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“Say Love not Politics”: FM radio voices, the economy of affect, and democratic ‘free speech’

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Since the *jan andolan* in 1990, there has been an impressive turn towards the public expression of personal or social discontent. While this has been the subject around which new political parties form, it is also a vital part of the emerging media in Kathmandu. The commercial FM radio, for one, has become a place to voice one’s troubles. So different are the FM programs from the state Radio Nepal, established in 1953, that people do not even refer to the media as the ‘radio’. “I don’t listen to Radio,” many people told me. “I listen to FM.” The FM radio presenters see themselves as proponents of democratic ‘free speech’, and many advertise their programs as potent salves to personal or social trouble. The boundaries of this specifically ‘Kathmandu listening community’ are based on an imagined sense of emotional proximity and an accentuation of social and geographical distances between people. This effect, which I call intimate distance, has become a vital form of social power in Kathmandu today. Intimate distance helps cultivate the feelings of social isolation, loss, and the desire to reach outwards towards a new social world. The solution offered is to turn inwards towards one’s personal concerns. Looking to the FM radio to understand this political moment means looking to the question of what such narratives, confessions, and sentimental testimonies provide for people, and what they hide.

The program I examine here in detail, *Mero Katha*, *Mero Git*, is based on long and often melodramatic personal letters that tell the story of a person’s life and a moment in their past. Rather than simply pierce these melodramatic tales with the arrow of a critic, I linger a little longer on what the fact that so many people write to programs like *Mero Katha*, *Mero Git* tells us about the changing terrain of desire and value in Kathmandu, and focus specifically on the form this writing takes. This leads to more phenomenological questions like: What is the place of ‘the personal’ in people’s contemporary understanding of their lives and their pasts? or Why do people use the FM radio as a place to address both personal and social discontent? These questions relate of course to broader ideologi-

cal structures such as *bikas*, social progress and the global economy. I want to suggest that the sense of intimate distance generated by the FM radio, and by programs like *Mero Katha*, *Mero Git*, connects to a discourse, especially emergent in this decade of democracy, that speaks out fiercely against politics. The commonplace refrain “Politics is ruining our country” rolls easily off the tongues of many, especially the middle class, in Kathmandu. Perhaps not surprisingly, the FM radio is one social force contributing to this attitude.

Although the official, public opening of FM radio was in 1996, the FM airwaves were actually used by the police during the riots of the *jan andolan*. Manjushree Thapa, a fiction-writer in Kathmandu, remembers secretly listening to the orders shouted between the police and their commanders on FM 86.4 (Thapa 1997). Thapa heard the exchange of code names — Delta 1, Golf 1, November 5, Peter 1 — as police and their superiors addressed one another. She listened in as the police asked for orders when faced with an unruly crowd on New Road. She heard Golf 1 — most likely the Minister for Law and Justice — quietly give orders to shoot at the crowd. For Thapa, like many middle class families, the secluded hearings through the FM radio set became a form of passive participation in the Movement. It was a way to be involved without dirtying one’s hands.

These radio-side conversations, Thapa suggests, “seemed to collapse the divide between those of us at home and those on the streets.” An illusion, Thapa readily acknowledges, but nonetheless a forceful one. It provided an imagined space of union between the activists and the more secluded bourgeois families. At the same time, these secret hearings through the FM radio also clearly marked the social and spatial distance between these two groups.

Today the very same people who listened in on FM 86.4 most likely have turned their radio knob up a few notches to FM 100.¹ The very same radio set that was used to eavesdrop on police and government brutality is most

likely used today to hear Maria's *Heart-to-Heart* or Kalyan's *Mero Katha, Mero Git*. The FM radio programs were, after all, designed especially for the "urban, educated elite", that is, people who resemble Manjushree Thapa. The sense of proximity and distance, political engagement and removed voyeurism, public participation and enclosure in the home that Thapa describes during the *jan andolan* echoes the contemporary FM in uncanny ways. Even today, the FM has become a place to imagine emotional closeness with some and a palpable social and spatial distance from others in the city. "We have to have some selection," one of the popular FM presenters told me defiantly one day. "We can't just broadcast to everyone. I mean, I don't want some Bhaktapur farmer calling up or even listening to my show!"

