On Komal Kothari

Shail Mayaram, Senior Fellow, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 29 Rajpur Road, Delhi 110054.

(Revised version of an article first published as “Komal Kothari: Rooted in the oral tradition,” Sunday Magazine, The Hindu, June 20, 2004. I am truly grateful for the enormous response this piece generated. I believe they are symptomatic of a response to Komalda’s own life and work).

In each human life there are fortuitous encounters with persons who turn out to shape one’s life, its purpose and destiny. Komal Kothari was one such person not only for me but also for many others.

I had met him as a school and college going girl in Jaipur, but my first real encounter with him was in 1983 at a Mela of Folk Performers from all over Rajasthan in Ajmer organised by the Social Work and Research Centre, Tilonia. We were living in Ajmer that year and I watched him with his recorder, interviewing, talking to and listening intently to musicians who performed throughout the day. What could be so interesting about these ordinary village-based musicians?

Komalda-as he was universally called- had by then established his partnership with Vijay Dan Detha, the writer, social commentator and collector of folktales from Rajasthan. The partnership had resulted in the establishment of Rupayan Sansthan, an Institute of Folklore. It functioned not from Jaipur or Jodhpur or any other urban centre, as is the case with most folklore institutes, but from the village of Borunda, in the heart of Marwar, the Marusthal, and the Thar. The location was more than symbolic as it allowed them to remain rooted in the cultures that watered their work and writing, as it were.

An interest in musical instruments had launched a lifetime’s work. Questions relating to the instruments took him to their materiality and ecology-the wood, the trees, the crops, water-and thereon to sociology, the complex world of castes, their cultures, politics and practices. The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts that was quick then to recognise talent had involved him in a project on bajra, millet around which performances would often continue through the night performed extensively in the Braj language region. These performers of the Ali Baksh khyals were often the bearer of an extraordinary literary and musical tradition as also capable of constant improvisation, change and creativity. This became for me the beginning of what has been more than a decade long attempt to understand the complex universes of Indian Islam and of Hindu-Muslim interaction. The world of the Indian Muslim clearly was far from the monolith implicit when one speaks the word, “Muslim” or “Musalman.”

I learnt more from the short trips I made with Komalda than from regional ethnographies. I still recollect a memorable trip to Tijara when we spoke to the last few performers of the Ali Baksh khyals. Ali Baksh had been a Muslim who lived in Behror and authored a series of khyals (best translated as a folk equivalent of opera) including Nal Damayanti, Radha-Krishna. Thekhyals meant an extensive knowledge of both Indian mythology and classical music. I still have buried in my papers the texts of several Ali Baksh khyals. But up to partition they were performed extensively in the Braj language region. These performances would often continue through the night with the raga-ragini changing as the night unfolded.
This was the period of a new interest in what was called “ethnomusicology” - a coded downgrading premised on the idea that the west has music and the rest have only “ethno music” “ethno food,” “ethno geography,” and ethno whatever. Nonetheless, people’s and subaltern knowledges were being taken seriously and postmodernism was coming into its own. It was the reigning moment of what the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins with his usual panache calls “postmodernism, post structuralism and other variants of ‘afterological studies’”!

Undeterred and uninspired by academic fashions, Komalda carved out his own universe and understanding. By now both western and Indian scholars recognised his quite encyclopaedic grasp of lived culture and many conducted fieldwork interspersed with conversations with him. He was, to my knowledge, one of the persons with the deepest comprehension of the lives and ritual practices of Indian Muslim and Hindu castes.

The 1980s was also the era of the state sponsorship of culture. The cultural bonanza called the Festivals of India and the setting up of Regional Cultural Centres marketed Indian Cultures, Crafts and “Heritage” domestically and the world over. Komalda himself had moved into decision making circuits at both the national and state levels, the Academies of Sangeet Natak and Sahitya. But I recall his pronounced scepticism of the state sponsorship of culture. I first heard it at a talk he gave at a small Workshop of scholars and Miras and Musalman Yogi Performers that I had put together at Alwar on the Oral Tradition of Mewat. Only the community could sustain living oral traditions, he argued. For a state to patronise them would be to museumise and ossify them, sap them of their vitality and capacity for critique. I had myself been contending with the question of the retreat of community’s patronage for oral traditions, the marginality and impoverishment of performers in the face of newer modes of electronic entertainment. After I heard Komalda I forever abandoned the idea that the state could be or ought to be a possible alternative patron of the arts, visual or performing. Komalda received the state awards of Padmashri and Padmabhushan but characteristically preferred to ignore the honorific.

Komalda himself remained of and rooted in the oral tradition. Conversations with him resonate in the understanding. By now both western and Indian scholars recognised his quite encyclopaedic grasp of lived culture and many conducted fieldwork interspersed with conversations with him. He was, to my knowledge, one of the persons with the deepest comprehension of the lives and ritual practices of Indian Muslim and Hindu castes.

Komalda wrote several essays in Hindi but there is little that the English reader can access. It is to Rustom Bharucha that we owe the trouble of actually sitting with, recording, transcribing and publishing detailed interviews with Komal Kothari in the book, Rajasthan: an oral history (Delhi: Penguin, 2003).

