5. Joining Verse to Verse: Professional Storytelling and Individual Creativity: Kathni Kuha

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Joining Verse to Verse: Professional Storytelling and Individual Creativity

*Kathānī Kūhā*

In the next three chapters, we shift from consideration of genres for which a ritual context is inherent to their interpretive framing (even though the verbal tradition may also be performed outside that context) to a series of narrative genres that may be performed independently from a particular ritual or festival (although their performances may also be included as part of festival and ritual celebrations): the traditions of *kathānī kūhā*, *candainī*, and *paṇḍvānī*. All three narrative genres are performed in similar contexts, as “entertainment” events (*manoranjan*), supported by villagewide monetary collections, or at weddings and birth celebrations, when the particular households involved patronize the performers. The terms *candainī* and *paṇḍvānī* refer to a particular “story line” or plot, and the genres are limited to those particular narratives. *Kathānī kūhā*, on the other hand, is an Oriya term that literally means “teller of stories,” used to identify the performer himself rather than the narrative he performs. His repertoire is theoretically unbounded, drawing from folktales, puranas,¹ and other religious narrative traditions. In this chapter I examine one kind of space that the folklore repertoire gives for such individual creativity within a system that identifies genres with particular communities, how such an individual establishes au-

¹ The puranas are a body of Sanskrit and regional-language religious texts that record, literally, the “old stories” of ancient days; they are a principal source of Hindu mythology. See Doniger 1993 for discussions of their flexibility and transformations in shifting contexts and the Dimmitt and Van Buitenan (1978) reader of portions of the major Sanskrit puranas in translation. The puranas are encyclopedic in nature, and thus it is fairly safe to attribute particular religious or etiological narratives to a puranic source.
authority to perform professionally (in a public context), and how the storyteller carefully creates community through performance.

Kathāni kühā is a term used in the Phuljhar borderlands of Chhattisgarh and western Orissa for a loosely defined class of professional storytellers whose performances are not ritually prescribed and whose style and repertoire are idiosyncratic. They differ from other individual professional performers, such as the Oriya bähak or Chhattisgarhi candainī singer, whose performances are associated in indigenous commentary with particular caste or regional communities, in that they do not claim to be part of a larger ongoing “tradition” passed on from teacher to student (gurū to celā) or to be the bearers of the “story of a particular community.” In this way, the kathāni kühā is similar to the individual storyteller of folktales in a domestic context who picks up his/her repertoire informally from a wide variety of sources. What is significant is the existence of a specific indigenous term that distinguishes these individual performers when they are professionals performing in a public context; it is this identification, then, that places the kathāni kühā in the repertoire of public folklore in Chhattisgarh. If we understand indigenous classification and terminology to be forms of metafolklore (Ben-Amos 1976:226), then the term itself suggests that our analytic focus be on style, since this is what distinguishes the kathāni kühā from others who may tell folktales from a similar repertoire—we ask what difference it makes to the shape of their performance that these stories are told by a professional.

Parmeshvara: “Singing with a Sweet Voice”

After I had lived in the Phuljhar village Patharla for several months and villagers and friends began to understand my interest in Chhattisgarhi stories and customs (“what we observe/celebrate here in our Chhattisgarh”), several people made reference to a particular individual, Parmeshvara, whose stories (kathā) they felt I should record. They made it clear, however, that I would have to call him to the village if I wanted to hear him, since he performed at irregular intervals. It was another case of reluctance on my part to initiate (in this case, patronize) a performance outside its “natural” context, which at that time I rather naively interpreted to be those performances that I just “happened upon”—another case, in retrospect, of indigenous shaping of what I have ultimately included in this study. So it was, primarily to honor the individuals who had made the suggestion and to thank the village for its hospitality, that I eventually made contact with the singer Parmeshvara and set up a performance in Patharla on a cold November night
in 1980. I attended another of his performances in the village of Sirco, close to his natal village, nearly a year later; the translation of the full verbal text of this later performance is provided in the Texts, and the specific performative analyses that follow here are based on this Sirco performance.

Parmeshvara was a fifty-year-old Christian man who at that time was the only known *kathānī kūhā* performing in Phuljhar. He told me that when he first began performing as a young man, there were two other *kathānī kūhā* in the area but that both had died within the last ten years. Parmeshvara distinguished himself from these two performers by saying that they had had gurus but that he had learned his skill independently.² Further, he said, although there were several young boys in his village who imitated him, they were not serious about learning, and he was not teaching his skill to anyone. Neither of his sons had shown any interest in following in their father’s steps: one was a high school teacher, and the other was studying in a Christian seminary. Parmeshvara was pleased that they were receiving an education and was hopeful that they would have a more secure life than he did. He did not seem concerned that he had no disciples or that the *kathānī kūhā* performance genre may be a dying art form in Phuljhar unless new performers immigrate from Orissa.³

Parmeshvara told me that he began telling stories in the style of a *kathānī kūhā* when he was twelve or thirteen years of age. He looks back to one particular experience as his beginning. A traveling cloth merchant from Orissa had stopped overnight in his village, and the villagers asked the merchant what he could do that would entertain them. The merchant said that he was a *kathānī kūhā* and proceeded to perform for the villagers throughout the night. The next day, as he was feeding his younger brother, Parmeshvara began to imitate the traveling merchant, telling his brother segments of the stories he could remember. His parents and neighbors overheard him and were surprised at his “sweet voice” (*priya vacan*); they encouraged him to continue learning and performing. He gradually built up a repertoire and began to perform professionally at the age of sixteen or eighteen.

Nonliterate when he began performing, Parmeshvara said he taught himself to read so that he could enlarge his repertoire by reading the Oriya puranas, the major source, according to him, of his narratives. The two

² Remember that the semiprofessional performer of the Song of Subanbali in Chapter 3 was just as vehement about the fact that she had not learned from anyone; in her case, she attributed her skills to the vision (*darśān*) given to her by the goddess Parvati.