While the FM presenters emphasize the social importance of "free speech", they also project a notion that true freedom of expression can only really take place through the radio inside one's home. This intimate distance creates a new way of understanding time and space which no doubt affects the way people think about themselves: their pasts, their present lives and also, importantly, the possibilities people imagine for political action. This works through the enclosing qualities of the radio medium itself, as well as the genres of speech generated on FM programs. Kalyan's program *Mero Katha, Mero Git* (My Story, My Song) perhaps best epitomizes this process.

On a Thursday at noon in the Kathmandu Valley, people from all walks of life — college students, factory workers, taxi drivers, bronze casters, and housewives — tune into the only FM station and listen to Kalyan Gautum's soothing voice. "*Please put down your longings,*" Kalyan begins his weekly program. "*People are born for speaking their hearts and born for speaking of their achievements. . . Sometimes it's sukha, sometimes it's dukha, that is how life turns about. But dukha is like mustard seeds. In a wrapped bundle of cloth, the mustard seeds must remain towards the bottom. When a little hole forms, the mustard scatters all over the floor. Dukha is also like this. One must spill dukha...And one's heart will be lighter. There-*

¹Since the time when I conducted my research in 1997-1998, there have been numerous FM channels that have opened. In 1997, Sagarmatha Radio, a community-based set of programs sponsored in part by a Canadian INGO, opened on another FM airwave that offers an alternative to the commercial FM radio I write of here. A few of the commercial FM programs that were semi-private at the time of my research (renting radio time through the government and broadcasting through Radio Nepal studio in Singh Durbar) received their private licenses as I was leaving Nepal and are now broadcasting from their own studios. I recently learned that Radio Nepal plans to open its own FM channel in January 2001, along side the private FM businesses to which Radio Nepal currently rents time out.

fore, tell your dukha freely. Tell whoever is close to you. If you don't have anyone, I am together with you. For each of your sufferings, I am here. For all of your happiness, I am here. I am just like you. . . Remember yourself to me and write a letter, okay? All songs are mine."²

The instructions Kalyan gives to his listeners to 'spill their dukha freely' in the form of a 'true life story' speaks to a much broader ideology in contemporary Kathmandu: people should speak their minds, freely and openly. As Kalyan's introduction suggests, there is nowhere else to go; he thus actively endorses and manufactures a sense of loneliness, loss and isolation as the basis and frame of his program. This, in turn, creates in the listeners a desire to write. "Before I heard Kalyan Gautum," one middle-aged woman told me, "I did not have the wish to write. Even if I did," she reflected, "Who would I tell? Who would I tell?" Kalyan's program provides a space for such otherwise unspoken stories; more than this, he creates the very notion that common people do have a story that they should want to tell.

The stories sent to Kalyan's program are primarily concerned with a loss in the past of loved ones or incidents of unrequited love. The focus on love in *Mero Katha, Mero Git*, and many other FM programs, responds in part to the initial contract with the government, which placed a ban on radio broadcasts with political or religious content. But FM managers didn't protest. They insisted that the "free expression" of personal issues — as well as music from around the world — was also crucial for the nation's 'progress' of '*bikas*'. They plastered the walls of their FM offices with such messages. Computer print-outs taped across the periphery of one FM office bore slogans, in English, that spoke defiantly against political expression. "No Politics Please," stated one white page, directly facing the office door. Others read: "Silence is one great art of conversation" or "Accept pain and disappointment as part of life." In bold font, below the 'No Politics' sign hung the most visible of them all. It read: "We Prefer Love". The expression of love and personal lives was something necessary for realizing the ideals of democratic 'free speech'.

