Soaking the Goddess,  
Celebrating Friendship  
Bhojalī

It is significant, perhaps, that the context for the first performance I taped for this study of Chhattisgarhi folklore was that of a festival honoring the deity Ganesh, remover of obstacles, who is worshiped before beginning any significant undertaking, journey, or public performance—an auspicious beginning for a neophyte fieldworker about to embark on what, at the time, loomed ahead as a rather intimidating journey. I returned home late that night with several hours of tape in hand but, as was repeatedly true to the nature of the years of fieldwork that were to follow, unaware, until months later, of the many obstacles that had been removed and the significance of other factors which that evening looked to be only annoying obstacles.

It was a late rainy season night in early September (the light half of the month of bhādon), and I was still looking for a village in Phuljhar in which to settle, when a friend came to my family's bungalow to call me out to hear some men singing in front of the temporarily installed Ganesh mūrti (image) in a nearby Chhattisgarhi-speaking village. He thought that they might know something about the Ramayana traditions in which I had stated my research interests to lie. I hesitated to go out in the night rain when, at this point early in my fieldwork, I had consciously decided that I did not want to elicit materials directly, seemingly out of context. However, I felt I should show my appreciation for the friend's interest and knew that I might need and want his cooperation in the months ahead (which I did, indeed), so I reluctantly followed him.

What we found was, as expected, a clay Ganesh mūrti sitting on the verandah of the home of one of the large landowners of the village in celebration of the festival ganēs caturthī, which honors the elephant-headed
Soaking the Goddess

Ganesh. With roots in the province of Maharashtra, this festival has spread all over north and central India and has been absorbed into the Chhattisgarhi festival cycle in many large villages and urban areas. Often neighborhoods or entire villages take up a collection to support the purchase of the Ganesh mūrti, which then sits out on a platform in public space for all to take darśan (auspicious sight) of, before it is immersed at the end of the week in the local tank. In this village, there were, as reported, a group of men sitting around the image, smoking bijī, talking, and singing bhajan. We talked with the men for a while and eventually, with the prodding of my friend, I rather uncomfortably asked them about the Ramayana traditions that might be performed in their village.

What had caught my attention and interest, however, was a row of small baskets filled with bright green seedlings lined up in front of and underneath the platform on which the god was seated. When I asked what these were, the men said they were bhojali, seedlings planted by young girls. The girls were said to worship the bhojali as the goddess as she grew for nine days and then, upon immersing the seedlings in the village tank, to form ritual friendships by exchanging the seedlings as prasād (sanctified offerings distributed to worshipers).

Before I could ask anything further, the village headman had called the girls who had planted the bhojali to sing the songs they had sung early in the evening to the goddess, this time for my tape recorder now set up near the bhojali baskets. They sat in pairs, the ritual friends, and took turns leading out in a verse, with the rest then joining in, frequently bursting out in embarrassed giggles. The men who had become their audience then suggested that they sing homo, another song genre sung by unmarried girls as a kind of repartee game. At the time, I was frustrated with losing control of the “research situation”; the call for the performance of song genres outside their “natural” context, elicited rather than “spontaneous” performance, went against all the “ideal” methods of folklore fieldwork methods with which I had come to Chhattisgarh.

Only much later, after I had heard bhojali gīt sung by married women, in a village nearly one hundred miles away from the above-mentioned Phuljhar village, did I realize that the call for the performance of homo was an indigenous Phuljhar contextualization of and commentary on bhojali; it positioned the two genres in an intertextual relationship of which I might not have otherwise been aware. This interpretive framing was indicative of a performance context quite different from that in which bhojali is performed in the Chhattisgarhi plains near Raipur. In Phuljhar, although bhojali is a ritual genre honoring the goddess and homo is a nonritual genre of “play,” they are categorized together within the broader folklore repertoire as “unmarried
girls’ traditions.” In Raipur, on the other hand, bhojalī is primarily spoken of as a goddess festival, associated with other goddess festivals, particularly those whose songs are sung by married women. The rest of this chapter looks at the ways in which placement within these categories affects both the performance of the genre and its interpretation.

The Genre Defined

The word bhojalī has several referents: a female festival, the accompanying verbal song tradition, the goddess worshiped and honored during the festival in her form as wheat seedlings, and the ritual friendship formed by exchanging the “cooled” seedlings at the end of the festival as prasād.1 The term makes no distinction between ritual and verbal tradition; the indigenous genre encompasses both. In both the central plains and the Phuljhar hills of Chhattisgarh, the festival centers around the planting of wheat or barley seeds in small shallow baskets, the sprouts of which are the goddess.2

The timing of the festival is somewhat flexible but should coincide with an auspicious day in the rainy season months of śrāvan (July-August) or bhādon (August-September), usually a festival day. In the Raipur area, it is common to plant the bhojalī on rākṣā bandhan, a festival celebrated on the full-moon day of the month of śrāvan. On this day, sisters tie tinsel-decorated threads (rākhlē) on the wrists of their brothers, thereby “binding” brothers to protect them.3 If bhojalī are planted on this day, they are immersed nine days

1 The immersion of a clay mūrti at the end of a festival (such as that of Ganesh at the end of ganēś caturthī), or in this case the seedlings, is called, literally, “to cool” (thāṅḍā karna). With this act, the deity leaves the form; the clay becomes only clay, the seedlings only seedlings, although they are considered to be auspicious/blessed because of the earlier presence of the deity (see Babb 1975:234–235).
2 See Gold 1988:198–199 for a description of a ritual in a Rajasthani village in which millet sprouts (called juvārā) are similarly planted as part of the framing rituals around pilgrimage. They are cared for by those left at home: “Those who remain at home feel that if the sprouts are flourishing through their steady care, so are their pilgrim kin” (199). The juvārā are also planted for the ritual in which the Ganga water that has been brought back from the pilgrimage is opened and distributed: “As a vivid sign of new life and growth, they certainly connote fertility” (199).
3 The association of rākṣā bandhan with bhojalī on the Raipur plains, an articulation of the importance of the sister-brother relationship, is reflected in the commentary provided by a female village elder that the bhojalī baskets must be lifted on and off of the girls’ heads by their brothers. A bhojalī verse recorded in this village asserts that only a brother, and no other male kin, can be trusted to fulfill this obligation:
later on the festival day celebrating the birth of the god Krishna, janmāṣṭamī, in the month of ṇhādon. In Phuljhār, bhojalī has recently been celebrated in conjunction with ganeś caturthī (the fourth day of the light half of ṇhādon).