Komalda battled cancer for several years before finally succumbing to it. I met him intermittently during this period always promising myself to go back and spend more time with him. Once when I was visiting his home in Jodhpur I found some eighty Langas and Manganiyars collected. Malika Sarabhai had got him to organise a performance at his home. This was to help Vikram Oberoi select the cream of musical talent for his new hotel in Jaipur called Rajvilas (advertised today as the place where Bill Clinton stayed!). Through the evening they sang and played, singly, in groups and in chorus. This was nothing less than an ocean of sound and it left me completely drenched after the performance Komalda and I sat and went through a range of subjects. These feasts were followed an actual dinner cooked with non-hybrid indigenous millet and vegetables grown without pesticide and fertilizer (that the west now markets as “organic”). But there was more to come to make that day so memorable. Komalda’s house includes a huge hall where musicians are always welcome to stay and sleep. I sat up with these desert musicians through the night. There was no audience then. For them this opportunity where so many of them were together was rare and they sang and sang and sang...till it was time for breakfast and the bus homewards. There were little Manganiyar boys ranging from four years of age through early adolescence with the purist of voices as also the more mature voices of their fathers that demolish any dichotomisation of the folk and the classical. The performers’ enormous repertoire included songs associated with Kabir, Mira, Shah Abdul Latif and Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and relating to Radha and Krishna, Ali and the Prophet Muhammad, heroes, saints and satis....

There were other times that I met Komalda in Jaipur. Once when we discussed the phenomenon of the possession of spirit, he held forth on non Sanskrit Mahabharata. Strange, how he had already travelled intensively in areas that I had just begun to journey. On one of my last meetings with him he said he had recovered substantially. I had become interested in the
mythic and musical connections between northwest India, Afghanistan and Iran. As we waited for Shubha Mudgal to sing at a performance at the City Palace, Komalda shared with me some extraordinary insights into the exchanges across this frontier and right up to Tibet and Nepal. Little wonder that when I hear the Persian singer, Sima Bina, I recall Shubh Mathur telling me, “This music sounds so much like ours.” His explanation reverberates as I listen to the score of the Iranian film directed by Samira Makhmalbaf. At five in the afternoon (2004) that has been filmed in Afghanistan.

When I was in Jaipur last I learnt that Komalda was in the Intensive Care Unit at the hospital. The cancer had spread. I knew I had to see him for it might be a last time. An advance copy of my book had just arrived and I took it along to show him. It was the culmination for me of a pilgrimage begun a decade ago with the project on oral epics.

I could not see him, I was told. Doctor’s instructions. For just one minute? I promise not to let him talk. Ok.
The face with its silver white fair was familiar, if drawn. The solid girth of his body became frail. He looked at me and his eyes lit up at a familiar face. I grasped his hands. Bahut thak gaya hun, said that man of untiring energy. I held up my book. I like the title, he said, his eyes glinting, giving a fleeting glimpse of the sparkle and ready laughter that had been so characteristic of him.

Little wonder, I thought. For the title is, Against history, against state counter perspectives from the margins. Those familiar with Bijji’s (Vijay Dan Detha’s) stories—that every educated Indian should read—and Komalda’s ideas will recall that “the folk” for them is not the German Romanticist idea of the volk that potentially constitutes the national culture. For them the folk is the idea of loka that has to do with community, but that which can also be potentially subversive of power, of the patriarchal and pat lineal authority of family, caste, clan, kingdom, and modern state. I have a hazy recall of a story Komalda once told at the launch of the National Campaign of the Right to Information meeting at Beawar, Rajasthan. It is of the tiger that began to be called sher because he devoured the patwari, the much maligned land revenue record keeper and the bane of poor villagers! Aruna Roy writes that at the Tilonia meeting when someone commented on the importance of the right hand in Hinduism, Komalda explained that in the potter’s art and in the work of the artisan and performer, in general, it is the left hand that is the more important hand, while the right is merely used for the gesture of denial (Ujala chari, 10 May 2004).

At Syracuse later that month I broke the news to Nancy Martin who had perhaps been one of the scholars closest to him over the later years. Nancy had been helping him to systematise and consolidate the Rupayan Sansthan archive drawing from what is perhaps the best collection of Mira songs for her own book. We both knew that he did not have long. The end for him came when I was buried in the 1820s records in the British Library. I learnt of it only when I returned a month later. I could do little then, but dedicated a piece I penned for a forthcoming volume on Muslim portraits that is titled, “Poor, Untouchable, Muslim and Mirasi: Abdul, the storyteller” to Komal Kothari (1929-2004) “the storyteller of the storytellers.”

Far away at Columbia University in May 2004, his American “family” met to pay tribute to him. Ann Gold, anthropologist, folklorist and religionist recalls that Komalda was the reason for her making Rajasthan her fieldwork base. This was at a time when most American scholars would be headed towards either Uttar Pradesh or Tamil Nadu. Ann had met him at Chicago where his conversation beckoned her into possible worlds.

In Hindu cremation ritual the ashes of the body sans atma are scattered allowing them to mix with the elements that enable the regeneration of life, water and earth. In the case of Komalda his presence continues in so much of our reflection and writing, contributing to the constant regeneration of the world of ideas.