When I first met Kalyan, while sitting on the roof of the tall Hits FM office, he insisted that these 'true life stories,' the confessions of unrequited love, were important for the 'betterment of society'. Drawing on a vision of social change that has become the fertile stomping ground of political activists, development agencies, and the state alike, Kalyan explained to me that these stories presented possibilities in people's pasts that other listeners might act upon. It also gave them a chance to express themselves in a form that would be readily recognized by others, a chance

²Italics indicates words written to or spoken on the radio.

to prove themselves, to make amends. He described these social benefits by referring to the new genres that emerged in FM programs. "After FM came, people started sharing their feelings. . . FM is a 'diary'," he told me, using the English word. "People send letters - they don't make a collection - but they send them to me, and I keep them here. They are a diary so I must keep them." The idea that diary-writing and collecting go hand-in-hand - and that these both correspond to a new form of broadcasting - is an interesting subject, but one I have no time to pursue here. Suffice to say, these story-letters *cum* diary confessions were seen by Kalyan not only as a training and expression of the self, but also as a form of education.

That the 'life-story' letters carry within them an important social message from which people can learn, is implied in the title of the program, *Mero Katha, Mero Git*. 'Katha', as most of us know, refers to a religious narrative, recited orally by a pandit; it is a form of moral and religious education. Kalyan, who reads these letters, has become a kind of modern, secular pandit. Reading in a tone that emphasizes the written quality, Kalyan's florid beginnings and endings, the flourishes he adds to people's letters, echo the forms of literary Nepali. Many listeners associate the power of Kalyan's voice with the fact that it *sounds* like literature.³ Insofar as '*Mero Katha, Mero Git*' transforms the traditional high pandit or literary forms into a mass commodity made from people's everyday lives, the program represents a peculiar form of Kathmandu kitsch. Rather than simply dismiss this as "mass manipulation" or "a debased simulacra of genuine culture"⁴, I follow Svetlana Boym's approach and "seek to understand kitsch as an experience and to recover precisely what kitsch tries to cover up: its history, its cultural mythology, and its contexts" (Boym 1994: 19). To do this, I turn to the genre of these stories, as a way to link them to this particular political moment in Kathmandu.

In many ways, the 'true life stories' Kalyan reads every Thursday at noon resemble a modern *bildungsroman*, in which a person's identity develops over time.⁵ A person learns something over the course of their life, and this learning can be a lesson to the readers. The writers to '*Mero*

Katha, Mero Git' often frame their letters with this idea of education. *Kalyanji*, begins one letter by a man in his early thirties:

I am fully convinced that the program 'Mero Katha, Mero Git', which you present, will discourage, to a certain extent, our social wrongdoings, our superstition, and narrow-mindedness.

A divorced woman prefaces her 'true life story' with the following remark: *It could be that my life's bitter truths should not be broadcast on air. But if my past could be an education for someone else, why then retreat, right?*

Along with the theme of education, many people turned to *Mero Katha, Mero Git* as a solution to largely social problems. This was certainly the case for Lulu Lama, a Tamang boy of 18 from a village outside the Valley, who now spent his days in a Tanka painting workshop in northern Kathmandu. Kalyan and I visited Lulu in this workshop where he, and approximately twenty other men his age, painted for at least 12 hours to the sounds of FM radio. Lulu's father had abandoned him and his mother as soon as Lulu was born. When Lulu arrived in Kathmandu in the early 1990s he began to search for his absent father. Through a network of villagers he learned his father had remarried and also lived in Kathmandu. It was then that he considered writing to *Mero Katha, Mero Git*:

At that time, I was in the 10th class...at that time we [father and he] had not met yet. It seemed that everyone was sending letters, it was like a kind of message through this program. Since I had not met him in so many years, perhaps doing it this way — not by searching — his heart might change and he would come looking for me? He might want to meet? After sending a message, he might say, 'Until today, my son exists'. And for that I wrote a letter. That's the most important reason.

As we talked in the musty back room of the factory, I became more and more intrigued with this story while Kalyan became more and more absorbed in his newspaper. Lulu seemed to feel that the power of the radio medium,

fers to a genre of literature in which the main character of a novel "emerges *along with the world* and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other...The organizing force held by the future is therefore extremely great here - this is not, of course, the private biographical future, but the historical future" (Bakhtin 1986: 23). Bakhtin links the development of this genre of literature to the idea of education developed during the German Enlightenment, especially the idea of a nation of people, who 'grow' in national-historical time. It is from here that I begin my own argument about the place of '*Mero Katha, Mero Git*' narratives within the present political landscape of Kathmandu.

³As I elaborate elsewhere, Kalyan's desire to create a program like '*Mero Katha, Mero Git*' stems in part from his deep interest in Nepali literature and in film.