Whatever the auspicious timing chosen by a particular village or neighborhood for planting the seeds, the bhojalī baskets are placed in a darkened space in a temple, around a temporary festival mūrtī, or in a household shrine. They are allowed to grow for nine days, during which time they are worshiped as the goddess, Bhojalī Dai (literally, “bhojalī mother”). One Phuljhār verse sequence identifies the goddess as Pili Bai, “Yellow Woman,” the seedlings having taken on a yellow-green color from being sprouted in a dark place. The reference may also be to the goddess as a bride who, like all Chhattisgarhi brides, has been annointed with turmeric and oil prior to her wedding day, leaving a golden yellow hue to her skin.

Every evening the festival participants gather together to sing bhojalī gīt and serve (sevā karnā) the goddess by soaking her, pouring water over her sprouts. On the last of the nine days, the seedling baskets are carried in procession on the heads of the participants to the village pond or tank to be immersed. After the bhojalī sprouts are “cooled,” and the soil washed off from their roots, they are distributed as prasād. Often this prasād is then exchanged between two participants to formalize a ritual friendship. Thereafter, the two friends will call each other “bhojalī” rather than by their given names or fictive kinship terms.4

This much of the performance “event” (or “reference” in Jakobsonian terms) is stable between the ritual as celebrated in Phuljhār and the Raipur plains. The festival context is the major frame giving definition to the verbal song genre, as indicated in its name. There are also thematic and formal features that identify the genre, elements that signal the introduction of this genre wherever it is sung in Chhattisgarh and elicit certain expectations from the participants and audiences of the performances. What we will see in the discussion that follows, however, is that the expectations these frames estab-

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4 The friends extend the bhojalī terminology to the immediate kin of their friends, that is, calling the friend’s mother and brother bhojalī mother, bhojalī brother, and so forth. See Jay 1973 for a fuller discussion of ritual friendships in Chhattisgarh.
lish differ considerably between performances in the central plains and on the Phuljhar boundaries of Chhattisgarh.

The most stable of the bhojali frames is the melodic line (rāg) of the bhojali gīt, one built around the repetition of a refrain after every verse. In South Asian folk song repertoires of a single community or region, the number of rāg is relatively limited. Specific rāg are associated with specific occasions, festivals, or rituals, so that, for example, the bhojali rāg is rarely sung outside this ritual context or the context of its friendships. When a rāg is employed outside its “traditional” context, its usage is marked; it is used to develop a particular mood or to provide performative commentary by placing the two genres/rāg in relationship. So the fact that bhojali verses are sometimes sung to the rāg of wedding songs (vīhā gīt) elicits an interpretive frame of marriage, whether or not there is direct reference to it (see Wadley 1989).

The number of verses that are or can be sung to a given rāg is unlimited; verses are simply joined one to another until the participants want to stop. Individual verses are not necessarily connected together as a bounded “song,” although there may be sequences of internal coherence between sets of verses. The identifying refrain of the bhojali rāg, introduced by the phrase “hā ho, devī gangā” (“Yes, the Goddess Ganga”) at the end of the last line of the verse, is:

Devi Ganga, Devi Ganga,
A wave as your horse,
With your waves,
Soak the eight limbs of the bhojali.

This is the only mention made of the Goddess Ganga in the sung verses; the sprouts themselves are worshiped as the goddess Bhojali Dai.5

The introductory verses with which most bhojali gīt performances begin are a second framing device. Although the formulaic patterning of these verses remains stable between the two geographic/cultural areas under consideration, the specific details inserted into the formula vary in significant ways. The verses identify the principal “props” needed for the ritual celebration: the basket, the mixture of cow dung and soil that fills it, and the bhojali seeds planted in the soil. A Phuljhar example is:

From where is the cow dung and soil?
From where is the basket?

5 Recall the association between ritually planted millet sprouts and the waters of the Ganga in pilgrimage rituals described by Gold (1988); see footnote 2 above.
From where is the basket?
From where is Pili Bai?
We’ve planted the *bho jalī*.

The cow dung and soil are from Raigarh.
The basket is from Candarpur.
The basket is from Candarpur.
Pili Bai is from Phuljhar.
We’ve planted the *bho jalī*.

From the Raipur plains, the following example:

From where is the cow dung and soil?
From where is the basket?
From where is the basket?
From where is the new *bho jalī*,
Whose water drops are pearls?

The cow dung and soil are from the potter’s house.
The basket from the weaver’s house.
The basket from the weaver’s house.
The new *bho jalī* is from the house of the king.
Whose water drops are pearls.

This Phuljhar example, like others recorded in the area, lays out a simple map, centering the festival in a specific geographic context. It first names the towns of Raigarh and Candarpur, which are inside Chhattisgarh but *outside* Phuljhar and even Raipur District, from where the cow dung and basket have been brought. But the most essential component of the ritual, the goddess herself, here called Pili Bai, is from Phuljhar. Thus the verse sequence provides a connection of Phuljhar to the rest of Chhattisgarh while at the same time maintaining its separate identity; notice that the song refers to the cultural subregion of Phuljhar as a whole rather than naming a specific town or village *within* Phuljhar.

