

## **‘This is How we Joke’. Towards an appreciation of alternative values in performances of gender irony among the Gaddi of Himachal**

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What do we make of the jokes and irony that we encounter during our fieldwork, in particular in the realm of gender relations? Jokes and ironic performances have been a rather neglected field of anthropological inquiry. In an article on practices of flirting, teasing, and sexual joking, Caroline and Filippo Osella have drawn attention to the significance of ambiguity, indeterminacy and ambivalence as values in the context of South Asian anthropology (Osella and Osella 2000). Their analysis of flirting by youth in Kerala, and of the joking involved therein as a form of play, offers an alternative to the established framework of hierarchy and hierarchical relations that commonly forms the basis for anthropological analysis in the South Asian context. The present article discusses this approach vis-à-vis the established approach of seeing performances that portray alternative values as discourses of subversion or resistance to dominant power structures. I thereby follow Osella and Osella’s focus on the recognition of ambiguity and irony as values in and of themselves in my investigation of performances of gender irony and joking by women in Northwest India.

My argument draws on fieldwork conducted in the district of Kangra in the state of Himachal Pradesh between 2006 and 2009. Kangra women and their oral performances are known within anthropology through Kirin Narayan’s work on songs (1986, 1997), but here I am concerned with a different kind of performance and a different section of Kangra’s population, namely Gaddi women. The Gaddi are known throughout Himachal Pradesh as a shepherding people. The majority live in the districts of Chamba and Kangra and the men are still famous for their large flocks of sheep and goats, with which they move throughout the year, reaching the high pastures in the Himalayas in summer and the Punjab border area in winter. Today many – although not all – Gaddi families have left shepherding for other jobs, and for college education. However, most families, mainly the women, still practise subsistence agriculture and

thus form part of Kangra's large agricultural population. Gaddi is also the language spoken as first language by most Gaddi people. Gaddi families often live in the same villages and interact and share many things in daily life with non-Gaddi speakers. They are thus an integrated part of the Kangra and Himachali population (see Wagner forthcoming). However, when it comes to weddings and ritual performances, many Gaddi would argue for a distinct Gaddi identity. The performances I will describe in the following are part of what would be considered a Gaddi practice by Gaddi people themselves, and moreover a rather enjoyable one.

Irony and joking by women form part of wedding celebrations and preparations. From the day a wedding is fixed, that is, when the date of the wedding has been written down by the families' priests about four weeks prior to the wedding date, women from the family and neighbourhood of the prospective groom gather each night at the groom's home. They sing wedding songs, play drums, dance, and sometimes drink. The atmosphere is that of joy in anticipation of the wedding as well as enjoyment of the dancing and singing as a distraction from daily routines.<sup>1</sup> At any point during these evenings, the atmosphere might turn from one of innocent dancing and singing of wedding songs to that of hilarity and outright sexual joking. The joking culminates on the day of the wedding, after the groom's party – the men – has departed for the bride's home, where the wedding ceremony with the circumambulation of the sacred fire will take place. The women remain at the groom's home, where they continue to dance, sing, drink, and most of all joke, as I will show below.

Performances by North Indian women that play on gender roles during weddings are well known in South Asian ethnography and society. The best known forms are *gālī* – indecent songs containing mockery, abuses and insults that are often exchanged at weddings between relatives by marriage (cf. Raheja and Gold 1994: 45). Gaddi performances fit within this larger picture. Among the Gaddi too, *gālī* are exchanged between relatives of the groom's and the bride's side: for example, they can be sung at the groom's house when the bride's relatives come to visit on the third day of a marriage. However, I am concerned with a different kind of performance here, which takes place among the female relatives of

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1 The singing is also a kind of 'ritual' obligation or *sevā*, marked by the distribution of sweets to all participants at the end of the evening.

the groom and seems more graphic and blunt than the common abusive songs. This should not be a surprise, because Gaddi kinship practices also differ from practices dominant in wider North Indian society. In contrast to the hierarchical and asymmetric Rajput marriages prevalent in Kangra (Parry 1979), Gaddi marriage relations are symmetrical and egalitarian (cf. Phillimore 1982). Divorce and remarriage are tolerated (ibid.), although Kriti Kapila's study from Kangra has shown that especially the younger generation increasingly adopts more restrictive and mainstream societal values (Kapila 2004).<sup>2</sup>

Since the 1990s, the academic discourse on women and gender performances in South Asia has been strongly influenced by the work of Gloria Raheja and Ann Gold (Raheja and Gold 1994).<sup>3</sup> These authors see women's performances and especially their oral performances, songs and narratives, as a kind of alternative discourse to mainstream societal and often male-dominated discourse. They see them as a critical response and resistance to those 'more widely known, more audible, and perhaps more pervasive South Asian social and cultural conventions that insist that women be controlled and subordinate' (Raheja 1997: 2).

