

# Editor's Introduction

## A POET'S JUSTICE

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ag lagā do in vidhān ke pannō mē,  
āg lagā do sabhī dhārmik granthō mē,  
jō na sahāyak hō nirīh jan ko kincit,  
āg lagā do sabhī viśva ke panthō mē.

If they provide no help to the destitute,  
burn these constitutions,  
burn all the religious scriptures,  
burn all the religious sects of the world.

Ved Prakash Vatuk, 1955

(at age 23, previously unpublished)

The essays in this volume, written by authors who have published extensively on the subject of inequality and social justice, have been brought together to honor the life and work of poet, essayist, linguist, and folklorist Ved Prakash Vatuk. Author of over thirty internationally recognized volumes of poetry as well as numerous political essays and academic articles, Dr. Vatuk has developed an influential body of work that is intimately grounded in his life-long quest for social justice. The nineteen chapters included here, consistent with Vatuk's ongoing interest in advancing social critique through both poetry and scholarship, employ varied disciplinary perspectives and research methodologies to confront systems of social hierarchy in diverse contexts. The four sections of the book address the ways in which social hierarchy is fostered and instantiated by dominant social institutions and movements, among

them caste, race, and religion (Part I), gender and socioeconomic class (Part II), migration (Part III), and globalization (Part IV). Taken together, these essays provide a provocative portrait of the mechanisms that underlie and create social disparity, each exposing the workings of inequality within particularized historical, social, and cultural contexts.

If there is one idea that could be said to underlie all of Vatuk's writings, whether poetic or academic, it is skepticism regarding the potential of established political structures to improve the state of humanity. In keeping with his passion for folklore, Vatuk's work reflects upon the potential of the "folk"—or in his own words, "the thousands of little Nehrus and Gandhis spread all over in the villages and towns of India" (Vatuk 2003a)—to contest and challenge the saturation of state power, even if only within the localized warp and weft of everyday life. As I describe in my introduction to the recent publication of Vatuk's collected academic writings, *Essays in Indian Folk Traditions* (Hall 2007), Vatuk's research in folklore and linguistics focuses not upon the elites who govern, but on the men and women who lead lives that are extraordinary only in their ordinariness: the tired sugarcane workers of Western Uttar Pradesh who survive twenty-four-hour shifts at the presses by singing a special type of work song (Vatuk 1979); the highly skilled yet overlooked performers of local folk operas in eastern Meerut (Vatuk and S. Vatuk 1967a); the poor women of a North Indian village who secure their futures by secretly stashing goods with a Brahman neighbor (Vatuk and S. Vatuk 1971). These are the lives that interest Vatuk, precisely because they are the very people who have the potential to talk back to power. It is the ordinary folk who experience the effects of political decisions, not the politicians. And it is therefore the ordinary folk who are uniquely situated to propose more equitable visions of social justice, if only their voices could be heard.

Vatuk's academic mission is thus to bring the collective voices of these ordinary actors into scholarship: their songs, their dramas, their conversations. These are the voices that fill the pages of his work and provide the data for his ongoing exposition and critique of social hierarchy. In many senses, Vatuk's academic 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. In short, Vatuk's scholarship focuses on the disenfranchised who counter injustice with whatever tools they may have for expressing 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 power, to borrow a phrase from James Scott's (1985) influential account of everyday peasant resistance. For Vatuk, power is not the top-down prerogative of a select elite, but rather something that is available to all through the everyday workings of social practice.