The Raipur plains are located in the heartland of Chhattisgarh and are not part of a smaller cultural or geographic unit. Hence, the same concern for geographic identification and centering, to reinforce a separate identity, is not found in the verses sung there. In the Raipur verse sequencing, the mapping is social rather than geographic, from the potter’s and weaver’s houses to that of the king, from where the goddess herself comes. It is significant that in the Raipur plains, men (husbands/grooms, often called “kings” in Chhattisgarhi folklore), never the women, plant the *bho jalī* seeds
into the cow dung and soil, whereas in Phuljhar, the girls themselves plant the seeds. In Raipur, the seeds are associated with male reproductive power, suggested in the line referring to the water drops/pearls (semen) from the house of the king. The receptacle in which the seeds are planted, the earth/the basket, and the emerging sprouts are feminine.

Yet another formal feature characterizing the bhojali genre, but not unique to it, is the high occurrence of a question-answer format between verses, which has already been seen in the introductory verse sequences, as well as in repetitions of the sequences. The interactive form itself establishes a communicative channel between speakers, both in the fictive world of the text and in the performative world of the context; the give-and-take and repetition of verses between friends reinforce the relationships being formalized through the ritual. Two groups of women or girls sing back and forth to each other, one group leading out with a question verse, which is then repeated by the second group. The first group then responds with the answer, again repeated by the second group. A short example of the question-answer format, with all repetitions, follows. Elsewhere in the chapter, I have not provided the repetitions, which results, perhaps, in undue attention being paid to the semantic meaning of the text rather than its performatively constructed one (difficult to convey on the printed, silently read page, where repetition creates a totally different effect).

Group 1: Instruments are sounding, *dhamak dhamak*. From where are the instruments sounding? From where are these instruments?

Group 2: Instruments are sounding, *dhamak dhamak*. From where are the instruments sounding? From where are these instruments?

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Any infertility problem, however, is seen to lie with the woman; the “pearl” is rarely, if ever, faulted.

See Gold (1986) for a discussion of chorally represented conversations in Rajasthani women’s songs, the effect of which is quite different, given their content and context, than these bhojali question-answer verses. Gold observes: “The words of Rajasthani songs often contain dramatic conversations, but the drama of these exchanges [expressing misunderstanding and conflict] is blunted or understressed or covered up by a chorused performance in which separate voices are not voiced” (17–18).

See Tedlock 1983 and Fine 1984 for full-length discussions on the transformation of oral performances to the printed text.
Group 2:  Instruments are sounding, dhimak dhimak.
From where are the instruments sounding?
From where are these instruments?

Group 1:  The telin and kalārin are serving the bhojālī dāī.
From there the instruments are sounding.
From there the instruments.

Group 2:  The telin and kalārin are serving the bhojālī dāī.
From there the instruments are sounding.
From there the instruments.

Group 1:  The telin and kalārin are serving the bhojālī dāī.
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Group 2:  The telin and kalārin are serving the bhojālī dāī.
From there the instruments are sounding.
From there the instruments.

The singers of this verse sequence, performed in the Raipur plains, explained that bhojālī was originally celebrated by the Teli (oil presser) and Kalar (wine maker) castes and was only later adopted by other castes of the same level (telin and kalārin refer to the female members of these castes). Again, notice the importance of caste designation here on the Raipur plains, which is almost altogether absent in the verses I have recorded in Phuljhar.

Other than the rāg, refrain, and introductory framing verses, certain thematic concerns and images shared between the two geographic contexts also give consistency to the genre. Many verses describe the actual physical setting where the bhojālī seedlings are placed, the preparation of the site where they will sit, the planting and immersion of the seedlings, and descriptions of the actual worship of bhojālī dāī with the lighting of incense, the offering of water, and the performance of ārtī (flame offering at the end of pūjā):

Having plastered the floor and wall,9
Having plastered the corner,
Having plastered the corner,
We’ll gaze lovingly
At our bhojālī dāī.

9 These lines refer to the ritual purification of the site by plastering it with a mixture of cow dung and mud.
We went to the Acri bathing tank.
We made a bathing ghât.¹⁰
We made a bathing ghât.
Then at the side of the tank,
We immersed our bhojali.

Regional Variation in Performance and Interpretation

The festival and performative contexts (in which participants serve the goddess and formalize friendships), a series of identifying framing devices, and shared images in the song texts help us to identify bhojalî git as sung in the Raipur plains and in Phuljhar as a single genre. However, these similarities also mask essential differences in how the genre is understood and received by the participants themselves and others in their communities. That the village men sitting in front of the Ganesh mûrti in a Phuljhar village asked the bhojalî participants to sing homo suggests to us that here the genre is categorized with other genres performed by the social group of “unmarried girls” and that this designation within the broader repertoire will affect its interpretation. It makes a difference in the reception of the genre in Raipur that the participants are both married women and unmarried girls, who do not necessarily form ritual friendships with each other, and that goddess possession is central to the festival, whereas in Phuljhar, only unmarried girls who will formalize a friendship participate.

In conversations with villagers on the Raipur plains, bhojalî is identified first as a goddess festival and only then is distinguished from a paired goddess festival called javârâ as the one that is exclusive to women. It is significant that javârâ is observed solely in the Raipur area and not in Phuljhar. Javârâ is celebrated in villages and in urban neighborhoods during both the fall and the spring nàvrâtri (the two nine-night ritual periods of the goddess that fall in the months of caitra [March–April] and kunivar [September–October]), although it is preeminent during the spring period. I was told that the fall celebration is optional and occurs only if a particular family has vowed to sponsor such a ritual in fulfillment of a vow, whereas it must be celebrated in the spring, whether sponsored by a goddess temple or an individual family.¹¹