Raheja and Gold's thorough ethnographic work on women's oral performances in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, as well as, for example, Kirin Narayan's work in Kangra (1986, 1997), has shown that women are not simply silently or uncritically approving of the conventions that assign young married women in North India the role of the obedient, modest and shy bride who blends smoothly into her husband's family without drawing much attention to herself, whether in family interactions or in interactions with outsiders. Rather, women are aware and at times critical of dominant conventions that assign them a subordinate position within their conjugal family. In this, the authors point to the existence of alternative discourses and forms of female resistance within the larger context of prevalent norms and conventions in South Asian societies.

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2 Phillimore, in addition, reports on the special case of a localised phenomenon of Gaddi women becoming *sadhin*, a celibate state presented in the idiom of female asceticism and masculinisation, in Kangra in the 1970s. He interprets this as a reaction to wider Kangra society that does not grant women the option to remain unmarried (1991: 343). Thus, he reports on a temporal and localised way for women to lead a life that is accepted as different from mainstream conventions.

3 The more general anthropological discussion has further been influenced by Lila Abu Lughod's work (1986, 1990).

Similarly, in her analysis of everyday resistance of Bedouin women Abu-Lughod (1990) sees resistance as a diagnostic of power and interprets women's non-compliance with hegemonic discourse and decisions as an indicator of the webs of power that control their lives. From this point of view, women's performances amount to a subversion of dominant discourse and can tell us much about the different structures of power and dominance they resist.

A further point of reference for interpreting Gaddi women's performances could be the aspect of fertility expressed in them. Overt or covert fertility symbolism is prevalent in other parts of Hindu wedding rites (see, for example, Fruzetti 1982) and might well be connected to sexual joking too. However, in my understanding the idiom of fertility is not relevant for the current meaning given to these performances by Gaddi women and did not appear in the women's own explanations of their joking (see below). I will not take up the topic of fertility symbolism here, since I am interested in the current meaning of these practices.

The question I will discuss below is whether Gaddi women's performances can fruitfully be understood as a further instance of expressions of resistance to the dominant discourse, albeit one is that more graphic in form (though not necessarily in content) than the well-known abusive songs sung by women throughout the wider region or, rather, whether there is a need for an alternative framework through which to make sense of the practices of joking and performances of gender irony. In order to answer this question I will first give a description of the performances involved.

### **Ethnographic description: gender irony and sexual joking**

Significantly, and in contrast to most of the performances described by Raheja and Gold and Narayan, Gaddi women's practices are not merely oral performances, nor do all oral versions come in the form of songs. My ethnography is rather about jokes, gestures, skits and other theatrical portrayals. The first time I ever witnessed this kind of joking, I was at a house where one of the sons was to be married, at night time one week after the date for the wedding had been officially fixed. The women of the extended family, who included the groom's mother, his father's brother's wife, an unmarried sister, his and his father's brother's sons' wives, and three or four women from the neighbouring houses, had gathered in one

room of the house to sing, dance, and celebrate the upcoming wedding. I had stepped out of the room after an hour of dancing to Gaddi folk as well as popular Punjabi songs from cassettes. When I went back inside, the whole atmosphere in the room had changed. Because I had only just started to learn the Gaddi language I did not understand much of the conversation at the time. However, I immediately noticed the change in the tone and mood of the singing and dancing. My slightly edited and translated field notes read:

First there was singing and drumming, then dancing as usual, later music from cassette and then again singing and drumming of Gaddi songs. Suddenly the atmosphere changed. I had gone outside and when I came back, the neighbour x had dressed up as a man with a turban and a walking stick. She was singing and making gestures. There was a question-answer play between her and two of the daughter-in-laws. The atmosphere was cheerful. [...] Then she started to dance on hands and feet turning herself around her own axis, interrupted by her own fits of laughter. Then she played the same story on the next person. Later on the neighbour and the daughter-in-laws y and z sang something about a doctor who had come and played the role of the doctor, checking lungs and giving injections among much laughter.