⁴This is the approach followed by many critics of kitsch, most famously, Theodore Adorno and Clement Greenberg. Most of these critics outline the structure and style of what they call the 'bad taste' of kitsch, as a way to critique the destructive effects of capitalist culture on society and art. My analysis takes this critique in a different direction, without completely departing from it.

⁵My perspective on the *bildungsroman* comes largely from the writings of Russian literary critic, M.M. Bakhtin. The term re-

and the power of Kalyan's voice, had an affective power to "change someone's heart". Perhaps he wanted sympathetic recognition from the many imagined listeners. But more than sympathy, Lulu imagined real consequences might transpire from this letter to *Mero Katha, Mero Git*. After repeating his entire 'life story' with his eyes fixed to the ground, he looked up at me and said: "*To make a citizenship card, you also need one's own Thar, a name...in order to show your identity. For that also, I needed to search for my father. . . For later, well, to get a job in an office, or to do some small work. . . Well, after saying you are Nepali, well, . . . one needs proof, and for that one's citizenship card is important. For that, I needed to meet my father. For that, also, I wrote a letter.*"

Lulu ostensibly sent a letter to gain recognition not only from his father, but more importantly from the state, and he sought this recognition by going to Kalyan's program. The issue of citizenship around which *jana jati* and other activist groups engage in fiery debates becomes a problem that people like Lulu imagine can be solved through the FM radio waves. Lulu did eventually find his father, but not because of the letter he sent to Kalyan. Kalyan felt this letter was unsuitable, and never broadcast the story. As we left the workshop, I asked Kalyan why, and he replied quite matter-of-factly: "It was not well written." His decision was based on an aesthetic choice. Of course the subject of the letter is immediately provocative: it not only confronts the failure of a father towards his son, but also implicitly confronts the failure of the state. I asked Kalyan if I could see Lulu's letter, but Kalyan nonchalantly said he could not find it: the letter had been misplaced.⁶ While *Mero Katha, Mero Git* appears to provide an attractive possibility for a public voice to many, only some stories actually make their way on to the show.

During a meeting with another young man, whose story was also not broadcast, Kalyan clearly spelled out the kind of story that met his aesthetic criteria. We met this twenty-something civil servant at the barracks on the outskirts of Kathmandu, where he worked in the x-ray room at the army hospital. The man had phoned the FM office several times to discover why his story never made it onto the show. Sitting with his arm draped over the x-ray machine, Kalyan began to explain:

"Your story was not a story. It was like an application (nirbidan). . . What I need is this: First one is born, right? Because when writing a story, people should give the whole thing. One is born, then state which place they grew up. There are some ordinary/simple events. Then one comes to college. (implicitly, Kalyan suggests, that one leaves

the village and comes to Kathmandu - a point that is part of most stories that we can talk of later). . . Because people of today look for the events. Literary writers who simply go around and around, they don't have any appeal anymore. . . Now people look for events. 'Now what?' 'What happened next?'

This way of packaging time in the story, as a plodding movement forward in a series of 'events' that mark the life of an individual, does not come readily to most of his listeners. Kalyan sends back or rejects a vast majority of stories because they do not meet this standard narrative form. This orientation towards time is, however, central to the idea of *bikas*. It also resonates clearly with the temporal perspective implicit in the ideals of political freedom and the possibilities of social change presumably realized with the re-establishment of 'multi-party democracy'. As many recent scholars have pointed out, the metaphors of an individual's life stages are often superimposed onto the very idea of 'developing' nations like Nepal (Nandy 1987; Gupta 1998). "Nations are 'newly' born, their economies take time to 'grow', and their markets and political systems finally 'mature' when they are fully developed" (Gupta 1998: 41). According to this model, the *jan aandolan* in 1990 suggests a moment of maturity for Nepal as a nation, and by extension for the individuals who make up the nation. The 'life-story' genre of Kalyan's program similarly initiates a way of seeing one's own life within such a temporal perspective, one that mimics the idea of the changing, developing life of the nation.

