Preface

This book examines the indigenous principles of genre identification and intertextuality within a folklore repertoire of middle India and proceeds to use these principles as an entry into the interpretation of six performance genres selected from that repertoire. This focus for the study of the folklore of the Chhattisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh took shape only gradually over the course of fifteen months of original fieldwork and numerous return trips to Chhattisgarh over the last fifteen years.

I first went to Chhattisgarh in the fall of 1980 on a Fulbright-Hays Dissertation Research Grant with a plan to look for regional variants, particularly women’s performance traditions, of the pan-Indian epic tradition of the Ramayana. My motivating question was whether and how the performance of a particular Ramayana tradition might define a cultural region and/or social groups within that region. Given the ritual dominance of the Hindi written version of the Ramayana, the Ramcaritmānas, in the Hindi-speaking belt of northern and middle India, I expected that specifically regional and gender- or caste-based variants and interpretations of the epic story would be embedded in nonepic forms, such as folk songs and tales or devotional songs. So, I began my fieldwork by taping a wide spectrum of ritual and festival performances that occurred in the villages in which I lived and visited. After several months in the field, I came to a realization that while many Chhattisgarhi folk traditions offered alternative narrative variants, emphases, and worldviews to that of the Hindi Ramcaritmānas, the performance

1 See Flueckiger 1991a for a discussion of the feminization and localization of the Ramayana narrative in women’s Ramayana maṇḍalī in the Chhattisgarh plains.
genres in which these were embedded were both more interesting to me and more significant to those who performed them than was the Ramayana tradition per se.

I shifted my focus to a consideration of this folklore repertoire as a system of genres, listening to performers’ and audiences’ articulations of the boundaries of what they perceived to be a “Chhattisgarhi” repertoire and making an effort to identify its internal organizing principles and categories. I found the question I had brought to my original research topic of regional Ramayanas still relevant, although now significantly expanded: could a region or social groups within that region be identified by the performance of particular genres, and if so, how; what were the relationships between genre and community? In the course of my fieldwork, it gradually became apparent that a central organizing feature of the repertoire of Chhattisgarhi folk genres is the social identity of the group to whom the genre “belongs”; performers and audiences categorize genres on the basis of this social identity more frequently than on the basis of form or thematic content. Performance of these genres both identifies and contributes to the identity of the Chhattisgarh folklore region and social groups within it.

Western scholars have conducted few ethnographic studies in Chhattisgarh, perhaps, in part, because of its geographic distance from major urban centers and the Hindi heartland of the Gangetic plains. Because Chhattisgarh lies on the southeastern borders of the Hindi-language belt, this region and others of Madhya Pradesh are assumed to share north Indian cultural and religious patterns in the north-south axis frequently drawn in South Asian academic discourse. Yet while much of what I read in north Indian ethnographies resonated with what I had experienced during my childhood in Chhattisgarh, I felt that Chhattisgarh was somehow distinctive and that assumptions for north India could not always be applied to the

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2 After Verrier Elwin’s substantial collections of the folklore of Chhattisgarh and the Maikal Hills in the 1940s (Elwin 1946; Elwin and Hivale 1944) with which he provided extensive ethnographic notes, the next ethnographically based scholarly work to be published in English was Lawrence Babb’s excellent study of popular Hinduism in the Raipur plains of Chhattisgarh (The Divine Hierarchy, 1970). Edward Jay has also conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the region, first in Bastar District and then in the Chhattisgarh temple town of Rajim (1970, 1973). Most Indian anthropologists based in Chhattisgarh have done their own fieldwork in the tribal district of Bastar, to the south of Raipur; in my visits to the Department of Anthropology of Ravishankar University in Raipur, many of the faculty did not understand my interest in nontribal Chhattisgarh and urged me to join them in their studies of Bastar.

3 In 1980, it was a two-day train ride from Delhi to the Chhattisgarhi city of Raipur and then another three hours by bus to the town of Basna in Phuljhar; from there, one had to make arrangements for transportation via private car, bicycle, or oxcart to outlying villages. Today, the city of Raipur is serviced by several airlines and is, therefore, more easily accessible from other urban centers.
region. This was perhaps the primary motivation for my return to Chhattisgarh as a field site—my desire to understand within an analytic framework this region of middle India which I had come to know on some intuitive level as a child and which remains an important part of who I have become.