The first time I took part in one of these performances, I did not understand much of what I saw. The change in behaviour appeared to be rather sudden and for me unexpected. I will give more details of the jokes and their indecent content, which I have observed many times since, below, but first I offer some general observations.

When the atmosphere during the dancing changes to one of joking and sexual allusions, any boys and men that might be present are sent outside. Only small boys up to school going age are allowed to stay and often huddle in their mothers' laps. The older boys are strictly and even violently told to leave. Girls of all ages, on the contrary, are allowed to watch at any time. Generally, however, the older girls only dropped in briefly. They mostly preferred their own dancing together with the boys in a separate room. Punjabi and Bollywood music was apparently more popular among the youth than married women's joking during the time of my fieldwork.

The women who are present are the women of the groom's household as well as their neighbours, generally but not exclusively part of the same local descent group, and not necessarily solely Gaddi neighbours. Additionally, the married daughters of the family belonging to different generations (those of the groom and his father) will try to spend a few nights at the groom's house prior to the wedding, where they are called to help with preparations including the nightly singing and dancing. On the night of the wedding nearly all women related to the groom will be present. This large group spans different generations and groups of relatives on the mother's as well as the father's side. One characteristic of these performances is, thus, that they include a heterogeneous group of women in terms of generations and kin groups.

The performances and the joking do not stop at the play with gestures, dance steps, and song lines. Women perform a variety of skits and roles. The spot in the room or courtyard that is kept free for dancing then provides a place similar to a stage, where the performing women face the others.

Dressing up for a role, which is frequently done, largely means dressing up as a man. The change from a woman to a man's costume is rather impressive. The women take out the nose-rings typical of women in the region (elder women may even wear one large one on each side of their nose.) They draw large black moustaches on themselves with charcoal. They build a turban or put on a cap and wear a shirt and trousers or the Gaddi *colā*, a short sheep wool gown formerly worn by shepherds. With the *colā* the headscarf, then tied around the waist, is often converted into the essential male organ which can be pointed at the other women when lifting the skirt.

A skit that was popular in 2007 and 2008 is as follows, with minor variations depending on the performers involved. Two women leave quietly. The first woman comes back dressed as a man in shirt and pants with a cap. She has drawn a charcoal moustache over her mouth and taken out her nose-ring or rings. She enters the room crouching like an old man over a stick, carrying a bundle over her shoulder. The second woman is dressed as a newly married bride. Like the real bride, she wears a *nuāncarī*, the Gaddi women's dress, and a long veil that covers her head, face, and the upper part of her body up to the waist. She enters one step behind the 'man'. The 'man' faces the audience and starts to tell a story,

saying that the girl has told ‘him’ that she has to go and get married. ‘He’ would be from village x and – what should one do with the poor girl who had no one – he had agreed to bring her here. ‘He’ asks for the mother of the groom, who is made to stand up. After this introduction of the mother of the groom, the ‘bride’ immediately throws back her veil revealing her face and jumps at her ‘mother-in-law’s’ neck, hugging her and shouting ‘ah, my mother-in-law, ah, I found my mother-in-law’. Subsequently she peers over the groom’s mother’s shoulder into the audience asking ‘now, where is my husband?’ This episode of *milnā* – the ‘meeting’ between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, where the bride shows none of the shyness and modesty a real bride would be expected to show – is followed by the giving of gifts to the groom’s relations. The old ‘man’ unties his bundle and distributes the gifts that are stored inside. These gifts, unlike proper marriage gifts, are visibly old and worn items, although generally they consist of clothing appropriate for weddings. Apologizing that the gifts are not really new, ‘he’ hands out the gifts, promising that next time he will surely bring something good. Women in the audience are called out according to their kinship relation to the groom and awarded their gifts, accompanied by laughter from the audience. On one occasion I observed, shoes and a *salvār* (women’s pants) were given to the *mausī* (mother’s sister) and the mother of the groom, and a woman’s panties to the groom’s *māmī* (mother’s brother’s wife) – the latter was met with screaming laughter from the audience. Considering the kinship relations between giver and receiver, the panties here were presented by a woman to her brother’s wife, that is, in a highly marked kinship relation that I will comment on below.