¹⁰ Ghât: special bathing site at the banks of a river or tank.
¹¹ When I observed javârâ in the spring of 1981, it was being sponsored by a family in celebration of the birth and survival for one year of a son, after two older sons in the family had died in infancy. Although the javârâ were kept in that family’s home and the family bore the financial burden of the goat to be sacrificed, the entire village (excepting the Brahmins)
The javārā ritual centers around the planting and service of wheat seedlings, worshiped as the goddess; and, as in bhojalī celebrations, the goddess frequently possesses her devotees, particularly during the procession in which she (the javārā seedlings) is taken to the village tank to be immersed and cooled. The javārā possession of the goddess’s male devotees is characterized by demonstrations of physical feats, such as piercing the tongue or cheek with a sharp metal rod. Fewer women than men become possessed during javārā, and those that do demonstrate the presence of the goddess through somewhat less dramatic gestures than do the men. An old widow repeatedly became possessed during the procession I witnessed, each time lying down in front of the women carrying the javārā to the tank, so that they would have to step over her. Water was then poured over her, the goddess riding her human “vehicle” again being drenched/soaked, and the woman would get up. By the time the procession of women carrying the javārā on their heads, preceded by musicians and male dancers who were possessed, reached the village tank, its banks were lined with men and women from a wide spectrum of village castes who had gathered to take this final darśan of the cooling of the goddess. Javārā participants include a wider social range than do those of bhojalī: men plant the seeds and serve the goddess with javārā gīt and watering, whereas women carry the javārā baskets to the village tank for immersion; both men and women may become possessed; and men, but not women, may form ritual friendships at the end of the festival by exchanging javārā prasād.

The structural similarities between javārā and bhojalī are obvious: the festivals’ duration of nine nights (although bhojalī is not celebrated during navrātri itself), the planting of seedlings, sevā to the goddess through song, and goddess possession. The primary differences between javārā and bhojalī lie in the season of year when they are celebrated, the aspect of the goddess that is highlighted, and the primary gender identification of participants made by the community. The community-wide javārā festival marks the beginning of the hot season, when the goddess becomes heated and likely to become overheated and manifest herself through disease (see Babb 1975: 128). Javārāgīt, sung by men, describe the potentially dangerous, ambivalent form of the goddess, under numerous names. The following is the translation of a javārā gīt recorded by Lawrence Babb in the city of Raipur:

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participated in the service of the goddess and the final procession to the village tank to cool her.

12 See Babb 1975:132–140 for a fuller description of the festival sequence and description of this possession.

13 This form of “de-possession” was different from that of the male devotees.
Oh Kali, killer of the demon, you carry many weapons in your hands; your eyes are red and you wear the bloody necklace of skulls.
Sixty-four yoginis, the horrible ones, dance to the sounds of a war-band.
Oh Mother, sit on your throne and tell us how the terrible sounds will come, as the clouds make noise at the time of the rainy season.
After hearing your voice Bakasur (a demon) and all (the demons) will run away.

(1975:135)

The heated form of the goddess is also reflected in the kinds of offerings made to her. Traditionally, the offering made to her on the last day of javārā is a goat sacrifice, although this practice is becoming less common, particularly in Chhattisgarh's towns. Even in the village in which I participated in javārā in 1981, the goat was sacrificed behind a straw screen, behind the house in which the javārā were being attended, with only two or three men as witnesses. I was specifically asked not to go back to try to see or photograph the sacrifice. The prasād of the sacrifice was then cooked by the sponsoring family and fed to the village participants.

The soaking of the goddess in the javārā context of the parched, barren hot season is in dramatic contrast to performing a similar sevā to her in the rainy season in which Bhojali Dai is already cool and the fields are filled with green rice paddy. Devi Ganga's soaking, the participants' sevā, brings her to fullness, splitting, fruition. The devotees sing of gazing at Bhojali Dai with love, with no mention of propitiating her anger. Although women also become possessed in the Raipur plains, no animal sacrifice occurs, and the entire festival is "cooler" than javārā.

Bhojali is distinguished, then, from javārā by the auspicious nature of the Bhojali Dai and its identification as a women's festival. These two factors put the tradition into relationship with the Chhattisgarhi gaurā festival that celebrates the marriage of Shiva and Parvati. Although both men and women participate in the gaurā festival on different levels, it, too, is often characterized as a women's festival, because only women sing gaurā git and primarily women become possessed by the goddess as they are singing these songs. The intimate association of the gaurā and bhojali genres as contexts one for the other was made explicit when during bhojali possession in a plains village, the nonpossessed festival participants began to sing gaurā git, whose words and rāg are clearly distinguishable from bhojali git.

In the Raipur area, both married women and unmarried girls participate in bhojali. Unmarried girls bring the soil from the fields to place in the baskets, and it is they who carry the seedlings nine days later to the tank to be
Bhojalī sprouts, the goddess, being carried to the village tank for immersion, Raipur plains.

immersed. Ritual friendships may be formed between participants through the exchange of bhdojalī, as they are in Phuljhar, but only between unmarried girls. Married women, on the other hand, are the primary participants in the singing of bhdojalī gīt and sevā to the goddess; they are also the participants who are possessed by the goddess. The presence of possession limits participation in the festival to ādīvāsī and low- to middle-level castes; high-caste women avoid situations in which there is goddess possession. As one Brahmin woman told me, “We know the goddess possesses when she’s called [that is, it’s not that we don’t believe], and we don’t want to be there in case she would come to one of us. You never know what you might do when you’re possessed.”

Perceived first as a goddess festival, it is this relationship with the goddess that is primary in the Raipur plains rather than the ritual friendships that are the focus of the tradition in Phuljhar. The goddess depends for her very life breath on the service given by the women during the festival through pūjā and bhdojalī gīt; the yellow-green seedlings literally depend on the water poured over them by the women for their survival. The women sing:
A fish without water,  
Grain without a breeze,  
Grain without a breeze,  
*Bhojalī* without service,  
Longs for breath.