A bottom-up understanding of power is not limited to Vatuk's academic inquiry; it also serves as the inspiration for much of his poetry. His epic *Bāhubalī* (2002a) is a case in point, which earned him the Hindi Sansthan's prestigious ‘Jaishankar Prasad Award’ for best epic of the year. In this *khanḍa-kāvya*, or ‘story-in-verse,’ Vatuk portrays the strength of ordinary resistance in his rewriting of a Jain scriptural narrative. The storyline involves two feuding brothers who are ironically the sons of Adi Tirthankar Lord Rishabdev, the apostle of non-violence. When the elder brother Bharat undertakes to conquer the entire world in the name of peace, his younger brother Bahubali threatens to sacrifice the lives of his subjects in order to protect his kingdom from his elder brother's aggression. As Vatuk (2002b) explains when reflecting upon his writing of the epic, the battle between these two feuding brothers “could have been as horrific as the war in Mahabharat, had not the blameless subjects and its leaders stood up to protest the imminent bloodshed of the innocent in the impending *dharmyuddh* (righteous war).” It is thus the everyday folk, not the kings, who have the experiential wisdom to see through the pointlessness of war and propose a nonviolent alternative.

Vatuk's passion for the revolutionary potential of ordinary citizenship originated 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

independence infected the lives of even the most isolated, fostering the development of diverse grassroots sentiments that permeated everyday life. (See Jagdish Sharma's chapter in this volume for a personal narrative regarding what it was like to come of age in an Indian village during this historical period.) Vatuk's father Krishna Lal (1886-1941), the only Sanskritist Arya Samaji priest in the village, 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, established in opposition to the local Shiva temple's refusal to allow low-caste dalits to worship alongside other villagers. Consistent with the platform of the early Arya Samaj movement, his father's belief in the value of education extended to all people in the village, even Vatuk's recently deceased elder sister, Narayani Devi (1916-2008), who was the only daughter in the village who learned to read and write. So even though Vatuk celebrates the voices of the progressive folk in his academic writings, he also recognizes the small-minded potential of popular religious institutions to incite the worst elements of humanity through religious, ethnic, and gendered fundamentalism and conservatism.

Vatuk's attraction to the idea of equality was evident as early as the fifth grade, when he renounced his caste surname and took on his penname 'Vatuk.' Inspired by the political poetry of the performing *bhajnopdeshaks* who came to his village during the annual Arya Samaj conventions, Vatuk began writing folk lyrics on freedom and revolution at only ten years of age. Some two decades later, with the benefit of years of higher education in Agra, London, and Boston, Vatuk used the tools of folklore to analyze the early influence that these performers had on his poetry, publishing a well received article entitled "The *Bhajnopdeshak* as an Agent of Social Change." In his discussion, Vatuk (1967) outlines how something as purportedly "simplistic" as folksong can produce radical change with respect to systemic inequities. 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).

Many of the chapters that appear in this edited collection, particularly in Parts II and III, share Vatak's interest in bringing to the fore voices that have been traditionally underrepresented in the academic literature. Sharat Lin analyzes the recent Latino-based resistance movement in the United States that culminated in "the largest collective outpouring of street protest since the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement" (p. 251). Responding to initiatives by the U.S. Congress to crack down on undocumented immigrants, movement organizers chose "May Day" 2006 as their day of protest, a strategy that proved extremely effective in its alliance with a much larger international labor movement recognized across the world as International Worker's Day. Chandana Mathur shares a similar focus on undocumented workers in the United States, though her concern is with women who are employed as domestic workers in the suburban homes of South Asian American professionals. Exploring what she identifies as "class cleavages" in the South Asian immigrant community (p. 276), Mathur questions the effectiveness of middle-class feminism for the lives of these workers when it emerges in the context of patron-client relations.

Mathur's interest in the plight of domestic workers is furthered in contributions offered by Raka Ray and Donna Goldstein, who explore, albeit within very different sociocultural contexts, the ways in which ideologies of gender and socioeconomic class work to maintain a hierarchy of labor. Ray explores how dominant *bhadralok* (or 'middle-class') understandings of idealized femininity and masculinity in Calcutta are at odds with the very structure of domestic servitude, since these ideals require independence for men and staying-at-home for women. This latter ideology of femininity, incidentally, is markedly different from that experienced by the educated middle-class female protagonists of the novels examined in this volume by Indu Prakash Pandey, who "seek to free themselves from the tyranny of social tradition" (p. 197) by leading more independent lives. Ray is particularly interested in how domestic workers resist these dominant ideologies by defining their own understandings of masculinity and femininity over and against that of their employers. Likewise, Goldstein's chapter, reprinted from her award-winning ethnography *Laughter Out of Place*, takes us to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where we experience the day-to-day banality of race, class, and gender relations that structure