At one wedding I attended, the popular skit of bringing in the bride was followed by a second skit. Here the mother of the groom explicitly asked one of her sisters to perform the second skit by handing her a piece of flat, round bread, a chapati or *fulkā*. The sister tore a small piece out of the chapati so that it had a hole in the middle. She then approached different women in the crowd with the chapati flat in her hand asking: *Tere indā pakānā?* (‘Do you know how to cook it?’). The person she asked – already laughing – answered: ‘Yes, I do.’ The women were screaming with laughter. The performer looked at them saying: ‘Oho, she knows!’ and holding the chapati up showing its hole to the first one: *Tere sharam na indā?* (‘Are you not ashamed?’). She then danced with the chapati in

her hand which she pointed at the crowd, singing several times *āk, āk fulkā* ('one, one bread') and subsequently went on to play the same game with another woman. To clarify: The dialogue on 'baking bread', apart from its visual aspect, has a double meaning – the actual act of cooking, on the one hand, and an allusion to sexual intercourse, on the other. Answering the question 'Do you know how to cook it?' is hard to avoid with reference to bread, since baking chapatis is one of women's daily chores and more or less a prerequisite to marriage, but the answer obviously invites a different interpretation here.

Further skits are played with similar and less elaborate costumes. Some women also practise the art of humorous story-telling rather than performing skits. Additionally, there are several character roles that are often played. Among them are the role of the doctor and the role of the old shepherd. The doctor is played by a woman dressed with male attributes – pants or simply a hat or turban. She enters the room and asks the women about their well-being and upon being informed about pains in the back, joints or legs, she then prescribes and administers *injections*. The whole dialogue becomes a play on words and meanings since the word *injection* itself is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. The character of the old shepherd, in turn, is more graphic in performance. The performer will usually wear a *colā* and carry a cup or a small pitcher. Producing the familiar sounds to call on goats, 'he' will set out for milking, asking the others which of the goats is giving milk. As a response the women point out someone in the audience and the 'shepherd' attempts to place the cup between the appointed woman's legs.

Most easily performed, however, are a range of obscene gestures. At any point during the dancing, the women might start to run into each other pointing sticks or their hands between each other's legs. And usually a couple of elder women, when dancing in pairs of two or three, all of a sudden start to roll the bottom part of their *kamīz* (shirt) into a phallus, dancing obscenely or pointing it into the audience. Some go so far as to physically 'assault' other women, e.g., by climbing onto their laps or pulling at their legs. These gestures are often the start of the joking and usually appear prior to, as well as in between, the performance of skits.

In their songs and in the lines of their jokes, women address each other throughout by referring to their kinship relation to the groom, *lāḍā* in Gaddi. Thus, a woman singled out to be the recipient of the next teasing



is approached as *lāḍe kī mamī* (groom's mother), *lāḍe kī māmī* (groom's mother's brother's wife), *lāḍe kī bahin* (groom's sister), and so on.

While the repertoire of gestures, role plays and full-fledged skits is only performed during the nightly song and dance gatherings, joking and irony in the wake of a wedding is not restricted to these evening performances. During the wedding preparations, humorous jokes and witty stories are also told during the day among the women of the groom's neighbourhood, that is, those of the same *sharik* or local descent group as the groom's family. The regular afternoon chat among women from a house cluster is an excellent occasion for joking. More formalised jokes are told, as well as stories that tell of a happening related to someone who is known to all. In the latter case the storyteller usually starts by saying something like: 'You all know x, don't you? Guess what she did!' The person in question might be a daughter-in-law in or of the village, but also a sister of one of the women. The stories often verge on real, exaggerated or imagined happenings that involve a transgression of norms of behaviour which are formally unaccepted but are still likely to happen to every woman at some point in time. The character of the story might have accidentally shown her face or spoken back to her father-in-law or husband's elder brother, or even been seduced into doing so by a drunken and misbehaving counterpart. Both are persons with whom she would usually maintain a relationship marked by formal distance in her tone of voice, and also by veiling her face. The shock and shame displayed by the woman upon her realising her mistake is the punch line of the story, which is greeted with laughter.