The service given by the women is reciprocated by the goddess granting her favor through possession of some of the participants. Several women who regularly become possessed said that when they hear the *bhojalī* *git*, they are filled with devotion toward the goddess, become so full of her emotion (*bhāv*) that they can no longer bear (*sahanā*) it; then the goddess comes to them (*devī ham par āti hai*).\(^{14}\) The presence of goddess possession reinforces the primacy of the relationship between goddess and individual participant. Interestingly, though it is the *bhojalī* *git* that incite the possession (call the goddess), none of the songs themselves make mention of possession. And when participants became possessed in the village where I witnessed the performance of *bhojalī* *git* in the Raipur plains, as mentioned above, the other women switched song genres from *bhojalī* to *gaurā* *git*. This association suggests that possession may not be inherent to the *bhojalī* tradition per se but occurs in the Raipur plains because of the influence of other goddess traditions, such as *javārā* and *gaurā*, that do involve possession.

The goddess also grants her favor by granting fertility, both to the land and to the participating women. The growth of the seedlings is associated with the fertility of the paddy fields and other crops that have been planted in the rainy season. The verbal *bhojalī* song tradition makes explicit this association of goddess, *bhojalī*, and crops:

The corn is full of starch;  
The sugarcane is ready;  
The sugarcane is ready;  
Hurry, hurry and grow, oh *bhojalī*,  
That you, too, may ripen.

The *bhojalī* is not only the goddess and seedlings but also the girls who have formed ritual friendships by the exchange of *bhojalī*. Thus the verse can also be understood as a call for the ripening of the girls and, more generally, the female participants, to fruition/fertility.

\(^{14}\) Certain women are more susceptible than others to this possession. I was told that once a woman becomes possessed, she will thereafter usually become possessed whenever she hears a *devī* *git* (song to the goddess) associated with any of the goddess festivals in which possession takes place. This is why women say they are hesitant to sing these songs outside of their ritual context.
Another verse makes a similar metaphorical reference to the fertility of the fields and the female participants. The Bhojali Dai's (goddess, participant, seedling) sari and crown are likened to the ripening, golden paddy after the flood of monsoon rains.

The flood has come; the waste swept away.
The sari border of our bhojalī dāī is golden.
The flood has come; the small boats have floated away.
The crown of our bhojalī dāī is golden.

In still another verse, the participants ask directly for the blessing of fertility and, more specifically, for the blessing of a son.

We asked for milk; we asked for a son
And we asked for a blessing.
And we asked for a blessing.
Queen Kaushalya is standing there;
She gives her blessing.

In the Ramayana narrative, the queens of King Dasharath were infertile for many years. Finally, he performed a sacrifice, the prasād (blessings) of which his three queens partook, each then becoming pregnant. Queen Kaushalya was the oldest and gave birth to the hero Ram, an incarnation (avatār) of Vishnu; thus, her blessing is particularly powerful. However, the blessing of any married woman is considered to have some efficacy and it is a common custom in Chhattisgarh for such women to confer their blessings on newly married women.

It is perhaps the strong association with maternal fertility in the bhojalī ritual and verbal tradition in the Raipur plains that results in the association of the singing of bhojalī gīt with primarily married women. Unmarried girls may sing along, but they are included in the “married” category by virtue of their potential married status. Widows, no longer eligible for fertility, are excluded from direct participation, their presence considered to be inauspicious at any ritual occasion emphasizing a woman’s fertility (such as certain wedding rituals). Where fertility is a dominant theme in the songs and where, through possession, the goddess-participant relationship is primary, the ritual friendship associated with bhojalī is downplayed, and not all unmarried participants form such friendships.15

15 This follows the common pattern of formalizing friendships in Chhattisgarh, including Phuljhār. That is, the prasād of various rituals or festivals may be exchanged to formalize a friendship without the friendship being the focus of the ritual or mentioned in any of its verbal traditions.
The bhojalī tradition in Phuljhar has taken an interesting turn from what might be considered the “mainstream” Chhattisgarhi tradition. Here, bhojalī is always referred to in the context of ritual friendships between unmarried girls; I never heard it contextualized or associated with other goddess festivals. While the Oriya castes of Phuljhar may have little knowledge of the rituals of the festival, unless it is celebrated in their village, they all know about the friendship. They equate it with their own friendship tradition called mahāprasād.\[16\] The nature of the two kinds of friendship is, however, differentiated by the Chhattisgarhi castes living in Phuljhar. They specify that bhojalī is the friendship formed between unmarried girls; after marriage, women form mahāprasād. Further, adults say that bhojalī cannot be as serious and long-lasting as mahāprasād, because the girls move away from each other upon marriage and cannot fulfill the obligations of being a mahāprasād (these being ritual obligations similar to those of kin.)\[17\]

Not only is the primary emphasis of bhojalī on the formation of ritual friendships, but in Phuljhar, only unmarried, pubescent girls who are going to form a friendship participate. The girls whom I taped were between the ages of eleven and fifteen or sixteen from the Gond, Aghariya, and Saunra castes. The friends plant their bhojalī together in one basket, and the subsequent growth of the seedlings is associated with the strength and longevity of the friendship. The bhojalī seedlings are still worshiped as the goddess, but this aspect of the festival and the relationship between goddess and participant are secondary to the friendship between girls. This is confirmed by the absence of goddess possession and the association of the tradition with other girls’ traditions rather than other goddess traditions. The Phuljhar villagers with whom I spoke about the bhojalī goddess possession I had witnessed in the Raipur plains one hundred miles away were unaware, and slightly disbeliefing of, its existence.

The change in marital status of the participants and the emphasis on the relationship between the girls through friendship, rather than on a relationship with the goddess, is reflected in the thematic content of the bhojalī gīt. In

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16 Mahāprasād literally means “the great prasād” but generally refers to the prasād brought back from the Jagannath temple in Puri, Orissa. For purposes of forming mahāprasād friendships, however, the prasād of any major festival may be exchanged (rarely the prasād of private family rituals).