³ I did not travel widely in western Orissa and thus was unable to document any *kathānī kūhā* performances over the border from Phuljhar; hence I am unable to verify that there are, in fact, more *kathānī kūhā* in Orissa than in Phuljhar, as many of Parmeshvara’s audience members asserted.
performances I recorded, however, were not “religious” in a puranic style. Parmeshvara had no puranic texts with him in his home, nor could he name specific texts that he had read. It is more likely that the singer calls on the puranas to give authority to an individualistic performance style; when he actually does use puranic narratives, it is more likely that he has heard these narratives in an oral context in which they were attributed to a certain purana rather than having read them himself. Parmeshvara admitted to adding “additional materials” to the puranic stories to make them more entertaining. Nevertheless, he continued, “They are not useless/superfluous [phāltā] songs; they’re from the puranas, but I have added a lot to give them more flavor [mazā karāne ke liye, literally, to make them more delicious, that is, more entertaining]."

Performing as a kathānī kūhā has been Parmeshvara’s principal source of income throughout his adult life. It is not a high-paying profession, and full performances are not sponsored frequently enough to support a family totally. Between performances, Parmeshvara walks or cycles from village to village singing in front of people’s houses and asking for alms. These songs are usually devotional in nature, drawing from Ramayana or other religious and mythical themes. With this supplemental income, Parmeshvara said he earned more than did a primary schoolteacher in his village.

Recently, Parmeshvara had run into a new problem. His oldest son attending seminary had asked him not to perform professionally, because it did not seem a fitting profession for a Christian. The Christians I spoke with in Phuljhar were themselves divided in their opinions on such a profession for a member of their community. Most educated Christians considered it to be a specifically Hindu tradition and, therefore, inappropriate for a Christian to perform. Most nonliterate Christians, however, saw it as only one more way to make a living, and they themselves attended and enjoyed his performances. Parmeshvara said he had given in to his son’s requests and had not performed professionally as a kathānī kūhā for three years, although I heard reports to the contrary. He had, however, continued to sing and ask for alms as an itinerant performer. Parmeshvara provides a metacommentary in one of his performances (found in the Texts) about the ambivalence with which such itinerant performers are often received, when the hero of the story takes

Although Parmeshvara was never specific about his income, I was told by other villagers that he received, in 1980, approximately five kilograms of rice per performance as well as a small amount of cash and food for the day of the performance itself.

I also met a Christian bāhak, a singer/dancer who performs at each of the “thirteen Oriya festivals.” There was more criticism by members of the Christian community of his participation in a Hindu tradition because it was specifically linked to religious ritual and festival.
on the disguise of such a “beggar” in his effort to gain access to the princess and sings:

    Even reciting the name of Ram,
    People in this country abuse you.
    They insult you.
    If I sing and beg,
    Will I get any alms?
    Will I see the queen?

When I met him, Parmeshvara said he had become impatient with his son’s requests, since his sons could not yet support him. After all, he continued, singing was the only skill he knew, and “no one gives rice to someone for nothing.” If he could not do that, he had no income. When I asked if he would be willing to perform in Patharla, he was more than willing.

**Keying Professional Performance**

The term *kathānī kūhā* is not used for just any storyteller but rather specifically identifies a professional (paid) storyteller. As a professional, he may draw on tales told in domestic, private contexts; but the ways these tales are received, the expectations the announcement of a *kathānī kūhā* performance raises, differ because of the singer’s professional status. As I suggested above, that the folklore community has designated the teller with a unique term suggests that the focus of the communicative event will be on him and his performative style rather than on the narrative itself. The audience will have higher expectations of his performative abilities than they do, for example, of a grandmother telling the same tale in her kitchen. His professional status creates a greater critical distance between the audience and performer than is present with non- or semiprofessionals, many of whom are one among equals in the settings in which they perform and whose audiences are tolerant of a broad range of abilities.

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6 I use the term “keying” as used by Erving Goffman (1974) and Richard Bauman as “the process by which frames are invoked and shifted,” “explicit or implicit messages which carry instructions on how to interpret other message(s) being communicated” (Bauman 1977:15).

7 This is not to imply that non- and semiprofessional storytellers performing in a private context are not held accountable for their style; there are certainly levels of proficiency and artistry in nonprofessional performance as well. But the level to which these performers are held is lower, and the communicative frame does not focus on the *telling* as much as on the *story*. As we saw in Chapter 3, the semiprofessional storyteller Kaushalya Bai herself distinguished between performed and reported narrative; but she was well known in the village more for her *knowledge* than for her performative style.
Parmeshvara is self-conscious of his professional status and its influence on his performances. He himself told me that his skill does not rest in the knowledge of the narratives, for many of them are well known to his audiences; rather it is his delivery style that differentiates him from nonprofessional storytellers. He feels god (bhagvān) has given him a special measure of strength that is not available to the general public. He gave an example of what happens when people try to tell stories without this strength: they often cannot remember what to say next, and while they are trying to think of the next word or sentence, they have to fill in with, “Ahhh...” He was proud that he never had to do this, since he “knew how to tell stories.”

The morning after his Patharla performance, several male villagers came to the house where Parmeshvara had spent the night and asked him if he would sing something more for them, wanting to know “what else he could do.” He was reluctant and told them they surely did not understand the strength and energy it took to perform all night; he was too tired to sing so soon after a three- to four-hour performance like that. He made the analogy to a woman’s difficulty in labor and childbirth, which only another woman who has given birth can understand. In the end, however, he acquiesced and sang several Ramayana-related songs of the type he sings when asking for alms.