### **Interpretation and theoretical discussion: joking as alternative discourse?**

As the last example clearly shows, playing with prevalent conventions is certainly an aspect of the joking performances of Gaddi women. The conventions that are played with and reversed in the performances are those which pertain to the behaviour of women towards men in their conjugal family, as well as to the behaviour of the new bride, as in the skit of the over-confident and immodest bride described above. The new bride of the skit ignores conventional behaviour in at least two ways. First, it is the bride who initiates the journey to the groom's house, a journey on which a real bride is expected to set out only reluctantly, carried away

first by her brother and then by her husband's relations in a palanquin. Second, she is anxious to meet her mother-in-law, whom she greets not as a person of respect by touching her feet with the end of her headscarf, but as an equal by directly hugging her around her neck. Furthermore, she asks about the whereabouts of her husband, whereas a real bride would show no interest. In sum, this bride does not behave shyly, *sharmatī*, and does not display the modesty or shame, *sharam*, that a woman entering her in-laws' home should show. The imperative of modesty is further played with in the skit with the *fulkā*, as in the lines 'do you know how to cook it?' and its consequent 'are you not ashamed?' clearly show. Here, apart from conventional respectful behaviour, the frank discussion and admission of knowledge of sexual matters is at stake. In both cases, as in the other examples of playing the doctor or making more simple gestures, the modesty, respect, shame or shyness (*sharam*) that a woman should display in certain situations are played with through reversals or allusions that provoke laughter because of non-compliance with the norm. In addition, joking through male roles as well as the play with gestures not only makes fun of men (and especially old men), it also shows a rather affirmative stance towards sexuality, that is an openness and acknowledgement of its pleasures.

So far, the discussion of Gaddi women's performances is in accordance with Raheja and Gold's analysis of women's oral traditions as a kind of alternative discourse to the dominant conventions mentioned above. The performances, songs and skits show a different side of those who are otherwise modest women. They turn expected conventional behaviour upside down and can therefore be seen as a comment on a dominant discourse that assigns North Indian woman the role of the chaste and subservient female in her conjugal home.

Raheja and Gold have further noted the play on moral behaviour and the legitimacy of female desires expressed in women's oral performances in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan (Raheja and Gold 1994, Gold 1990: 120). As Gold notes, in Rajasthani women's songs it is the veiled woman who uses her veil not only to protect her modesty, but equally to unveil and seduce: 'Coverings are not opaque; wraps can also unwrap...' (Raheja and Gold 1994: 52).

However, while Gaddi women's performances play with values and social conventions, I do not think they can be understood satisfactorily

simply as performances of a cultural critique along the lines suggested by Raheja and Gold or Abu-Lughod. While Raheja and Gold (1994) have taken the irony, ambiguities and indeterminacy in women's songs fully into account, Raheja (1997) interprets women's performances within the framework of power relations that inform the lives of the performers and thus vis-à-vis authoritative representations of gender, kinship, sex and authority. Gold, in the same volume, comments on the difference between 'private' encounters between spouses, where ideas of romance may well exist, and 'public' encounters that are shaped by distance and non-interaction:

All I have said about the latter [observable husband-wife relations] – concerning women's reticence before their spouses – applies to public encounters. Private encounters, everyone knows, are different. And of course, by definition, they are unknown to anyone other than the couple themselves. (Gold 1997: 106)

However, it is the 'public' convention with which Gold contrasts the songs. She states that 'female genres posit the legitimacy of female desires and place a strong positive value on their fulfillment – a value divinely sanctioned in the songs' (1997: 120). Female voices are sanctioned by references to similar demands made by goddesses or by positioning women's actions in the context of received blessings (*ibid.*). Therefore, Gold analyses the songs and stories within the framework of power relations and as a form of cultural critique. In her analysis, female desires need sanctioning because they deviate from another more prevalent norm and are only expressed within the ambiguity of this sanctioning. I strongly disagree with Gold on this point. Gold herself notes that in 'private relationships between spouses [...] rural South Asian culture allows and imagines intimacy' (*ibid.*: 106). This intimacy, I argue, is not only known by the couple themselves. Nor is it only to be known from what people confide about their 'private' life in intimate conversations with ethnographers.

First, rather than the quite absolute notions of 'public' and 'private' spheres, thinking in terms of shifting contexts that allow for or require certain behavioural conventions seems more fitting. Interactions and behavioural conventions are much more nuanced than a simple public-

private divide suggests. 'Context' here refers to both the people present and the place where an interaction takes places.

Second, alternative conventions for behaviour are visible and actually quite often directly visible in interactions, or at least known and recognised by others, including anthropologists. There are, for example, many instances where a positive attitude towards sexuality and much greater assertiveness is expressed by women, although these have been less intensely reported on in anthropological literature.