17 Even for married women, however, the ritual and social obligations of ritual friendships are not as demanding as they are of men. For example, I was told that if a male mahāprasād needs help harvesting his fields, his ritual friend is under obligation to help him, even if it means neglecting his own fields; male mahāprasād observe death rituals for their friends, participate as kin in marriage gifting, and so on. Women in the Oriya village where I lived usually formed mahāprasād on the basis of the number and sex of their children; these relationships were sometimes formed by verbal assent, without the actual ritual exchange of prasād.
comparison with the songs of the Raipur area, there is a noticeable lack of
direct reference to the fertility of either land or participants. It is natural for
the songs to reflect the immediate concerns of unmarried girls, particularly
when they are being sung among female peers between whom close friend­ships have been formed. At this point in a girl’s life, she is not yet supposed to
be sexually active, and her fertility is not the subject of open conversation; it
is inappropriate for a girl to speak directly even about her forthcoming
marriage, much less her childbearing potential, in front of her elders. Talk of
her marriage is all around her, however, and is of interest to her as well. This
concern finds expression in several verbal traditions of these pubescent girls
in Phuljhar, including bhojalī git.

First, think back to the reference to the Bhojali Dai as the “yellow
woman,” which I suggested may be a reference to the turmeric-bathed
bride. Another verse sequence explicitly identifies first the bhojalī and then
the singer herself as a bride, homologizing the goddess, participant, and
bride. The third verse of this sequence suggests the reluctance and apprehen­sion of a young bride going to her sasurāl (in-laws’ home) for the first time,
where the wedding palanquin will carry her.

Who mounts the elephant?
Who mounts the horse?
Who mounts the horse?
Who mounts the palanquin?
Who mounts the wedding litter?

The king mounts the elephant.
The chief minister mounts the horse.
The chief minister mounts the horse.
The queen mounts the palanquin.
The bhojalī mounts the wedding litter.

In which village is the young girl?
In which village is the engagement?
In which village is the engagement?
Only when the instruments begin to play,
Will I mount the wedding litter.

Other verses describe the actual wedding ceremony:

The tulsī platform,
A crown in the courtyard,
A crown in the courtyard,
Round and round the Brahmin circumambulates,
The wedding hour is auspicious.\textsuperscript{18}

According to the indigenous principles of genre categorization within the folklore repertoire, the fact that \textit{bhojali} is identified with and participation in the tradition is limited to unmarried girls places it in relationship with other genres whose performances are limited to unmarried girls. In this case, the Phuljhar girls who participate in \textit{bhojali} are from Chhattisgarhi-speaking castes. Oriya-speaking girls in Phuljhar have their own traditions, identified as “theirs,” in which the Chhattisgarhi girls do not participate directly (although these still serve indirectly as a broader context for \textit{bhojali}). But one in which they do participate, singing in Oriya instead of their mother tongue, Chhattisgarhi, is the verbal repartee game \textit{homo}.

In the play of \textit{homo}, two groups of girls (rarely just two individuals) try to “outsmart” each other by responding appropriately to the verse just sung by the opposite group. The context of the game and its themes are nonreligious, sung while the girls are working (the girls in the village where I recorded these \textit{homo} and \textit{bhojali} go out into the jungle to pick leaves for use in \textit{bīrī} making), walking to and from a bazaar, bathing in the village tank, and so forth. The girls sing of fleeting glances, flirtations, potential relationships between teenage girls and boys. And this is why the girls who were asked to sing \textit{bhojali} in front of the Ganesh \textit{mūrti} on that rainy night frequently burst out in giggles, finding themselves singing of these flirtatious relationships in front of elders who would not normally be the direct audience of these songs. On one occasion, when I had asked some girls to sing \textit{bhojali} \textit{gīt} for my tape recorder, out of context, they seemed stumped. Finally, an elderly woman began to sing out the verses, line by line, and the girls repeated. Interestingly, all these verses were descriptive of the ritual \textit{sevā} (service) to the goddess; there were no examples of these flirtatious verses. The following \textit{bhojali} verse sequences are illustrative of the \textit{homo} influence:

\begin{quote}
From where is the \textit{dāl} [lentils] and rice?
From where the brass bowl?
From where the brass bowl?
From where the unmarried boy,
Who wanders around in the afternoon?
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Tulsi} is a basil plant grown in the courtyards of most high- and middle-caste homes. The plant is a goddess and is worshiped daily by the women of the household, service that includes watering the plant. The “crown” refers to the headdress worn by both bride and groom, from which hang small strings of flowers and tinsel that veil their faces.
Narsinghpur’s dāl and rice;
Jagdishpur’s brass bowl;
Jagdishpur’s brass bowl;
Jarra’s unmarried boy,
Who wanders around in the afternoon.19

Who dams a river, my friend?
Who obeys their mother and father?
This is the age we do this, my friend.
This is the age we do this, my friend.

I gave a brass plate to the guest, my friend.
There was no watchman at the Nikunj dam.
I plucked and took the victory flower [jai phūl], my friend.
I plucked and took the victory flower, my friend.

I decorated the inside of the brass plate, my friend.
Boys these days are very fashionable.
I’ll take it and go to the river, my friend.
I’ll take it and go to the river, my friend.

I went out to the big fields, my friend.
I kept waiting in the biggest field.
I watched the road for you, my friend.
I watched the road for you, my friend.

I sowed the field with munīg lentils, my friend.
Seeing you, girl, I felt desire.
The munīg crop will be good, my friend.
The munīg crop will be good, my friend.

Another bhojālī verse suggests a sexual relationship between the singer and a male visitor through the imagery of the two of them sharing prasād:

\[ Jhan, jhan \text{ sounds the } mṛdāṅg, \]
\[ \text{The cymbals also sound.} \]
\[ \text{The cymbals also sound.} \]
\[ \text{There’s no master in our house;} \]
\[ \text{Come, take some prasād.} \]

19 Narsinghpur and Jagdishpur are the two villages closest to Jarra, the village where the songs were performed, all three within easy walking distance of each other.
20 Mṛdāṅg is a type of drum; jhan, jhan, its onomatopoetic representation.
Prasād may be any offering to a deity that is then distributed to the worshipers as a sanctified, blessed substance, but it is usually associated with food offerings. Preceded by the phrase “no master in our house,” however, prasād takes on the sexual connotation of “feeding” when it occurs between sexes, common in South Asian folk and literary sources.