domestic-worker and middle-class identities. Goldstein argues that hierarchical relations between domestic workers and their employers are historically constituted in that middle classness is a state of mind, or more critically, a “cultivated incompetence” marked by an abhorrence of manual labor and a dependence on others for the daily work of living. Moreover, the development of domestic servitude out of the ashes of colonial slavery in Brazil has constituted hierarchies of race and gender that also inhabit the emotions and affective life, making these hierarchies largely invisible to participants. Most notably, domestic workers are discursively made to feel as if they are part of the family—e.g., a child, a sibling—while at the same time being passed down to future generations as property.

Goldstein's chapter mirrors Vatuk's long-held interest in voices of alterity, particularly when she analyzes the everyday laughter of these domestic workers as a subversive response to the structures that oppress them. Two other chapters in the volume elaborate upon this theme directly: Nitasha Sharma's chapter on the lyricism of South Asian American hip hop artists and my own chapter on the use of verbal insults by hijras in Varanasi. Sharma goes so far as to characterize the music of the hip hop artists that are the subject of her study as “the sounds of social consciousness.” Drawing an overt parallel between their lyrics and the poetry of Vatuk, Sharma elaborates upon the ways in which artists associated with this genre “critique the racial hierarchies that both oppress and inform South Asian communities in the United States” (p. 110). My own article shares a similar interest in the potential of linguistic performance as an instrument of social critique, although my focus is on the hijras' association with verbal insult, both in historical and contemporary perspective. Marginalized socially and spatially, hijras employ highly sexualized insults in their everyday interactions as a means of calling into question some of the assumptions that undergird normative understandings of gender and sexuality. By so doing, they manage to carve out space for themselves in an otherwise hostile world, even if this space is problematically interpreted by nonhijra listeners.

Sharma aptly concludes her chapter with reference to the protest poetry that Vatuk wrote for his elder brother Sunder Lal (1906-1988) while he was imprisoned during Indira Gandhi's

Emergency period of 1975-1977. Sunder Lal in many ways serves as the model for Vatuk's belief in the power of everyday resistance. Even before Vatuk was born, his brother had been jailed three times in the fight for Indian independence. Indeed, one of Vatuk's most vivid childhood memories, as he expresses in his autobiographical essay (2003a), involved watching his elder brother rally the masses from atop an elephant. His brother sat together with Chaudhry 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 independence. "You have the power to bring down the world to its knees," they sang, "if only you rise."

It is with a similar ferocity of spirit that a much older Vatuk composed a series of political poems for his brother during the Emergency, later published under the title *Kaidī bhāī, bandī deś* 'Jailed brother, imprisoned nation' (2006a[1977]). Sunder Lal was one of the 376 activists who were imprisoned on the first day of the Emergency, shortly after the government had essentially suspended all elections and civil liberties under article 352 of the Constitution. Vatuk sent these poems to his brother over the course of the next eighteen months, providing him comfort as he sat in solitary confinement in a Varanasi cell (and, according to some accounts, even winning the admiration of the jailor and jail censor through his verse). Although Vatuk had moved to America fifteen years earlier, he lived in India during a significant part of this troubling period, both to accompany his daughter as she attended an Indian high school and to visit his then seventy-year-old brother as much as possible. At a time when most Indian intellectuals were terrified to speak out against the workings of the government, including the would-be Vice President Krishna Kant, Vatuk opposed the Emergency openly. He submitted essays of condemnation to the *San Francisco Examiner*, *India Abroad*, and any other forums that might consider publishing his controversial opinions, even securing an hour-long interview with KPFA radio in San Francisco. His network of activists in India consisted of students at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) as well as friends like Gandhi's grandson Ram Chandra Gandhi and writer Nirmal Varma. Vatuk's activism

during this period eventually captured the attention of Shiv Kumar Goel, a famous Hindi journalist, who in 1977 published an article on Vatuk's work for the respected Hindi weekly *Dharmayug*.