Among the Gaddi, this finds expression first and foremost in the joking relationship between *bhābhī* and *nanand*, brother's wife and husband's sister. The *bhābhī-nanand* relationship is a very pronounced joking relationship among the Gaddi. A woman will invariably joke with her husband's sister, and if the sister is married this will generally involve sexual joking. This joking relationship is well characterised by Radcliffe-Brown's definition of joking relationships (although not by the function he attributes to it). It is 'a relationship between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offense' (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 195). For the Gaddi this is a symmetrical relationship: a woman and her husband's sister and a woman and her brother's wife do mutually joke with each other. In this relationship, talk about or hints of sex, desires, and pleasures are appropriate and acted out as teasing. Moreover, sexual joking can even be required by convention if *bhābhī* and *nanand* meet in the presence of others, especially if those others are women in the same kinship relation. The joking does not take on a hidden form if other women (for example, a mother-in-law) or children are present, and even if the father-in-law or husband is just around the corner, well within earshot, although he will never be an active listener. As a matter of fact, during my fieldwork 'my' *bhābhī* teased me especially when other neighbouring women were visiting, and it was the mother-in-law who recognised that I would not know how to respond and fed me the answers, making sure I did not let any teasing pass without an appropriate response.

The question of moral sanctioning raised by Raheja and Gold is not predominant in Gaddi women's joking. There are no references to divine sanctions or actions found in the songs and stories analysed by Gold. Rather, sexual relations and behavioural transgressions are laughed about

and played with, leaving the question of moral sanctioning open. Judging from the joking between *bhābhī* and *nanand*, the expression of female desires does not need sanctioning for these women. What is needed is the appropriate occasion and context for the desires to be expressed.

Further nuances in conventions are visible in two other joking relationships, namely that of *jījā* and *sālī* (sister's husband and wife's sister) and *bhābhī* and *devar* (brother's wife and husband's younger brother). The former is another very pronounced joking relationship not only among the Gaddi, but across large swathes of North Indian society. The latter is a relationship characterised by joking and informality in contrast to the avoidance relationship between a woman and her husband's elder brother. The only adult man I ever saw as a direct observer of a Gaddi women's joking performance was related to the mother of the groom and her sisters as a *jījā*. He had returned early from the marriage celebrations at the bride's house and placed himself in a chair in one corner of the courtyard where his wife and the other women were performing their jokes. He did not remain a distant observer for long, because his wife's sisters started to group around him and directly address him in their jokes.

Talk about intimacy and relationships, however, is not only common in joking relationships. It is also observable in interactions between husband and wife, especially if both are not at their conjugal but in her natal home (Wagner forthcoming).<sup>4</sup> Alternative conventions for 'open' behaviour among the Gaddi apply also in the presence of husband-wife and brother-sister pairs; that is, when a married couple meets the husband's sister and sister's husband or the wife's brother and brother's wife. Here the interaction between the partners will be much more relaxed than in the presence of the elder generation, especially the husband's relatives, and will include a great deal of teasing, generally on the moodiness, physical shortcomings and other weaknesses of the partner.

These alternative and less formalised behavioural conventions become visible if the focus is shifted from the behaviour of women as a single category to the interaction between pairs - whether married couples, pairs of women, or other mixed-gender pairs. The term 'gender' and its replacement of the term 'women' points to an understanding

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4 I restrict myself to observations on young couples here. As is well known, different conventions hold for the behaviour of older couples with married children, where open interactions between husband and wife are much more common in their home.

of categories such as men and women as mutually constitutive and interdependent rather than as separate spheres (cf. Scott 1986). Still, gender has largely not been studied as gender in relations but rather as gender in opposition; that is, either in the study of women or the study of men. Historians of South Asian religion and classical Indic studies have described the emphasis on marriage and of the couple in South Asia in Hindu rituals, where husband and wife not only act as a unit, but are often literally bound together by their clothing. Anthropologists, too, have of course noted instances where emphasis is placed on the married couple, or the brother-sister pair, for instance during the festival of *rakhsā bandhan* when the brother-sister relation is celebrated. When it comes to 'less ritualised' contexts, however, ethnographers still seem reluctant to bring their observations on male-female interactions to the fore. However, it is not men and women pitted against each other as opposed groups representing hegemonic and subversive discourses respectively. Rather realities are much more fragmented. 'Women's' alternative discourses are shared by men and women too are protagonists of hegemonic conventions (see Raheja and Gold 1994).