The physical location of the performance is one of the first factors to key a professional performance in Chhattisgarh. The site for a kathānī kuḥā performance is generally a publicly accessible location rather than a private courtyard or verandah. The Patharla performance I attended took place on a raised earthen platform built under a large tree on the main street of the village, in front of the village headman’s house. This was the site of other villagewide rituals and performances, such as the rāmīlā (dramatic presentation of the Ramayana) and performances of the male bhajan maṇḍalī (devotional singing group). Thus, even physically, the performance of the kathānī kuḥā is in relationship with other publicly performed folklore genres of the village. Parmeshvara’s audience consisted of men, women, and children from all castes of the village. The men who were the most vocal in the audience and sitting closest to the performer were from the dominant Kolta caste in whose neighborhood the performance took place. Many women sat in the audience; others watched the performance from their doorways or verandas. This was the first time a kathānī kuḥā had ever performed in Patharla in the memory of the audience members, and they were spellbound. There was not as much coming and going as is usually common in public performances because the audience did not know quite what to expect and was not familiar with the ways in which the kathānī kuḥā developed his storyline.

The second performance I attended was held on a clearing between two
neighb orhoods at the edge of a village. For this reason, the audience was smaller than that of the first performance, with many fewer women present because of the physical distance of the site from their homes. This village was only a few miles from Parmeshvara’s home village, and the audience was well acquainted with him and his performance genre. They interacted with him more freely and easily than did the first audience. They were also freer in coming and going throughout the evening, many audience members remaining for only part of the performance. Parmeshvara, too, seemed more at ease with this audience than with the one to whom the genre of kathāni kūhā was “new.” However, it is characteristic of a professional that he will, and often does, perform in front of unknown audiences whose “goodwill” he has to create and sustain.  

The professional status of Parmeshvara’s performance is marked by the presence of the opening frame of a vandanā, or invocation. The presence of a vandanā in Kaushalya Bai’s performance (Chapter 3) marked it as a semi-professional genre; the expansion and elaboration of the vandanā in the kathāni kūhā’s performance similarly sets up even higher expectations of performance than that of Kaushalya Bai. Her vandanā was short, almost perfunctory, and led right into narrative, using the same rāg (melodic structure); it simply marked the beginning of the performance and asked the blessings of the deities upon it.

The longer and more elaborate vandanā of the kathāni kūhā serves these purposes and more. Parmeshvara’s vandanā literally “announced” the performance and called the audience to gather. Before he sang the vandanā of the second performance, only a few audience members were seated in the clearing. The performance had not been planned very far in advance, and many villagers were alerted to it only when they heard the vandanā; its length gave them time to gather. Parmeshvara’s performance style incorporated both song and spoken conversation and prose; that the vandanā followed this style and rāg, accompanied by the performer’s dance, gave the audience a preview of the performer’s style and ability. During a break of several minutes between the vandanā and performance of the narrative itself, audience members and Parmeshvara talked with each other conversationally, and the performer smoked a bīṭī.

The content of the vandanā reflects Parmeshvara’s awareness of his performance abilities and his willingness to take responsibility for the quality of that performance (see Bauman 1977:9–12). After praising the name of Ram and

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8 See Flueckiger 1988 for analysis of a failed performance of candainā, in which the singer was unable to create and sustain such goodwill and most of the audience walked away within the first hour of performance.
singing of the benefits of its recitation (finally, even protection from death), Parmeshvara sets himself up as a professional by associating his voice with the proverbial beauty and sweetness of that of the koyal bird (Indian cuckoo). In Indian folklore and traditional literature, the koyal carries associations of the season of love; its voice brings pain to separated lovers. But here, the koyal is also the guardian of song (the thirty-two rāg). Parmeshvara asks the koyal to endow him with the quality of its voice:

The koyal bird, the koyal has thirty-two rāg.
Give me part of your voice, oh koyal,
Give me part of your voice.

In invoking the deities, Parmeshvara not only asks for their blessing but also specifically asks them to assist him in the skill of performance:

I salute Sarasvati.
I salute Samlai.
Give me a verse;
Show me the way.

I salute Sarla;
I salute Mangla.
Play in my throat;
Open my throat.

If Sarla is here, she will play in my throat;
She will play in my heart.

Lord Narayan [Vishnu], I take refuge at your feet.
Listen to my one request,
That my throat may be strong.
Lord Narayan, I take refuge at your feet.

Take me across this ocean of mundane existence.9
I am singing, joining verse to verse.
Hari [Vishnu], listen to my one plea.

On the surface, these lines suggest that if, in fact, the performance is successful, it will be because of the assistance of the deities. The expression of a deity

9 The implication of this phrase is that the performance itself may be a bridge across this ocean.
“playing” in a person is used in conversational and ritual contexts to refer to the possession of that person by a deity. To use the expression in this setting suggests the goddess herself will find voice in the throat of the performer, who has no control over the quality of that voice. Such a verbal abdication of responsibility for the success or failure of the performance is a conventional strategy in South Asian professional performances; it is, in fact, an indication that the performer submits the performance to audience evaluation.

A similar convention for accepting such responsibility is for performers to make open disclaimers regarding their abilities and to apologize to the audience for any mistakes they may make in the performance that is to follow. Parmeshvara follows this convention in his vandanā:

The black pepper tree is black.
The black pepper tree is black.
Look at my ignorance,
That of a child.
. . . . . . .
I have neither wisdom nor knowledge; I am foolish.
I have neither wisdom nor knowledge; I am foolish.
So I fall at your feet.
I fall at your feet.

Once an audience-performer dichotomy has been established in a folklore genre, in contrast to group performances such as the suā nāc or bhojālī, the performer necessarily subjects himself or herself to some kind of evaluation by the audience. However, a continuum exists in the nature of the relationship between the audience and performer, which roughly corresponds to the status of the performer from nonprofessional to semiprofessional to professional. A child telling her friends a short folktale stands on one end of the continuum, and a professional such as Parmeshvara, at the other end, with a semiprofessional such as Kaushalya Bai situated in between. Parmeshvara’s vandanā, as well as comments he made outside of performance, make clear that, as a professional, he has accepted responsibility for his stylistic presentation, for the quality of his voice, and for his ability to “join verse to verse.”