I began my fieldwork by living for several months in the village of Patharla, on the eastern borderlands of Chhattisgarh, ten kilometers from the village where my parents, Ramoth and Edward Burkhalter, were Mennonite missionaries and where I had numerous friends and contacts from my childhood. Here, I gradually internalized the rhythms of village life I had previously known only from a distance and observed the ways in which performance both creates and reflects those rhythms. I became aware of a wide spectrum of Chhattisgarhi performance genres, their rules of usage, and Chhattisgarhi “ways of talking” about performance and eventually decided to make this regional repertoire the focus of my study.

The village in which I first lived was primarily an Oriya-speaking village in the subregion of Phuljhar, with several Chhattisgarhi-speaking villages close by. Even within the latter, however, many genres identified as “Chhattisgarhi” were not uniformly available (such as the candaini epic tradition). To make a study of a regional repertoire would require a wider geographic field. So after several months I moved to the more centrally located town of Dhamtari in the plains of Chhattisgarh, from where I could more easily locate and access Chhattisgarhi performance genres not available in the region’s borderlands.

In the village of Patharla, I lived with the only Christian family in the village, that of a pastor for whom the church had chosen this village as a central location between several small congregations that he served. Habil and Kamolini Nand, along with their two young daughters and baby son, had recently moved to the village and were living in a new home with an empty corner in one of its two rooms. The village headman and others in the village with whom I had discussed housing concurred that it would be best for me to live “with my caste [jāti]” and, more specifically, with persons who knew my parents. I was reluctant to live with a Christian family, but it was a situation that served me well. Living with them, I was free to visit homes and participate in the rituals of both high- and low-caste Hindu families. The family was not yet directly aligned in village politics and was unrelated to anyone in the village, and so they became the confidants of many. Located at the edge of the village, their home became a conversational

4 This was particularly true in my readings about purdah (female veiling) and the position of women in the Gangetic plains of north India. It was these kinds of imprecise generalizations for middle India, based on north Indian ethnography and experience, that led me to expect the Ramayana tradition to have greater significance in Chhattisgarh than it does.
way station for many village women as they “went to the fields” in the evening. Not living as a young daughter-in-law in an extended family, Kamolini had fewer household obligations than she might have had otherwise and was freer to accompany me to neighboring villages and to houses within our own village; she was an invaluable companion. Both she and Habil were genuinely interested in my work and served as constant teachers about Oriya/Phuljhar culture, language, and folklore. Habil also transcribed several performances for me from Oriya into Devanagari (Hindi) script and made initial translations into Hindi.

In Dhamtari, I lived on the Christian hospital compound where my husband was working for a three-month rotation as a medical student. There was a tribal (ādivāsi) Gond settlement (pārā) right across the street, where many of the “unskilled” hospital workers lived, that I knew would be fertile ground for fieldwork. But after a week of living on the compound, I had not yet been able to decide how to make my entry into this neighborhood. Then one afternoon I heard singing and ran out to the road, where there was a large procession of women accompanying a new bride on her first entry into the pārā; I joined in their procession.

A woman with the name of Rupi Bai tattooed on her forearm pulled me aside and began to give me a running commentary about what was happening, instructing me at the appropriate moment to give the bride at least a rupee as my part in the community’s gifting to her. This gifting tangibly identified me as an “honorary member” of the pārā I had just entered; there followed several other such ritual affirmations of my identity as fictive kin in the community. When I told Rupi Bai of my interests in Chhattisgarhi festivals and rituals, she begged me to return the next day, saying, “Why stay over there [the hospital compound]; this is where you’ll learn.” Thereafter, I spent many long hours sitting with Rupi Bai as she rolled her quota of hundreds of leaf cigarettes (bīṭī), was invited to their ritual celebrations, and was introduced to the life of a Gond community that in many ways typifies what inhabitants of Chhattisgarh identify as uniquely “theirs.” Rupi Bai has since moved to another settlement on the opposite side of town, and I lived with her for several days when I returned to Dhamtari in the summer of 1993; the pāṇḍvānī performance analyzed in Chapter 7 took place in her front courtyard.

Initially, I had deep reservations about beginning my fieldwork so close to “home,” in the rural area where my parents had worked for over thirty years. I feared that their identity as missionaries would have a dampening effect on my access to and relationships with Hindu villagers with whom I lived and whose performances I would be recording. In fact, this fear was an indication of how little I really “knew” about the villagers’ perceptions of boundaries of
religious and social identification and the implications of these from a Hindu point of view. My own religious background came up only when I was asked what was my caste (jāti, with the implications of what was I born / how did I live, rather than what did I believe). I realize that the implications of that jāti were not the same as they would have been had I been an Indian woman; I had a freedom of movement, access, and action that an Indian female colleague might not have been granted so readily. To what extent and how I should take advantage of this, to acknowledge the degree to which it was not always my decision, was a process of continual negotiation for me in fieldwork.