All in all, the play with conventions during Gaddi wedding performances is in line with other spheres and situations of daily life, where mentioning intimacy and joking about gender relations, as well as sexuality or simply alternative conventions for interactions, are frequent and even part of expected behaviour. The jokes performed during wedding preparations do not merely play on formal conventions. They belong to a broader field of talk, ideas and joking that are publicly expressed in *bhābhi-nanand* joking relationships in the context of weddings, but also (as Gold too has noted), are not absent from interactions between spouses or from ideas of partnership. All this puts the authority of the so-called 'dominant' representations of gender into question: why contrast the joking performances only with those social conventions that define well-known gender roles and the 'public' behaviour of women and thus understand them merely as a subversive genre, instead of linking them to other social and moral values existing in Gaddi and wider Indian society?

I think one reason for the persistence of the analytic framework of hierarchy and resistance is the fact that the study of gender in South Asia is still strongly shaped by its academic roots, namely the developments in feminist studies that led to the anthropological programme of

foregrounding women in ethnographies (Bennett 1983, Fruzzetti 1982, Jacobsen and Wadley 1992). Before contemporary analysis turned towards the more specialised ‘gender and...’ topics – gender and politics, gender and reproductive health, gender in education, and recently also the study of men and masculinities – gender studies in India meant by and large the study of women. Together with the practice of focusing on what women do and say went the notion of power relations as inherent to gender questions. As Scott put it, ‘Gender is a primary field within which [...] power is articulated’ (1986: 1069). In the specific field of South Asian ethnography, the work of Gloria Raheja and Ann Gold on women’s oral performances has probably made this association of gender with power relations most explicit.

These interpretations, however, fail to highlight what women quite literally do on these occasions: they joke. The joking and irony involved here, in my understanding, is more than a statement or expression of power relations and thus needs to be analysed in and of itself.

This is in accord with what women themselves say about their performances. On one occasion, a woman who had just shed her costume as a man came up to me and asked if I could understand what they said in their jokes, then went on to inform me ‘this is how we make fun, this is how we joke at weddings’. The usual explanation I got for these performances is: ‘we joke, we make fun.’ One woman, my *bhābhī*, with whom I discussed the joking at weddings, saw the *bhābhī-nanand* relationship at the base of the joking, from where it would extend to all the women present. Although it is true that *bhābhī* and *nanand* meet during weddings, especially in the early phases of singing, a groom’s sister is mostly absent because she lives in a different place and will not be able to come to her natal home every night. So here it is not necessarily the two sides of in-married versus out-married women that meet in the joking. From my observations, it is rather a kind of generalised joking that takes place, apart from the standard joking relationships. So it is not uncommon for a young woman to act in a skit that is aimed at her mother-in-law or at her husband’s elder brother’s wife – both persons who should normally be treated with respect. Kinship, however, does matter and as might be expected the respective pairs of brother’s wife and husband’s sister will engage in heavy teasing (as noted in the example given above) and more generally the groom’s

mother and especially his *māmī* (mother's brother's wife) will receive their share of attacks.

There is another side to the reversal of social conventions acted out in joking performances. It is well recognised by the men and women concerned that the expected behaviour of, for example, the newly wedded bride, is a role she has to play. As no one would expect the new bride to be a shy person, women explicitly talk about the way they will have to comport themselves in certain situations or places. This explicit awareness of role playing was brought home when I was taken in by the performance of shyness of a new bride during her wedding. When I was asked by the other families in the village how I liked her after our first meeting after her wedding, I expressed my astonishment that she was quite outspoken and laughed a lot. In turn, the others laughed at me asking 'but what did you expect?'<sup>5</sup> This recognition that a certain behaviour is expected of women (and also of men) in specific situations and places probably contributes to the play with irony and makes part of the joke of role reversal skits.

#### **From dominant discourse to public morality, from critique to play**

In search of an alternative framework for interpreting 'alternative discourses', I turn to a more recent approach by Osella and Osella. The authors first of all replace the term 'dominant discourse' by 'public morality' (2006: 107). 'Public' morality, rather than evoking questions of power and resistance, evokes knowledge about other, 'hidden scripts' (ibid.) that are not displayed but still recognised. What is widely acknowledged as the correct or 'public' morality does apply to many but does not apply to all contexts of social interaction, whether open or hidden. Youths behave differently in each other's presence from how they behave in the presence of their parents; groups of women or girls behave differently from groups of men or boys or mixed-gender groups. Morality and behavioural conventions thus depend on context. With the Gaddi, for example, what is unthinkable in front of a husband's elder brother because of the avoidance or respect relationship with him is not only acceptable but also common and even expected in front of his younger brother or sister, to whom a woman stands in a joking relationship. Her

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5 Later on I learned that the question of how one likes the bride should be answered with a comment on her physical appearance.



open behaviour, in short, varies according to which person a woman is interacting with and the degree of formality required by the social relationship involved. Here I prefer the expression 'formal morality' to 'public morality', because 'public' refers to ideas about public and private spaces that are not easily translatable into different cultural contexts and are too rigid in their opposition to leave space for 'semi-public' spheres. By 'formal morality', on the other hand, I mean conventions in a formalised, official context in contrast to behavioural conventions in less formalised contexts for interactions where other existing ideas and values come to the fore.