An important stylistic feature helping to give definition to the kathānī kūhā as a professional genre is the combination of mediums or channels

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10 This is not a unique South Asian phenomenon; such disclaimers as framing devices that actually claim artistry and ability are common in numerous traditions cross-culturally (Bau­man 1977:21–22).
employed by the performer: spoken narrative, song, and dance. Such a combination is characteristic of many professionally performed narrative genres throughout India. In Chhattisgarh, it helps to differentiate the kathānī kīhā from nonprofessional storytellers, and even from the semi-professional and professional singers of the candainī epic, and the combination of mediums aligns the genre more closely with such dramatic forms as the rāmāśā and the nācā, or “dance-drama.” Semiprofessionals such as Kau-shalya Bai and the traditional performers of the candainī epic employ only the single medium of song.

Variation between spoken narrative, song, and dance establishes the rhythm of the kathānī kīhā’s performance and provides an important means through which the performer can vary the texture of his narrative. Dance occurs only during the songs. His dance is a simple raising and lowering of his heels while standing in a relatively stationary position and snapping his fingers. He wears ankle bells, which serve as a percussion instrument, but utilizes no other instrument. The kathānī kīhā’s periodic use of song has the effect of slowing the pace of the performance, both through drawing out individual words over several notes and by increasing the amount of repetition. The song and dance unique to the performance style of the kathānī kīhā was key to helping to draw audience members to his performances. But in the Sirco performance, as the evening progressed and the hour became late, members of the audience seemed to become impatient with the pace, fearful that they may not hear the narrative to its end. At one point, they even asked Parmeshvara how much longer he would take before finishing the story. The performer then began to sing fewer songs and speeded up his spoken prose style by eliminating some of the repetitions.

The kathānī kīhā’s songs are not memorized, discrete units, nor do they occur at regular intervals. The performer may introduce a song at any time in the narrative and vary its length according to his sense of the performance’s timing and rhythm. The basic rāg and meter of each song are similar, and the kathānī kīhā is skilled in fitting any part of the narrative into verse form. The songs are not purely lyrical, as they are in numerous other dramatic genres; rather, here they often present new narrative action that is not necessarily repeated again in the prose preceding or following the song.

The first song of Parmeshvara’s narrative, in which the carpenter and goldsmith meet each other, is an example of the way in which song advances narrative, but at a pace slower than spoken prose. The song begins with the carpenter asking the goldsmith where he is from.

11 Susan Wadley (1989) characterizes this use of multiple mediums as one of the distinctive features of South Asian oral epics.
“From which place have you come?
From which place have you come?
You’ve gotten off at the station, brother.
Where are you going?
Introduce yourself, bābū,
Introduce yourself.”

“I’ve come from the east.
I’m going to the west.
I’ve learned a skill, brother;
I’m getting its full worth.
I’m going from place to place.
I’m using my skill.
And you, from which direction have you come?
Why are you asking me?
To which place will you go?
To which city will you go?”

“I have no mother; I have no home village.
I have no father; I have no place to go.
Where should I go, brother?
Where should I go?
I’ve learned a skill.
I’m going from place to place.
I’m taking contracts, brother.
I’m taking contracts.”

While the songs do not occur at predictable intervals, they do mark most major events, a useful narrative device in a performance of this length. In the frame story, one would be able to follow the basic narrative through the songs alone; songs in the main narrative are less frequent. In the frame story, a song portrays each of the following incidents:

The introduction between the carpenter and goldsmith;
The fight that ensues between them and the goldsmith running to the king for protection;
The carpenter finding a sandalwood tree on his way home;
The goldsmith making a golden image of the king to present to him as bribe, so that he will decide in favor of the goldsmith;
The carpenter's wife attempt to allay his anxiety;
The carpenter explaining the source of his anxiety by reporting the meeting with the goldsmith and their fight;
The carpenter making the sandalwood horse for the king;  
Acceptance by the king of the golden image;  
The carpenter flying on the horse to the king’s court and the king’s  
acceptance of the horse  
The king’s son flying off on the horse;  
The lament of the prince’s mother over what she thinks is his certain  
death.

Only two of these, the song in which the carpenter’s wife tries to allay his  
anxiety and the lament of the queen mother, are lyrical verses that do not  
advance the action of the narrative; both are sung by female characters.

Another performance medium available to a professional, rarely employed by nonprofessional storytellers, is the use of props. Parmeshvara uses only a kerosene lantern and a cane basket, simple but effective props. In both performances I witnessed, he requested that a lantern be brought from a home near the performance site, as well as a large basket used to carry grain. In the first village, there was some resistance on the part of the homeowner to bringing out his lantern, possibly because of the high cost of the kerosene that would be used up through the evening. But Parmeshvara refused to begin his performance without it.

The lantern was utilized in two ways. First, it was a tangible performance marker indicating that the performance had begun and was in progress. While Parmeshvara was waiting for the audience to gather, the lantern was set down on the ground. Before he began the vandanā, he placed it on top of the overturned basket. During the break between the vandanā and beginning of the narrative, while he was going around taking up a collection from the audience later in the performance, and again at the end of the performance, he placed the lantern on the ground.

The lantern was also periodically used as if it were a deity or another person on stage. During the vandanā, Parmeshvara sang to the lantern as the particular deity being addressed. Often in dialogues, he took the part of one character and addressed the lantern as if it were the other character, gesturing to it as one would in a conversation with another person. During the argument between the goldsmith and carpenter, Parmeshvara gesticulated angrily toward the lantern and all but kicked it over when the carpenter pushed over the goldsmith. In other dialogues, Parmeshvara addressed the dialogue directly to the audience instead of the lantern. The alternation between the two styles provided still another means of establishing performance rhythm and variation.

