found the phrase I put at the end of my title. He tells Bharucha, "we can say that these shrines provide a breathing space... At a psychological level, they provide the mediation of time for wounds to heal." I like this view of shrines. For myself, sitting at Puvali or Sundar Mata, just beyond the density of the village life, physically and mentally apart if not for long, has always constituted a kind of relished breathing space. More importantly, I hope his insight will help me understand how healing processes take place at these shrines, because there is plenty of testimony that they do.

Finally, I think that the idea of a curative breathing space may be an important one for us today, gathered to memorialize and celebrate a great person's memory -- but also still in mourning. In concluding, I found a passage in the Bharucha book that truly expresses exactly how we should feel in Komalda's own words.

He says:

"As I look back on all the rites and rituals of death that I have experienced, I realize that in all the hundreds of little things that happen after a person dies, you continue to treat the dead person as a living being. That is the basic point. Now, to my mind, if you are capable of treating a dead person a living being immediately after his or her death, then he or she can live for eternity. The dead can be with you forever (p. 136)."

Komalda was speaking about death here in the broadest frame of reference, comparing India's rituals with those of Western countries. But at the time of this interview, he doubtless knew his days were numbered. Here are words we may take to heart. To treat a dead person as a living being comes naturally when that person has shared themselves so generously.

Thank you...

References

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Dedication: "For the storyteller of the storytellers, Komal Kothari (1929-2004)"