The theme and imagery of fertility are not altogether absent in the Phuljhar bhojālī tradition. After all, the central symbol of fertility—the planting and growth of the soaked wheat seedlings—has been retained, although on a conscious level the girls may have given it a different significance, one that mirrors the life of their friendships. The refrain to the bhojālī rāg is also frequently retained:

Devī Ganga, Devī Ganga,
A wave as your horse,
With your waves,
Soak the eight limbs of the bhojālī.

The soaking of the bhojālī refers not only to the soaking of the goddess but also to that of the physical seeds, which ensures quick sprouting. With this soaking, the seeds become soft and swollen, readying to split and “give birth” to the new sprout. Contextually, the image extends to the goddess, the paddy, and the friends. The horse, on the other hand, has strong associations in South Asian verbal traditions with male virility. The wave, the horse upon which Devī Ganga rides, is suggestive of the rains, essential for the fertility of the earth and the bhojālī and to all female fertility and productivity.

In addition to the refrain, some of the verses sung by the unmarried girls in Phuljhar retain hints of the fertility theme; however, explicit references to the crops and fertility of the land are few. One verse sequence mentions the newly harvested rice and the fragrance it emits:

In a bamboo storage bin
They have filled rice.
They have filled rice.
The breeze of the bhojālī dāī
Brings sweet fragrance.

In a bamboo storage bin
A colorful braid for the bhojālī dāī.
A colorful braid for the bhojālī dāī.
Her forehead decorated,
We will sow the bhojālī dāī.
The lines of the first verse are identical to a verse recorded in the Raipur area, except for dialect differences. However, the second verse diffuses the focus on productive fertility of the land (the harvested rice) by referring to the Bhojali Dai’s colorful braid and decorated forehead, suggesting imagery of a bride rather than of a mother, with fertility being less explicitly articulated.

Another Phuljhar verse is similar to the one sung by the Raipur women in which Queen Kaushalya gives the blessing of a son. But here in Phuljhar, it is Kaushalya who is asking for a son, rather than the participants themselves asking, thus distancing the reference to fertility one step from the unmarried girls singing the song:

In the brass plate, a little rice;
In the brass jug, some milk.
In the brass jug, some milk.
Kaushalya is standing there
Asking for a son.

I was told that childless women in Phuljhar may plant *bhojali* in hopes of receiving the boon of fertility (and I have witnessed similar participation of married women in the *dālkha* Oriya festival tradition for unmarried girls in Phuljhar). In this case, however, their service to the goddess consists of *pūjā* (worship) only; they do not sing *bhojali gīt* along with the unmarried girls or participate in the ritual friendships. Performatively, their limited participation places them back in a gender category in which fertility has not yet been “tested” and the possibilities are still open.

We started this chapter with the observation that though *bhojali gīt* can be identified formally, thematically, and contextually as those songs that are sung at a particular festival in which seedlings are worshiped as the goddess, the genre is received very differently by the folklore communities in the Chhattisgarhi heartland (Raipur) and in its borderlands of Phuljhar. The shifts in perception and interpretation of the genre coincide with the differences in the social identity of the principal participants and thus, as the men in front of the Ganesh *mūrti* suggested, the other genres with which that participant identity puts *bhojali* into play. These shifts are summarized in Table 1.

The *bhojali* verbal tradition and the structuring of the relationships within the festival context reflect the concerns of the participants at their stage of the female life cycle. During puberty and before marriage, girls are most concerned with their relationships with their peers, as reflected in the primacy of ritual friendships in the *bhojali* tradition in Phuljhar. Ritual friendships formed at this age are based on “liking each other” rather than on some
Table 1. Chhattisgarhi *bhojāli gīt*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Raipur</th>
<th>Phuljhar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary festival relationship</td>
<td>married women with goddess: possession</td>
<td>unmarried girls with female peers: ritual friendships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related genres</td>
<td>goddess festivals: <em>javārā, gaurā</em></td>
<td>girls’ play games: <em>homo</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic emphasis of songs</td>
<td>fertility of land and participants</td>
<td>emerging sexuality and forthcoming marriages of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life-cycle emphasis</td>
<td>motherhood</td>
<td>puberty and marriage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

external circumstance such as number of children (as they often are for married women); and in Phuljhar there is a specially named friendship reserved for this age. The verbal tradition that the girls share provides an indication of their interest in relationships with their male peers, an interest that is not appropriate to voice publicly in front of anyone but their female peers. In these *bhojāli gīt* and other associated verbal genres that the girls perform, such as *homo*, they express interest in their emerging sexuality and marriage but are not directly concerned with their fertility and childbearing potential.

In contrast, the primary participants of the Chhattisgarhi heartland are married women or potentially married women (that is, unmarried girls); widows are excluded. The category of unmarried girls is distinguished only for the purpose of identifying who will carry the baskets on their heads in procession; but they sing along with the married women as members of that social group, whose central concern has become fertility and the birth of sons. Providing service to the goddess *bhojāli dāī* and strengthening their relationship with her is one way for married women to ensure this fertility; the goddess herself affirms the relationship by possessing her devotees.