Following Osella and Osella, we should thus not look for hierarchies and their reinforcement everywhere, but give also room to other 'under-theorized values' in South Asian anthropology (ibid 2000: 190). Osella and Osella look at practices of flirting, apparent harassment, and romance between youths. They show that in flirting, hierarchy is consciously played with while it is reversed, intensified or negated. The authors do not merely see these practices as counter-practices that critique or reinforce well-documented values of hierarchy in Indian society. They argue for the consideration of ambiguity, indeterminacy, and ambivalence as 'highly important principles of everyday Indian social life' that 'may act as independent sources of aesthetic and moral value', although these values have been under-theorised in South Asian anthropology (ibid.: 189-190).

I think that an understanding of Gaddi women's sexual joking at marriages fits within the line of thought advocated by Osella and Osella. The humour and irony expressed in the jokes is not trivial (ibid.: 196) but rather reveals the existence of a morality independent of 'correct' formal principles. Gaddi women's performances of gender irony thus do not merely represent a subaltern discourse that subverts and reinforces a dominant discourse on hierarchy, but portray a context where moral values that exist in everyday life are expressed in addition to the correct formal morality – as in the context of interactions between husband and wife or the joking between brother's wife and husband's sister. Thus, these jokes can be seen as revealing values different from formal moral conventions without primarily being a critique of the latter.

I would like to add to Osella and Osella that it is not only alternative values that are under-theorised in South Asian anthropology. Together with a neglect of alternatives to a formal morality in ethnographic

descriptions, it is also a positive attitude towards sexuality – as I see it expressed in Gaddi women’s joking and performances – that is rarely written about in the context of Indian women, who are usually described as facing the pressure of social conventions that phrase marriage and sexual relations in terms of kinship norms and reproductive questions. Gaddi women, as well as the women Gold encountered (Raheja and Gold 1994), clearly express a different stance towards desires and intimacy in the performances and everyday interactions described here.

### **Conclusion**

What do the women then joke about: men, gender roles, themselves, sex, or maybe all of these and many other things too? In my view, the established framework of resistance and alternative discourses does not sufficiently grasp women’s practices. Neither would any reference to fertility rituals, which I have not discussed here. The scope of analysis has to be widened in order to make sense of the irony at the heart of the performances. While credit has to be given to authors like Raheja and Gold for recognizing the existence of alternative views, Osella and Osella’s terms ‘public morality’ and ‘alternative values’ draw attention to the parallel existence of conflicting but independent values of everyday life.

These values, moreover, become more visible if we shift our focus from exclusive male or female performances towards a recognition of couples, whether husband and wife, brother and sister, or sister’s husband and wife’s sister. Flirting and related practices, (and, I would add, performances of gender irony) are part of gendering processes crucial to the production of heterosexuality and the married heterosexual couple (Osella and Osella 2006: 116). As well as paying the necessary attention to processes of gendering and thus constituting in whatever way fragmented identities, attention should be drawn to the products of these processes. Drawing on Osella and Osella’s general call for a study of the production of conventional heterosexual couples in South Asia, I advocate a move away from the mere acknowledgement of ‘mutuality and interdependency between the sexes’ in the construction of gender categories (cf. Gold 1997: 129) – and towards the recognition of pairs or couples as the product of gendering processes.

Through a turn to the recognition of alternative moral values and irony, as well as the study of couples, I advocate a change of perspective,

or better, a widening of our view on gender performances. South Asian anthropology has long recognised that 'each culture harbours within itself critiques of its most authoritative pronouncements' (Raheja and Gold 1994: 193). To understand Gaddi women's joking not merely as a critique of hegemonic discourse, but rather as an independent everyday morality that exists in their society, opens new alleys for analysis that lead to the appreciation of a plurality of values in South Asia, among others the value of irony in itself.

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