The primary effect of the proximity of Patharla to the village in which my parents lived and the fact that I was born and raised in India was that I entered the village with an identifiable context; I was readily accepted as a Chhattisgarhi “sister.” In numerous conversations during those early days in Patharla and surrounding villages, I found myself, quite naturally, explaining why I had come to live in a village. At first, I framed my responses by explaining that I hoped to teach about India in an American university and wanted to learn more about Hinduism and village life by actually living in a village, attending their festivals, listening to their songs, eating their vegetables, bathing in their rivers. After all, I frequently said, “What is the use/befit [kya phayda hai] of living in a bungalow?” This one comment, often drawing gales of laughter, seemed to be, finally, explanation enough. When I moved to the Raipur plains and I had already experienced acceptance as a Chhattisgarhi “sister,” I began to refer to Chhattisgarh in such “explanatory” conversations as my “mother’s place” (maikā), to which I had returned for a visit (and nurture) from my home of marriage (sasurāl), the United States. I was rarely asked to give further justification for my interest in recording Chhattisgarhi songs, stories, and ritual celebrations.

This insider/outsider dual status affected what I observed, the kinds of questions I felt I could ask, and the nature of the answers I received. It was

5 In Patharla (and in Chhattisgarhi society more generally), proper names are rarely used; in the village I was called, in Chhattisgarhi/Oriya conversation, the English term “sister.” Hindi terms for sister distinguish between older and younger sister; however, my actual age did not concur with cultural expectations for a woman that age. For example, the wife of the family with which I lived was, in 1980, twenty-four years old and the mother of four children; I was in my late twenties, married, but with no children. It would have been awkward under these circumstances for me to call her “younger sister” or for her to perceive me as her elder. The English term “sister” solved that problem; and even most village elders, who certainly perceived me as “daughter,” called me “sister.” In other villages and urban neighborhoods I visited, however, speakers did try to identify my age and use the appropriate fictive kinship term of daughter, older/younger sister, or father’s sister.

6 A common greeting in the village was, “What vegetable did you eat?” or “What is your vegetable today?”
often assumed by the villagers with whom I lived, audience members, and performers, that I knew more about their performance repertoire and its cultural contexts than I actually did, partly because of a certain intuitive cultural knowledge reflected in my body language, dress, and speech patterns; and this became more noticeable as I gradually picked up some of the basic “ways of talking” about performance. This assumption opened to me numerous situations that otherwise might have been closed to an “outsider”; it raised the complexity of many conversations since the speakers did not feel that they always had to “start from the beginning.” However, the expectation that I “knew” often kept me from asking certain elementary questions; I was reluctant to break the flow of conversation by asking something that the speaker may have thought should be obvious to me. I usually found the answers to these questions in other contexts or conversations, but some remained unanswered. I have since become much less hesitant as a fieldworker to admit what I do not know and to be more direct with my questioning.

A similar shift has occurred in another aspect of my fieldwork methods. I first went to the field with the ideal (gleaned in graduate school folklore classes) that I should tape performances only in their “natural” (that is, unelicited) performance contexts. During my first year in Chhattisgarh, I attended rituals, performances, and festivals that I heard about in my own or in neighboring villages, often quite literally following the call of a distant drumbeat; but I did not serve as the primary patron of and rarely elicited performances, with the exception of that of the kathānī kūhā of Chapter 4 (which was at the “insistence” of some of the villagers with whom I lived). As a result, my recordings from that year reflect a wide breadth of performance traditions and less “depth” in any given genre than I may have wanted (particularly since the performance of many genres are tied to the agricultural cycle and annual festivals). Nevertheless, this period of fieldwork was crucial to learn the general contours of the repertoire and Chhattisgarhi “ways of talking” about performance before I began to elicit more performances (outside their ritual or spontaneous contexts) and commentary about them on return visits to Chhattisgarh. I found that these latter contexts often provided more “space” for talk about the genre than their “natural”

7 I think of a specific example of this in my interactions with a Brahmin family in Raipur, whose son taught at the university and whose daughter was writing her Ph.D. dissertation. I had visited the family many times when the daughter told me that I was the first foreigner whose polluted cup her orthodox mother had not passed through the fire after it had been used. When I asked why, the elderly mother replied that it was because I became appropriately modest/“embarrassed” (tum ko ārth ānā ānā hai) when I spoke of my husband and did not use his given name in conversation.
contexts and helped to delineate significant categories of performance context. For example, it was only when I asked a woman to sing dālkhāī songs in a village courtyard that I learned that it was a genre that should not be sung inside the village but only outside its boundaries (where I had first recorded them during the dālkhāī festival). The analyses of individual performances in the chapters that follow are drawn primarily from those I recorded during that first year of fieldwork (with the exception of the pāṇḍvāṇī performance recorded in the summer of 1993 and discussed in Chapter 7), but much of what I learned about the genres through indigenous commentary is drawn from generative conversations around elicited performances and direct questioning that followed on return visits.