The mediums employed by a performer directly affect the relationship with his or her audience and the distance established between them. In a
genre that is totally sung, such as that of Subanbali, the audience is distanced from the performer by the very nature of the song medium. It is difficult for audience members to participate verbally in such a genre without breaking the performance mode and rhythm. This is also true of the sung portions of the *kathānī kūhā*’s performance. The audience never verbally responded or interacted with Parmeshvara during a song. Spoken prose narrative, however, more easily enables verbal interaction between audience and performer. The high degree of such audience participation and interaction characterizes the genre of *kathānī kūhā*, differentiating it from sung or spoken nonprofessional storytelling. Parmeshvara’s professional skill and confidence permitted such interaction without letting the performance be carried away or totally disrupted by the audience; Parmeshvara always remained in control. One way in which he did this was to elicit specific responses from the audience by asking questions. Questions and answers are not uniformly distributed through the performance but occur at unevenly spaced intervals. These sections of interaction alternate with relatively long sections of prose narrative and song during which the audience’s response is limited to nonverbal expression or responses of assent. In this way, the question-answer sequences are still another medium available to the performer, along with song, dance, and straight spoken narrative, providing variation in the performance.

Many bardic and professional performers in India perform with the help of a *celā* (disciple) or other accompanist (in Chhattisgarh, frequently called *rāgi*, or one who keeps the *rāg*). In the traditional performance genre of the *candainī* epic, the *rāgi* repeat the last word or two of every line sung by the primary singer and add the word *mor* or *tor*. Their repetitions are constant throughout the performance as a refrain, without much variation. The Oriya *bāhak* performs with a *celā* who accompanies the singer/dancer specifically to learn the performance skill, to eventually become a *bāhak* himself. The *celā* answers questions posed by the *bāhak*, repeats certain of his or her sung lines, or responds with short exclamations. A semiprofessional Gond female storyteller brought to her performances a female friend who played the role of the audience by responding appropriately and giving the performer encouragement. This singer directed her narrative to this companion, and the rest of the audience overheard the performance. Parmeshvara had no such *celā* or companion; instead, he depended on the audience to fill this role, one that he carefully controlled.

Parmeshvara’s questions to his audience were of two kinds: rhetorical questions for which he waited for an answer and questions that demanded a slightly more expanded response. To try to ensure that his audience’s participation was appropriate, he usually limited his questions to those for
which there could be only one answer. Generally, only members of the audience sitting closest to the performer verbalized the response, with other audience members concurring or repeating it. Parmeshvara again repeated the correct response before proceeding with the narrative. On only a few occasions did the audience give an incorrect answer, such as misidentifying a particular character, or give an answer that was not what the performer had in mind, although it may have been “correct.” In these cases, Parmeshvara simply gave the answer he had been looking for before continuing, as if it were the answer given by the audience. Examples of these variations in question and response are found in the opening lines of the frame story (P. and A. are abbreviations for Parmeshvara and audience, respectively).

P. There was a bus station. . . . People get off at that station, and what else do they do?
A. They go here and there.
P. They also get on. Right? They do both. They get off and they get on. . . . And, at that station, what happened to the two buses?
A. They were standing there.
P. They were standing there. Yes, they were standing there. . . . The buses were standing there, and then the people from one bus got off and the people from the other bus also got off. Right?
A. Right.
P. Or didn’t they get off?
A. They got off.
P. OK. The people from both buses got off. . . .

On a few occasions, the audience interjected an unsolicited response or question, without being prompted by Parmeshvara or having been asked a specific question; but Parmeshvara was able to integrate their responses without a break in his performance rhythm. An example is when the carpenter is talking about giving the sandalwood horse to the king as a bribe.

P. “Whatever happens, at least I’ve got one more chance,” he said. “I remembered god and got one more chance. If I take this and put it in the king’s courtyard, then in my favor, the king will—”
A. “Settle the case.”
P. “The king will settle the case in my favor.”

Infrequently audience members interrupted if they did not understand what was happening in the narrative or who was speaking in a particular dialogue. When the audience became impatient near the end of the performance,
its interruption was more aggressive and put pressure on the performer to hurry and complete the narrative. Even here, Parmeshvara did not lose control. He was describing the marriage of the prince and princess:

P. [The princess’s father says to the prince,) “You’ve been given this wealth, the kingdom, and my daughter. Look, I’ve handed them over to you. I’ve given them to you.” And he joined their hands there.
A. OK. Now the prince is married. What’s happening to his mother and father back in their kingdom?
P. OK. What time is it?
A. It’s twelve o’clock. Will he go back or not?
P. He’ll go back.
A. Then tell the rest quickly.
P. I’ll tell it quickly.
A. Take him back to his own kingdom.
P. OK. Then, when the king had handed over the kingdom, the prince said . . .

Eliciting verbal audience response is one way the *kathānī kūhā* incorporates the immediate performance setting into his text. When subjected to this stylistic technique, it is difficult for audience members to remain passive, uninvolved listeners. In the Patharla performance, Parmeshvara elicited their participation even further. During a scene in which wedding guests were giving the bride and groom gifts, Parmeshvara gave his audience the part of those guests. He left the center of the stage and held out a cloth to the audience members, soliciting small monetary gifts from them. Without interfering with the rhythm and continuity of the performance, for a brief period, text and context became one.