Vatuk wrote literally thousands of poems during the Emergency; indeed, during one three-day period alone in the summer of 1975, he reportedly composed over 150 short and long poems. His two subsequent volumes on the Emergency, *Āpat śatak* 'One hundred poems of the Emergency' (1977) and the English publication *Between Exile and Jail* (1978), are a testament to his productivity, with many of these poems circulating underground in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada long before publication. One of the most well known poems that emerged from the Emergency period carries the title *Maīne āj īsā ko marte hue dekhā* 'Today I Saw Christ Being Crucified' (Vatuk 1977:79). In it, Vatuk reflects upon his hospital visit with freedom fighter Jaiprakash Narayan, who was in extremely poor health after his release from five months of imprisonment. Like Vatuk's brother, Narayan had been sent to jail for his opposition to the increasingly undemocratic government of Indira Gandhi. This poem, together with a second poem from *Apat śatak* on the same subject, were translated into English by Professor B. N. Varma and printed in *News India*. Vatuk was at risk of being arrested at any time for these activities, particularly given their highly public nature, but he carried on out of a strong sense of social justice.

The seeds of extreme disillusionment that these books of poetry express with respect to the political process had emerged in Vatuk's political essays decades earlier. Vatuk's first major essay, written when he was only nineteen years old, was published in 1951 as a lead article in the Sunday magazine section of one of the most widely circulated newspapers in India, the *Navabharat Times*. Delivering a scathing critique of the unethical and corrupt practices used by India's national leaders to win elections, the essay launched Vatuk's career as a political soothsayer. When his friends and colleagues celebrated the elections of promising new leaders, Vatuk remained nonplussed, if not skeptical. As he so potently expresses in a stanza published in the collection *Itihās kī cīkh* 'The Cry of History' (2000), even the best of rhetoric is meaningless when the discriminatory structures that constitute society remain unchanged:



bas mukhaṭe hī chand badle haī.  
kaīculī ke hī rang badle haī.  
zahar phan, sāp kuch nahī badle.  
kāṭne ke hī ḍhang badle haī.  
Vatuk 2000:122

Only a few masks are changed,  
Only the color of the snake-skin is changed,  
Neither the snake, nor its hood, nor the poison has changed,  
Only the ways of stinging are changed.

In his more recent writings, including the volume in which the poem just quoted appears, Vatuk applies a similar skepticism towards globalization, another phenomenon which holds the promise of change yet simply alters the “ways of stinging.” As Vatuk states in 2002, “the surging tide of privatization and liberalization is in reality nothing but a new ruse for capitalist oppression. The affluent nations of the West are replacing yesterday’s transnational imperialism with the capitalist colonialism of multilateral organizations” (Vatuk 2002b).

Many of the chapters included in Part IV of this volume approach the current celebratory rhetoric regarding globalization and neoliberalism with the same skepticism voiced here by Vatuk. Surinder Kumar and Sohan Sharma’s chapter on the role of multilateral international organizations in shaping the world economy reveals how institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, while founded upon the promise to provide capital for reconstruction and development, have in actuality crippled the economic sovereignty of developing countries. The financial debt that is the byproduct of this New Imperialism has only served to intensify human suffering, forcing “local governments to cut jobs, eliminate subsidies to farmers, remove price controls, and reduce government assistance to education, health, water supply, and sanitation so that the country can ‘service’ its loan” (p. 338). Ashok Bardhan’s chapter expresses comparable skepticism with respect to the industrialized world’s offshoring of blue-collar jobs. As a challenge to those who believe in “the seemingly limitless possibilities unleashed by a combination of technological hubris and free market-based economic optimism”

(p. 423), Bardhan details the problematic impact of offshoring for future job creation and inequality in both India and the United States. Both of these chapters thus share Vatuk's skepticism regarding the contemporary middle-class belief in the promise of neoliberalism for economic development and growth.