Aesthetic and Social Organization

Roger Abrahams suggests in “The Complex Relations of Simple Forms” that a community’s aesthetic and social organization often mirror each other (1976:196), another way of saying that indigenous genres are themselves social constructions. The significant social categories suggested by participation in the *bhojāli* tradition is, in the Raipur plains, widow-nonwidow (that is, married and potentially married), whereas in Phuljhar the nonwidow category is differentiated further into pubescent girls and married women.
The Phuljhar aesthetic organization, where unmarried girls have their “own” culturally recognized and articulated verbal and ritual traditions, suggests that this life-cycle stage is performatively acknowledged; pubescence is a marked social category in this cultural area. That this phenomenon on the Phuljhar borders of Chhattisgarh has developed under Oriya influence is suggested by the absence of such verbal, performative traditions exclusive to unmarried girls in the Chhattisgarh heartland, while the others available in Phuljhar are specifically Oriya: homo, kārtik bathing, and the dālkhāī festival examined in the next chapter. Although none of these traditions is specifically a female initiation ritual, that pubescence is a marked category aligns Orissa (and Phuljhar) more closely with the south, where female puberty rites are celebrated, rather than the north, where they are not (suggesting again the usefulness of the southwest-northeast analytic cultural axis in India). In the Gangetic plains of the north and much of central India, no specific rituals mark a girl’s coming-of-age. Doranne Jacobson describes a young girl’s experience of first menstruation in a Madhya Pradesh village west of Chhattisgarh:

Munni had heard older girls whispering about “māhīnā,” something that happened to a woman every month. She had an idea what it was, but still she was not prepared for its happening to her. One day she found a spot on her clothes. She knew it was something embarrassing and tried to hide it, but her cousin’s wife noticed it and took her aside. . . . Bhābhī also told Munni never to touch a man or even a woman during her period . . . because a menstruating woman is considered “dirty” until she takes a full bath five days after the start of her period. . . . Munni never discussed menstruation with her mother, and no men of the family learned of the event. But Munni’s bhābhī quietly told Rambai [her mother], “Your little girl has begun to bathe.” (1977:40)

Lawrence Babb reports that when he asked a Chhattisgarhi Brahmin pandit about the absence of puberty rites in the Raipur plains, the pandit replied

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21 Kārtik (October–November) is an especially auspicious month in the Chhattisgarhi-Phuljhar calendar, coinciding with the harvest of the rice paddy. During this month, Oriya-caste pubescent girls rise before dawn and go to the banks of the village tank or riverside to bathe ritually, bringing back to their homes brass loṭā (small water vessels) of water to pour over the tulsī plant in their courtyards. Older women accompany them to teach them the rituals and songs, and by the end of the month, younger wives may join them, again usually nonfertile women. The participation of the latter is optional, whereas that of the girls is “mandatory”; thus, it is a “girls’ ritual.”

22 That unmarried girls’ games and song traditions are not named as part of the folklore repertoire in the plains of Chhattisgarh does not necessarily mean that they do not have such traditions but that they are not acknowledged as culturally significant so as to be included in the repertoire articulated by the larger folklore community.
that to celebrate a girl’s puberty “would be illogical because ‘in old times she would no longer belong to her father’s house,’ ” referring to the earlier custom of child marriage and still current higher-caste marriage patterns of village and clan exogamy and hypergamy (1975:80).23

The absence or existence of female puberty rituals and pubescence as a marked category is related to these marriage patterns. In the south, where the ideal marriage partner is one’s cross cousin, a girl’s fertility remains of value to her natal family because her offspring are ideal marriage partners for her brother’s children; a daughter, then, can increase the prosperity of her father and brother (Wadley 1980:162). It is in this cultural area that elaborate, “public” puberty rituals are observed among many castes. Holly Baker Reynolds describes these in great detail for Tamil Hindus: “Pubescence is seen as leading teleologically to cumankali [married woman and mother] status. . . . While it may seem “natural” for females to marry, cumankali-s are not born, they are made, and the process begins with the rites attendant upon first menstruation” (1980:40).

In Chhattisgarh, although marriage patterns do not follow those of southern cross-cousin marriages, the lower castes do not strictly adhere to village exogamy. Further, bride-price also exists among some ādivāsi castes, rather than dowry, because of tribal influences as well as, perhaps, these women’s participation in the agricultural work force. While it is simplistic to draw a causal relationship between marriage patterns, women’s economic roles (and perhaps even women’s status, more generally), and the existence of puberty rituals or pubescence as a marked social category, there does seem to be some correlation suggested in the repertoire of Chhattisgarhi folklore.

The differential performance of bhojali git in the Chhattisgarhi heartland and on the Phuljhar periphery marks the category of pubescent girls as distinct from that of married women and gives voice to their particular interests. The final goal of the overwhelming majority of Chhattisgarhi women, however, is to be married and become mothers; and the fertility emphasis of the bhojali tradition of the plains, in the very form of the bhojali seedlings and their ritual watering, if not always in the verbal tradition, undergirds and informs the Phuljhar tradition of unmarried girls.

23 The upanayana sacred thread ceremony for boys of the twice-born castes is the closest equivalent to a male initiation ceremony, through which the boy traditionally entered the “student stage” of religious instruction under a guru. This ritual is not observed by ādivāsi and low-caste males, however; and these days, even for upper-caste males, the ceremony is often an attenuated one immediately preceding marriage rituals, not one marking male puberty (Knipe 1991:24). In both Phuljhar and the Chhattisgarhi plains, the publicly articulated repertoire of “Chhattisgarhi folklore” does not include any genres that are exclusive to unmarried boys. They participate in festival and ritual traditions along with married men, much as unmarried girls do in the Raipur plains.
The *bhojali* tradition is not an initiatory ritual of transformation per se; rather, its songs and friendships provide pubescent girls an imaginative space for expression of that stage of their lives, even while suggesting what lies ahead. The *dālkhāi* festival and verbal tradition of Phuljhar, analyzed in the next chapter, may traditionally have approximated more closely an initiation ritual for its pubescent participants, a transformation of girls into potential brides. A narrative told to me by an old widow as the “story of *dālkhāi*,” however, suggests this particular initiatory tradition challenges the dominant ideology of what it means to be a Hindu bride, that the transformation is also one of pubescent girl to adventurous, brave, and wise ruler.