While audiences of the *kathānī kūhā* have specific expectations of his delivery style and skills, those familiar with the genre have fewer expectations of what the *content* of his narratives should or should not be. Because his performances stand as independent entertainment events, unassociated with a specific ritual or festival, the *kathānī kūhā* has a freedom not available to most other professional performers in the thematic construction of his texts. Narratives told as an integral part of a ritual or festival celebration must be “true,” such as *vrat kathā* (stories told during particular religious fasts); many of these recount either the origins of the festival or ritual or the efficacies of celebrating it. Similarly, while not a *vrat kathā* per se, Kaushalya Bai believed the Song of Subanbali to be the “true” story of *dālkhārī*; and her etiological narratives were believed to be “historical.” In such settings, narratives of
fantasy that the audience does not believe to have actually happened are inappropriate.

Even those narratives performed by a professional or semiprofessional in a public context "for entertainment" are generally expected to be "true." Evidence of this expectation held by the folklore community can be found in Parmeshvara’s performance in front of the Patharla audience unfamiliar with his performance genre. After the vandanā, the audience asked him what kind of stories he told and then requested that he perform a segment from the Ramayana or Mahabharata. Although he asserts that stories from the epics are part of his repertoire, Parmeshvara responded by saying that he would tell a story from a purana instead. That he attributed his narrative to such an authoritative, “true” source satisfied his audience. To place his own repertoire within the flexible boundaries of the puranic repertoire legitimizes them as worthy of public performance. After the Patharla performance, I asked several audience members whether they believed the story that had just been performed had actually happened. Most of them responded negatively, but they did not seem to be disappointed or to feel betrayed. It seems that once Parmeshvara had caught their imaginations in the web of his performance, their initial expectations for a “true” story were suspended.

The secular context of the kathānī kūhā’s performance and the fact that nothing in the definition of the genre itself limits the thematic content create at least the possibility for the performance of fantastic tales, narratives drawing images from outside everyday existence, the historical past, or the religious tradition of the audience. In Western folklore categories, narratives of this kind fall into the category of folktale or, more specifically, märchen, “tales moving in an unreal world without definite locality or definite characters and . . . filled with the marvelous” (Thompson 1946:8). In India, these folktales are generally told in a private setting by nonprofessionals. The kathānī kūhā brings such tales into the public domain. The folktale does not, however, remain unchanged in this new context. It undergoes several kinds of transformations as it moves from a privately told tale into one that is publicly performed by a professional.

The Domestic Tale in Public Performance

One of the first ways in which Parmeshvara’s public performance transforms the folktale is to place it within a specific social setting and geographic locality, by framing the narrative in the geographic landscape in which the audience lives. In the second performance I recorded, in the village of Sirco, Parmeshvara begins with a scene in which two travelers, a carpenter and a
goldsmith, meet at a bus stand and introduce themselves. They begin to argue and take their argument to the local king to arbitrate. The king tells the two men to come back to his court in two weeks. During that time, they each make a gift with which to bribe the king. This frame story reflects the everyday world of the audience: descriptions of the bus stand, a marital argument between the carpenter and his wife, collection of wild fruit from the jungle, the wedding season during which gold ornaments are made, and the effort to bribe an official to decide in one’s favor. The narrative up to this point could be a report of what had happened to one of the performer’s friends. But the carpenter’s gift to the king, a sandalwood horse, has the special power of flight. The king’s son sits on the horse, admiring its beauty, and it flies up into the sky toward a “foreign land.” With the prince, the audience is carried out of the localized frame story into a world of fantasy, away from mundane existence.

Parmeshvara situates the frame story not only within a familiar social/cultural context but, by using local place names, also within the immediate geographic setting of Phuljhar. Folktales told in a private context by non-professionals are rarely so geographically situated; if place names are used, generally they are of distant places such as Delhi. Most of the folktales I heard in domestic settings began with an announcement of the major characters, such as “There once was an old man and an old woman,” with no geographic setting. A. K. Ramanujan has made a similar observation about the difference between what he calls “domestic tales” and publicly performed tales in Kannada oral tradition (1986:44). The folktale element is retained in the most fantastic segments of Parmeshvara’s narrative, which take place in an unidentified distant land; the kingdom to which the prince flies is unnamed.

The first specific geographic reference in Parmeshvara’s narrative is to the “Oriya country,” from which the carpenter has come. The goldsmith says only that he is from the west (which would actually be the heartland of Chhattisgarh in this case), giving no further details. Not only does the reference to the Oriya country locate the narrative in the same geographic setting in which the performance is taking place, but it also causes the audience to identify more closely with the carpenter rather than the goldsmith, because he is from their home country (the language of performance being Oriya). Later in the performance, when the carpenter is returning from the court of King Manicandra to his village, he decides to save money by walking home instead of taking the bus. He says he will take a shortcut through the jungle rather than take the road that passes through Basna, a

12 Great landowning zamīndār who had nearly total control over those who worked their lands and lived in their villages were often called “kings” (rājā or mahārājā).
town only seven miles from the village in which the performance was given. Although the carpenter's village is not named, nor is the place of King Manicandra's court, the audience knows they are located near Basna.

The third place-name reference comes near the end of the performance, within the major narrative, when the prince is returning with the princess from the foreign land to his father's kingdom. They descend from the sky on the flying horse for the princess to give birth to their son. The prince goes to a nearby village to get some help for his wife and is there seduced by a prostitute, who causes him to forget his wife and baby. Parmeshvara specifies that they descend near the village of Sirco, in which he is performing. He is carefully bringing the narrative back home, to a familiar geographic setting. Eventually, the prince, princess, and their son are reunited after many years and return to the court of King Manicandra.

It is possible to construct a rough map from the information given to us by the performer. The frame within which the narrative begins and ends is situated within the geographic and social setting in which the performance itself takes place. The village in which the prince is seduced is on the border between the known Oriya country and the unknown foreign kingdom to which he has flown. Depending on where the kathāṇī kūhā performs this narrative or a similar one, the place names and shape of the map would surely change.