Yet as the poem that opens this introductory essay suggests, Vatuk's skepticism is directed as much toward "religious scriptures" and "religious sects" as it is constitutions. Two of the chapters in Part I address the disconnect between rhetoric and structure within organized religion, examining the emergence of caste within two belief systems that are ideologically positioned as casteless: Sikhism and Islam. Puri, for instance, traces the historical evolution of a Sikh caste hierarchy in the Punjab as a product of both political power and economic relations, thus challenging the abstraction that "the Sikh community represents homogeneity of caste rather than division" (p. 59). In a detailed review of decades of complex interactions between religious principles and the dominant power interests of Jats, Puri provides a compelling explanation for why and how a distinct caste system emerged within the Sikh community, even when Dalit political leaders like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar had once considered *en masse* conversion of the "Depressed Classes" to Sikhism with a view to liberate them from the shackles of caste in Hinduism. Imtiaz Ahmad likewise refutes the common assumption underlying the work of many scholars that "Islam is an egalitarian religion and that there are no status differences among Muslims" (p. 64). Through appeal to his own sociological research among the Ansaris in Rasulpur, Ahmad argues that groups like the *biradaris* and *zats* are constituted through the same discriminatory hierarchical structures as found in the Hindu caste system. He thus reflects upon the appropriateness of a term like "Dalit Muslims" for those Muslim groups who have suffered "an extreme degree of stigmatization and exclusion" (p. 78). Both Puri and Ahmad are careful to present these systems of stratification as distinct from those found in the Hindu caste system, yet at the same time they note the parallelism in the hierarchical principles that govern them. In Vatuk's terminology, the color of the snake-skin has changed, but the snake, the hood, and the poison remain the same.

Vatuk's adult experiences in Britain and the United States contributed significantly to the evolution of his political mind. 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 *Ghumakkaṛ śāstra* (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 traveled 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 his folklore articles 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 British daily life compelled Vatuk to rethink his previous imaginings of both home and abroad, launching his interest in a broader interrogation of structural inequality that considers systems of race as well as those of caste and class. Gerald D. Berreman's chapter entitled "Inequality in America" is thus a fitting introductory piece for the current collection of essays, particularly as he draws overt parallels between racial hierarchy in the United States and caste hierarchy in India. Recounting his own experiences as a young adult stationed in the racially torn city of Montgomery, Alabama, Berreman offers a compelling argument in support of affirmative action, the American equivalent of India's caste reservation system. Identifying this policy as "one step in the direction of overcoming the grievous and devastating effects of birth ascribed inequality," Berreman embraces a view of social justice that, like Vatuk's, necessarily requires structural change.

Vatuk's move to the United States in 1959 marks the onset of one of his most productive decades with respect to the writing of academic essays. It was during graduate school at Harvard University and his subsequent years at the University of California at Berkeley that Vatuk became increasingly attracted to folklore, a

field that shared his discomfort with many of the elitist assumptions that guide academic scholarship. Indeed, the field of folklore had emerged in large part through the rejection of academia's preoccupation with so-called 'high' forms of literature and poetry, a perspective that informs Vatuk's investigations of both non-standard Hindi dialects and localized performance genres. This is a kind of anti-elitism that emerges in the details of Vatuk's research—for instance, in his exposition of the metrical complexity of Hindi folk riddles as rivaling what is found in classical Sanskrit (Dundes and Vatuk 1974); in his critique of Sahlin's cross-cultural account of gift-exchange in so-called "primitive" economies for relying too heavily on Western concepts of self-interest (Vatuk and S. Vatuk 1967b); or quite simply in his decision to analyze the riddles of a thirteenth century writer like Amir Khusro, whose work has been overlooked by academics because it is written in "the language of the layman" (Vatuk 1969a).