The field of folklore and performance studies, as well as ethnographic writing styles, has changed significantly in the fifteen years since I began this project; I, too, am a different fieldworker than I was when I began. Were I to begin another long-term project in Chhattisgarh, it would surely take a different shape. Knowing what I now do about the complexities of the repertoire and the differences manifest within performances of its genres over geographic distances in the Chhattisgarhi countryside, I would, however, perhaps not be so bold as to attempt a multigenre project and thus would lose a primary contribution of the present book.

My research in Chhattisgarh was supported by a Fulbright-Hays dissertation grant in 1980–1981 and the early stages of the writing by a University Fellowship from the University of Wisconsin. Two subsequent trips were supported by the University of Wisconsin Albert Markham Traveling Postdoctoral Fellowship (1985) and Emory University’s University Research Council Summer Grant (1993). I returned to Chhattisgarh numerous times in between to visit family and friends, and each journey gifted new performances, enlightening conversations, and friendships.

I was invited to participate in a conference on Indian oral epics in June 1982, sponsored by the Social Science Research Council, shortly after returning from my first lengthy research trip to Chhattisgarh. I thank my South Asian folklore colleagues who participated in that conference for their welcome to me as a new colleague in the field and the continuing encouragement and responses to my work that I have received from this expanding community over the years. I am particularly grateful to Peter Claus, Margaret Mills, Kirin Narayan, Laurie Sears, David Shulman, and Susan Wadley for their early and ongoing support. My advisor at the University of Wisconsin, Velcheru Narayana Rao, first introduced me to the world of South Asian folklore as a legitimate field of academic study; his contagious enthusiasm and love for this world are reflected in his continual search for creative approaches to its study. Without his energetic intellectual challenges and interactions, rare friendship, and unfailing support over the years, I might not have persevered.

In the final stages of writing this book, when the end goal was sometimes obscured by necessary details, I benefited greatly from the vision, encouragement, and enthusiasm of Gregory Nagy, editor of the Myth and Poetics series in which this volume appears. Bernhard Kendler, executive editor at Cornell University Press helped me contextualize the book within the broader field of academic publishing and make subsequent difficult decisions. Nancy Malone copyedited the manuscript with care, and I thank her for her close reading. Finally, Kay Scheuer, managing editor, patiently guided the manuscript into publication.

I am particularly grateful to Emory University for providing a subvention that made possible the publication of the two full-length translated performance texts in this book. Full translations of these kinds of “mid-length” performances in South Asia have not commonly been published. They broaden our horizons of types of narratives performed in India, as well as break gender stereotypes (both in length and content) of those men and women perform.

In Chhattisgarh, I was affiliated with Ravishankar University in Raipur in 1980–1981. I particularly thank Saroj Bajpai of the Department of Anthropology for his time and energy in helping me to establish contacts in the Raipur area and for accompanying me to several villages. Dr. and Mrs. H. S. Martin in Dhamtari first gave my husband and me accommodation on the hospital compound in 1981, but since then have always held open a door to their home and a seat at their table whenever I have returned to Dhamtari. In Phuljhar, Kamolini and Habil Nand, Ibrahim Nand, and Shradhavati Sona were wonderful friends and conversation partners in discussing the performance traditions and culture of Phuljhar. Campa Bai was a dear compan-
ion, a spark of energy, and the source of numerous songs, narratives, and commentaries.

My husband Mike Flueckiger and my children, Peter and Rachel, have been more than patient with my frequent trips back to India and the impact of my continuing relationship with India on our family, which makes us, as my daughter once said, "not quite like other families." I thank them for their love and growing understanding. Finally, my parents, Edward and Ramoth Burkhalter, first instilled in me a love and respect for India; they created a home in Chhattisgarh in which grew deep roots that continue to nurture unexpected flowerings. They provided unconditional support to me during my numerous sojourns in Chhattisgarh, from creatively listening, responding to equipment failures and the latest adventure or misadventure of fieldwork, to meeting numerous trains and buses as I made my way back home. I sorely miss their presence when I now return to my maikā. It is to them and the performers and audiences of Chhattisgarh, who so graciously shared their traditions with me, that I dedicate this book.

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