As a professional storyteller, Parmeshvara incorporates (even exploits) the immediate performance context into his performance in ways that non-professional tellers of tales rarely do. His control of and creativity in the text-building process, "joining verse to verse" (tale to tale), as well as his particular performance style of alternating between song and spoken prose, permits the flexibility necessary to be able to do this. At one point in the frame story, Parmeshvara depends on a unique element of performance setting on that particular night (my presence in the audience) to support the carpenter's argument on the nature of truth and to engage the audience actively in that argument: "Trees and plants give fruit only because of truth; and because of truth, the seven oceans don't overflow their shores. If the ocean were a liar, then this American couldn't come and sit here. Could she sit here? If the ocean were a liar? How could she cross it? Right? If people came out of the ocean, how could you cross the ocean? That's why I'm saying, the trees give fruit and the seven oceans don't overflow their shores because of truth."

By deliberately setting the beginning of his narrative in a familiar geographic locality and moving into one unknown, Parmeshvara is manipulating his audience's expectations. If they have come expecting a "true" story, the opening frame story begins to prepare its members for the flight into fantasy, first by leaving some of the places unnamed, particularly King Mani-
candra’s court. Second, Parmeshvara subtly manipulates his audience into acceptance of this fantasy by choosing artisans as the main characters for the frame story. Artisans, like storytellers, are creators of new realities out of raw products: a lump of gold is crafted into a king’s image, and a sandalwood tree is carved into a magnificent flying horse. On receiving the golden image, the king calls the goldsmith “the creator of the world.” Similarly, he addresses the carpenter as “god” when he sees the horse. The frame story prepares the audience for a creation of fantasy, as well as for the transposition of a folktale into public performance.

The kathāṅi kūhā further transforms the folktales he uses as building blocks for his narrative by developing the major characters beyond the stereotypes typical of the folktale. One technique that begins this transformation is Parmeshvara’s use of personal names for some of the major characters. Traditional folktales, which frequently open with a formulaic phrase such as “There was once a king and queen,” rarely use personal names. In contrast, a publicly performed genre, such as the epic, names its characters, even minor ones. Ramanujan points out that this usage of names in publicly performed tales but not in such private genres as the folktale parallels the absence of the usage of names in traditional households and their usage in public and formal settings outside the home (such as in school and work situations) (1986:50).13

The kathāṅi kūhā’s use of names in his public performance stands between these two poles. The carpenter and goldsmith are identified by their caste professionally (as such artisans often are in village everyday speech), but royal characters in the main narrative, such as King Manicandra, the prince and the princess, and the queen who raises the exchanged baby as her son, are named. The two women’s names, Mohini and Mayavati, mean “she who tempts or charms” and “she who creates illusion,” respectively, names that contribute both to the grounding of the characters as well as to the narrative’s sense of fantasy.

More significantly, Parmeshvara develops stereotypical folktale characters by developing small action sequences that reveal their personalities. Rather than simply stating (through the words of the carpenter’s wife) that the carpenter is unnecessarily argumentative, we are shown his nature through an argument that unfolds between the carpenter and goldsmith, as well as in the conversation between the carpenter and his wife in which she recounts other times when he has argued unreasonably. From these scenes, the audience receives a clear picture of what kind of man he is, the strength and patience of his wife, and the relationship that has developed between them.

13 Ramanujan identifies a similar convention in ancient classical Tamil cairikam poetry in which personal names are not employed in the akam (interior) poetry but may be used in the puram (exterior) poetry (1986:51).
Parmeshvara also takes advantage of stereotypes and builds upon them. The goldsmith fits the stereotype of one who is cunning and greedy, an artisan who cheats his customers by adding impurities to his gold. The stereotype is given life through descriptions of several interactions between the goldsmith and his customers. Common human emotions are depicted in such a way as to raise characters above stereotypes. The queen mother pampers her only son by personally feeding him his breakfast. Another queen mother reveals her emotions as she talks to herself on her way to find out if her unmarried daughter is really pregnant: "If she'd had only two or three companions, my daughter would have been ruined even more. She had twelve and twelve, twenty-four companions, and even she's been ruined. Look how bad she looks! Her hair is loose. At least she could braid her hair!"

The high level of dialogue in the *kathāni kūhā*'s performance further develops character and also differentiates his narrative style from that of the privately performed folktale. The simple folktale may include short dialogues, but they are most often attenuated; and many of the dialogues are reported rather than reproduced. Parmeshvara, on the other hand, performs most of the dialogue in a realistic style full of local idioms; it is as if the dialogues are being spoken by the characters and overheard by the audience in their own village. An example of this realism is found in the scene in which the old flowerseller is telling her friend about the princess who has refused to move from her bed since she went to the bathing tank several days before. The flowerseller makes her friend promise she will not tell anyone what she is about to hear. The friend answers: "Why would I tell anyone? Why would I tell anyone? I'm the mother of three children, living and dead. Have you ever heard, seen, or known me to tell? Why would I tell anyone?"

The flowerseller tells her, speaking loudly: "Oh daughter, blooming flowers give a good smell. [In a whisper] I'm telling you; you're my daughter. For this reason, don't say anything. But, the daughter of the king went to bathe. Who knows if a water snake bit her, or a black bug bit her, or whom she saw at the ghāṭ. She came back from there and is sleeping. She isn't eating or getting up, or sitting up or bathing. [Normal, loud voice again] Blooming flowers surely give a good smell. Don't tell anyone."