But in relation to the rest of the world, Nepal is considered an LDC (least developed country) — a fact learned by Nepali school children very early on — and therefore, according to the ideology of *bikas*, it is a nation still in its 'childhood' phase. *Bikas* suggests that time moves ever forward, away from the present moment, and that this movement into a new future, away from events of the past, will always bring something better and brighter. The temporal theme promotes an evolutionary view of society whereby, as Stacey Pigg has discussed at length, "everyone's tomorrow will (or should) look like some people's present [ie. the middle-class in Kathmandu]" (Pigg 1992: 501). This has profound implications not only for the way Nepalis see their nation, but also subjectively how they view themselves, their pasts and presents. Such images are not absent from the story-letters sent to Kalyan.

Many overlay their stories with a tone of almost desperate loneliness and childlike ignorance. One woman begins her letter to Kalyan by emphasizing her relative seclusion and distance from the rest of the world:

Even though I know everything, I'm still like a newborn,

⁶The loss of this letter eerily mimics the lack of recognition Lulu received from either his father or the state.

innocent child. Even though I know everything, I am still silent. I try to speak to my friends, I try to look with my eyes outside the window, and they come back with sad messages. I have no one of my own, therefore I take you as my own.

Kalyan and the other invisible listeners appear to be the only people who might hear such troubles. All attempts to 'look out of the window' fail, and she therefore remains at home, scribbling letters to a sympathetic reader, hoping to hear her own story voiced on the radio box beside her.

It is worth mentioning briefly that this sense of distance from others in Kathmandu, and from the rest of the world, is further pronounced by the form of a *personal letter* to Kalyan, in which the writers compose their stories. Though now broadcast over the radio, the genre nevertheless carries traces of the historical contexts in which Nepalis write personal letters, due to separations caused by war or employment and/or education abroad. In addition it resonates with the practice of writing love letters, which Laura Ahearn has written about more extensively in a village context, a practice many writers actually refer to within their story-letters. Such epistolary forms foreground the geographic or physical distance between a writer and a recipient at the same time that they speak of their emotional proximity. They thus swell with the sense of intimate distance.

In addition to the march ahead in time, the *bildungsroman* or *bikas* approach to the life of an individual and nation within a broader 'family of nations', the story-letters are most noticeably wrapped up in a net of sentiment and melodrama. Melodramatic narratives generally create a suspension in time and do not move forward in a linear progression of unknown, ever-transforming events; rather, they present quite the opposite: the ending is already known. Part of the pleasure in hearing the deep resonance of Kalyan's voice repeat these tragic tales is precisely that everyone knows, from the beginning, how it will end. I remember once reading a story-letter with two friends, which did not end in the predictable, tragic fashion; both friends were seriously disappointed. Melodrama thus confirms that the world will remain as it has always been, and turns the provocative social messages into the comfort of a sentimental tale. Indeed, Kalyan makes explicit parallels between his program and the classic melodramatic form of Hindi film. After telling the civil servant at the army base about the importance of having a linear story line, he added with a tap on the young man's knee, "...even if the story is real, it is an added plus if it is like a [Hindi] film."

The double sense of time conveyed by melodramatic

sentiment and the linear narrative of 'life story' respond to two forces that intersect in today's post-*andolan* Kathmandu. The first is the idea that the nation and its citizens are on a steady progression forward in time, that democracy and *bikas* have opened up a space for people in Kathmandu to realize and make their own destinies, just as they write their own 'true life stories' to Kalyan. The second is a heavy political malaise, a growing nostalgia for times without such political tumult, and a disenchantment with politics in general. No doubt the two are connected and accelerated by growing global capitalism in Kathmandu. My interest here has not been to elaborate the causes of this malaise, but rather, to suggest that one effect of the union of these two potent forces has been the elaboration of a social power I call 'intimate distance'. Intimate distance keeps people attached to one another through sentiment and intimacy, yet also accentuates their social and geographic distance from one another and from the wider world outside of Nepal. The FM, and especially the letters on *Mero Katha*, *Mero Git*, manufactures this sense of enclosure and 'intimate distance'. They also show that actually having a story of loss to tell has become an important form of social and commodity value in Kathmandu today. In doing so, the FM promotes a popular idea that 'love' not politics is the most important form of post-*andolan* 'free speech'.

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