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Review of Recasting Folk in the Himalayas: Indian Music, Media, and Social Mobility by Stefan Fiol

Victoria M. Dalzell

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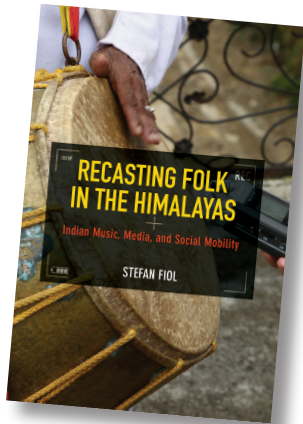
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**Recasting Folk in the Himalayas:
Indian Music, Media, and Social
Mobility.**

Stefan Fiol. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017. 228 pages. ISBN 9780252082757.

Reviewed by Victoria M. Dalzell

“The folk” is not a new concept for South Asia or the Himalayas. Yet instead of taking this category for granted, Stefan Fiol examines how people—specifically musicians and scholars—have constructed and deployed it within the Himalayan context. Using the folk music recording industry that shaped Uttarakhandi *geet* (in this case, popular song) as a case study, Fiol successfully denaturalizes the process of folkloricization—“the selective adoption of elements from narrative and musical performance rooted in the village practice and the adaptation of these elements to cosmopolitan performance media

through modernist reform” (p. 103)—as well as the paradox of “the folk”—that it is both something to be celebrated and simultaneously ashamed about. Ethnomusicology’s understanding that music is a process, not just a product, allows Fiol to elucidate these paradoxes, forefront the agency of people in these processes, and show readers why examining “the folk” remains an important component of Himalayan studies.

Chapters One and Two provide historical and conceptual frameworks for the other chapters. The first chapter traces how colonial administrators and the elite constructed “the folk” in effort to categorize, define, and subdue the people of the region now known as Uttarakhand. Fiol succeeds in humanizing the actors implicated in this process without endorsing their methods or all their results. He also draws parallels between the construction of “the folk” in India and other parts of the world without overgeneralization. In Chapter Two, Fiol discusses how the cultural policies of Nehruvian India enabled elites to use emerging media forms—radio, recordings, as well as writing and academic study—to codify and assimilate folk music into national imaginaries. Together, these two chapters situate the book within existing literature on folkloricization and lay the historical groundwork for the following chapters.

Throughout his work, Fiol makes familiar theoretical concepts tangible by demonstrating how they play out in people’s work. In Chapter Three, Fiol examines the career of folk artist Narendra Singh Negi to show how folk music has moved from a caste occupation to “a commercial brand that represents the new regional state and can appeal to diverse audiences at home and abroad” (p. 103). The

folk musicians with whom Fiol worked contended that folk music was not static; rather, it was an ever-evolving resource that artists used to convey meaning to current events (p. 83). Yet the emergence of the vernacular music industry and the creation of an Uttarakhandi “brand” crystalized certain linguistic and musical elements for the purposes of regional representation. The story Fiol tells in this chapter is not a new one, but focusing on Negi and his work demonstrates what revival, assimilation, and cosmopolitanism looks like in practice.

I read Chapter Four as the heart of the book. In it, Fiol addresses the proverbial elephant in the room: while folk music is desirable, folk bodies are not. Fiol introduces the concept of rhizophonics to analyze how the folk music industry has separated the folk music’s sound from hereditary musicians who have historically performed it. Fiol defines rhizophonics as the separation and reconfiguration of the relationship between a sound and its source. Fiol does not frame these reconfigurations as inherently bad; rather, he claims, “not all the elements involved in [rhizophonic] distribution have the same ethical claim” (p. 106). This concept allows him to demonstrate why music is socially mobile, but the musicians who have historically played it are not. Through the experiences of one hereditary drummer—Sohan Lal—Fiol shows how studio processes separate folk sound from the folk body, and how musicians continue to experience caste discrimination while their music becomes upwardly mobile. In this chapter, Fiol details the musical components of the Shilpkar drumming repertoire, and outlines the different value systems that guide ritual, community performances and studio recordings. Fiol’s analysis also serves to justify his own suspicions about

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initiatives that seek to “preserve” folk music, but do not directly benefit or involve folk musicians.

Fiol applies the concept of rhizophonics to gender, specifically women, in Chapter Five. He uses this concept to show how folkloricization does not have the same outcomes for everyone. By examining the folk music careers of two women artists of different caste backgrounds—Meena Rana, a middle-class recording artist, and Bachan Dei, a hereditary performer—Fiol demonstrates how rhizophonic processes have simultaneously erased women in some areas (such as live performances) but allowed women a role in others (like the recording industry). The experiences of these two women demonstrate how multiple meanings of “folk” exist side-by-side. Folk is both “a set of genres or stylistic conventions that may be selectively added to a performance” (for Meena Rana), as well as (for Bachan Dei) “a liminal social position that is incommensurable with regional modernity” (p. 156). Through these case studies, Fiol illustrates the complicated consequences of folkloricization: not everyone experiences the same outcomes.

Throughout his book, Fiol upsets binaries within South Asia studies. In Chapter Six, he shows how the boundaries between high religion and folk religion are blurred within *jagar* rituals. As possession rituals particular to the Uttarakhand region,

jagar have absorbed concepts of both pan-regionalism and the folk. Through the career of ritual specialist and folk musician Pritam Bhartwan, Fiol puts *jagar* at the center of the folk paradox: as a mark of regional spirituality, it is something people are proud of, yet aspects of the ritual practice make it something many are still embarrassed about. Focusing on Bhartwan's experiences allows Fiol to demonstrate the status negotiations that take place within and around *jagar* rituals, not just on an individual basis but also as a region.

The greatest strength of Fiol's work is the stories of individual musicians that illustrate folkloricization's consequences and benefits. This aspect gives the book wide teaching applicability. Individual narratives and detailed descriptions of folk music components and recording processes are not overwhelmed by the theoretical framing, which makes the work accessible to undergraduate students. Consequently, this work would meet the objectives of many upper-division music courses on South Asian or Himalayan music to introduce students to the sounds and cultural placement of so-called folk and popular music traditions. This same theoretical scope makes it a good fit for graduate seminars. Fiol's introduction and conclusion lay out the work's contributions for readers, and it can be read in conjunction with theoretical works on folklore. Its setting in Uttarakhand makes it a good fit for courses framed as South Asia or Himalayan studies. His

work is clearly rooted in Himalayan studies but is not Nepal-centric, while it demonstrates the continued interactions of national and regional imaginaries through folk music in South Asia studies. The relatively short length of the book—the main text is less than 200 pages—will make it attractive to instructors.

In conclusion, Fiol's deconstruction of the folk concept in Uttarakhand, India allows him to forefront people's agency and the uneven consequences of folkloricization. His work examines important themes for religious studies, South Asia and Himalaya area studies, and folk studies, and its grounding in ethnomusicology prevents it from being fragmentary. While the interdisciplinary nature of Fiol's work will initially attract a wide audience, its focus on people will keep readers engaged.

Victoria M. Dalzell is an ethnomusicologist whose work focuses on ethnicity, ritual, and belonging. Her research in Nepal's Tharu communities has appeared in the journals Studies in Nepali History and Society, and Asian Music. Her current project examines the congregational song practices of Christian Nepalis. She received her PhD from the University of California Riverside.