Vatuk's academic writings during the 1960s and 1970s thus 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. 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. His scholarship thus feature the voices of the "little" Nehrus and Gandhis whose memories of the past rarely make the pages of a

textbook, among them villagers in northwest India who critique Western institutions in their tales and proverbs (Vatuk 1969b) and East Indians in British Guiana who sing against the abuses waged by a century of indentured servitude (Vatuk 1964).

Several of the folklore articles published by Vatuk during this period seek to challenge the account of the making of modern-day India that surfaces in the Western historical record, an undertaking that syncs well with Vatuk's interest in subaltern perspectives. By bringing everyday voices into his scholarship that counter dominant narratives of British rule in India, Vatuk is able to position the historical scholarship on India as fiction rather than fact, or at best, just one of many perspectives. For Vatuk, Indian history as written by Westerners betrays a self-congratulating perspective that fails to reflect the experiences of those who have been colonized:

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 1969b)

Several authors in this volume follow Vatuk in questioning the way in which Western scholars have promulgated Eurocentric views, among them Janet Abu-Lughod and Deana Heath. Abu-Lughod's chapter reflects on the ways in which historians have offered

European-centered accounts of the rise of “the modern world-system”; she compares, for instance, ideas expressed by theorists such as Alan Smith, Jerry Bentley, and Immanuel Wallerstein. Ultimately, Abu-Lughod argues for a deeper consideration of multiple historical perspectives, asserting that the academic “struggle for truth is a fundamentally political matter” (p. 399). Heath, on the other hand, is concerned with the developmentalist logic that guides scholarly characterizations of Indian modernity, and more specifically Hindi cinema, as an ‘incomplete’ or ‘failed’ version of Western modernity. Through a careful reading of the ways in which the films *Khakee* and *Nayak* differentially characterize the relationship between community and state, she suggests the possibility that “India’s modernity is not only both viable and distinct, but serves as a model for the West to follow” (p. 416).

Vatuk’s move to America during a tumultuous 1960s climate also fueled his rebellious artistry as a popular essayist. During this period, Vatuk wrote over 500 essays for Indian publications, addressing such subjects as the civil rights movement, the free speech movement, the anti-Vietnam war movement, and finally, the agricultural labor movement led by Cesar Chavez. He worked in an activist capacity within all of these movements, marching to protest the Vietnam war and participating in political teach-ins. The strength of his activism left a great impression on those around him, not the least of which were his daughters, who as children refused to eat grapes for many years in solidarity with American agricultural workers. In 1963, Vatuk published his first book in English, *British Guiana* (1963), which offered a condemnation of U.S. policies against the world’s liberal governments. But after his mother Kripa Devi (1886-1971) died in 1971, Vatuk ceased writing political essays for the most part, turning his attention back to his first passion, poetry. Indeed, since the death of his mother, Vatuk has written at least one poem a day, without fail.

Poetry is usually not the first medium that comes to mind when one thinks of the articulation of sustained critique against war, but for Vatuk, nothing is more suited to a portrayal of war’s atrocities than a poem. He came to this view early on when listening to the protest songs of the bhajnopdeshaks as a child, but his anti-war artistry reached new heights after his adult initiation into the

lyrics of American folk singers like Pete Seeger. In this volume, Susham Bedi offers a provocative discussion of the ways in which Vatuk's travels "from home to diaspora" have contributed to his poetic uniqueness, not the least of which is his development of a global stance against violence of all kinds. His first book of poetry in English, *Silence is Not Golden* (1969c), both promoted civil rights and condemned the Vietnam War, reflecting inspiration from a variety of American protest movements. But his most powerful statements against war-inflicted violence are undoubtedly located in his recently published trilogy of epics: *Bāhubalī* (2002a), *Uttar rāmkaṭhā* 'The later life of Ram' (2003b), and *Abhiṣapta dvāpar* 'Dvapara—The cursed age' (2007). In his critical examination of central scriptural narratives (*Uttar rāmkaṭhā* reviews the life of Lord Rama while *Abhiṣapta dvāpar* focuses on the Mahabharat period), Vatuk illustrates how these texts, far from promoting freedom, instead advocate the enslavement of humanity in the name of *dharma* 'righteousness.' What good is dharma, he asks, if it buries Sita and cannot save Draupadī from torment? What war is not fought in the name of dharma and truth, and what war is there where dharma and truth are not sacrificed?

jo bhī bahānā ho kisī kā, dhyey jo ho driṣṭi mẽ,  
 hai yuddh se baḍhkar adharm nahī bhayāvah sriṣṭi mẽ.  
 Vatuk (2002a:61), *Bāhubalī*

Whatever one's pretext, whatever one's goal,  
 there is no *adharmā* in the universe  
 greater and more heinous than war.

Even though Vatuk's epics are based on Indian myths, the interpretation that he offers to his readers regarding the unjustifiable relationship between religion and war is both global and timeless.

Two chapters in this volume follow Vatuk in exploring the atrocities of war: Maharaj K. Kaul's historical account of the victimization of Jammu and Kashmir through the collusion of Western imperialism with the Pakistani military, and James M. Freeman and Nguyen Dinh Huu's exposition of the "terror" that faced post-Vietnam War asylum seekers, particularly children, who lived in the Dong Rek refugee camp on the border of Thailand and

Cambodia. On the surface, these two chapters appear to have little in common. Kaul takes us through the historical details of a conflict that has its origins in the 1947 partitioning of India and Pakistan, while Freeman and Nguyen interrogate an international bureaucratic foul-up that prevented resettlement and resulted in the decade-long detainment of Vietnamese refugees. Yet what both chapters vividly elucidate, albeit from markedly different sociocultural and historical contexts, are the longitudinal effects of war. The victimization exposed within the pages of these articles does not end with the conclusion of war, whatever that may mean, but replicates itself across generations in—to borrow Vatuk's terminology—truly *bhayāvah* 'heinous' proportions.

The passions of Ved Prakash Vatuk that I have outlined in this introductory essay—his belief in the power of protest poetry, his skepticism regarding the empty rhetoric of political leaders and the corruptive potential of religious sects, his drive to reframe history from the standpoint of the folk, his opposition to violence, war, and imperialism—all come together in his recent publications on the Gadar party (e.g., Vatuk 1998b, 2003a, 2006b; see Assisi 2006), an early twentieth century freedom movement discussed in this volume by Vijay Prasad. Associated primarily with South Asian Americans in California, the movement 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. Vatuk began writing about the movement as early as 1966, when he coauthored an article for the journal *Folklore* that stands as the first scholarly examination of the Gadar Party protest songs (Vatuk and S. Vatuk 1966). Their songs have been viewed as historically significant because they advocate the use of violence, yet 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.

As I suggest in the concluding paragraph of my earlier essay



on Vatuk's academic writings (Hall 2007), it makes good sense that Vatuk—folklorist, Bay area resident, and author of over thirty internationally recognized volumes of political poetry—would be attracted to a San Francisco group that published folk poems written in revolutionary style for Indians living abroad. Vatuk has since made it his life's 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 (Vatuk 1998c). The twenty-one authors contributing to this volume, all inspired by Vatuk's rebellious aesthetics and activities, seek to honor and reflect upon Vatuk's contributions to their own interests in the subjects of inequality and social justice. I imagine that the readers of this edited collection will be involved in their own revolutionary activities across the world, both quiet and loud, and I hope that all will join us in celebrating the life and work of this extraordinary man.

Kira Hall  
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