Joining Tale to Tale

Finally, in the *kathāni kūhā* performance, discrete folktales told singly in a domestic context are interwoven with other tales or tale types into a single unified narrative. This technique, along with expanded scene descriptions, characterizations, and dialogues, enables the professional performer to fulfill
the folklore community’s expectation that a public performance will last several hours. The *kathānī kūhā* “joins” the tales so that the action of one provides motivation for the action in another. At least three separate folktales can be identified in the three-hour performance under consideration: (1) the story of the carpenter who makes a flying horse, which carries off a prince or king to a foreign kingdom; (2) the story of a prince who disguises himself as a woman to gain entrance to the palace to form a liaison with the princess; and (3) the tale of the exchange of a dead and a live baby, the latter falling in love with his true mother when he grows up. Although I have not heard these discrete tales in Chhattisgarhi domestic performances, two of them are available in this form in Verrier Elwin’s *Folk-tales of Mahakoshal* (1944). (Mahakoshal is the eastern half of the old Central Provinces, which includes Chhattisgarh and a few districts immediately west of Chhattisgarh.) In combination, the tales undergo several transformations. I will depend on the published versions of the discrete tales to analyze the kinds of transformations made when they are put in combination with one another by the *kathānī kūhā*.

Parmeshvara begins his narrative with the story of the carpenter building a flying horse (called “The Clever Carpenters” by Elwin [1944:121–123]). His first adjustment to the tale is to make a more dramatic division between the two parts of the narrative: the section of the carpenter building the horse and that in which the flying horse carries the king or prince to a foreign land. In the published variant, both parts of the narrative take place in kingdoms far from Chhattisgarh and in the remote past. Parmeshvara separates the two sections by contemporizing and localizing the first part about the carpenter, leaving the second part in a foreign kingdom. The section in which the prince flies to the foreign kingdom thus seems more unified with the succeeding folktale segments, which also take place in that foreign kingdom.

In Elwin’s variant, the carpenters sell their goods to the king, the king is pleased with them, and the carpenters do not come back into the narrative; in contrast, the carpenter/goldsmith narrative frames Parmeshvara’s performance at both the beginning and the end. The king to whom the goldsmith and the carpenter present their bribes imprisons the two artisans when the prince flies off on the horse. They are to remain in prison until the prince returns or be killed if he does not return. Although the carpenter and the goldsmith are not directly mentioned again until the very end of the performance, the audience does not forget about them languishing in jail, and the knowledge of their condition provides a certain tension to the narrative. When the audience began to get restless as the hour was getting late, they reminded Parmeshvara to tell them what had happened back in the kingdom of King Manicandra. The very last sentences of the performance rather abruptly return to the initial frame and conclude it. The prince and the
princess return to the prince’s kingdom with their son and are united with the old king and queen. The audience then asks, “Did they let the thieves go or not?” Parmeshvara answers, “They let them go.”

Parmeshvara further elaborates the story of the carpenter by providing a more interesting motivation for making the flying horse than is given in the Elwin variant. In the latter, the carpenters are young boys whose father has died; they are poor and simply making goods for the king to earn some money. Parmeshvara introduces the character of the goldsmith and the ensuing argument between the two artisans. In this variant, the horse is made as a gift for the king in order to bribe him into deciding the argument in favor of the carpenter. Parmeshvara expands the second part of the carpenter story by fitting in two more tale types and more narrative motifs. These additions further complicate and motivate the actions of “The Clever Carpenters.” In the privately told tale, the meeting between the two lovers (the king of Delhi and the foreign queen) is quite simple and straightforward, without obstacles: “The Delhi king was thirsty and went to the queen and said, ‘Give me water.’ She said, ‘Come inside.’ . . . When he had drunk some water he lay down and went to sleep. The queen felt a sin in her mind and she went to the Delhi king” (Elwin 1944:121–123).

Parmeshvara’s performance of this scene presents a more complicated situation in which there are two meetings between the prince and princess, the first one aborted by fear. This meeting takes place in the princess’s dwelling next to her bathing tank. Parmeshvara elaborates with a “Three Bears” motif. The prince enters the dwelling without knowing to whom it belongs. He leaves signs of his presence on each of the three stories of the dwelling. The princess finally finds the prince sleeping in her bed on the fourth story. However, when she tries to wake him up with an iron rod, not wanting to touch him directly and thus seem too forward, the prince fears she is about to strike him with the rod and flees. But love between the two has been established. The subsequent separation adds tension to the publicly performed tale.

To bring about the second meeting between the prince and the princess, Parmeshvara introduces the second major tale type, which Elwin has called “The Two Friends” (1944:335–337). In the independently performed tale collected by Elwin, a prince and a princess first meet at a banyan tree outside the town in which the princess lives. The prince goes into the town with a friend to look for the princess, and the two friends take up residence with a flowerseller who makes garlands for the palace. The prince sends a garland to the princess, who recognizes that it has been made by a different hand. She asks the flowerseller who made it and is told that the old woman’s daughter made it. The princess asks the flowerseller to send her daughter to the palace
to live with her for a few days. Hence, the prince, in the guise of the daughter, gains access to the princess. After several days, however, he wants to return to the flowerseller's house to see his friend. The princess fears that he will not return and devises a plan to kill the friend. She sends some poisoned sweets for the prince to give to his friend, warning him not to eat them himself. But the two friends eat the sweets together, and both of them die, thus ending the tale.

In the kathāṁ kūhā variant of this tale type, the circumstances of the first meeting between the prince and princess, described above, themselves become an elaborate frame story. In both variants, the second meeting is brought about by the uniquely made garland; but here Parmeshvara again elaborates the Elwin variant by adding the uniquely Chhattisgarhi and Oriya motif of the mahāprasād friendship. The princess not only wants to meet the daughter but also to form mahāprasād with her. Parmeshvara, like Kaushalya Bai did in her narrative, relies on the audience's familiarity with this social institution and its obligations to comment on the relationship (see Chapter 3). The flowerseller verbalizes what the audience will have already noticed, that the ritual exchange is unequal. The princess washes the feet of the flowerseller's "daughter" and prostrates herself before her, but the "daughter" (the prince in disguise) does not reciprocate. The flowerseller confronts the princess with the imbalance of the ritual:

I, too, have seated [mahāprasād].
I've seen others seat it.
There's an equal giving and taking.
What kind of mahāprasād have you seated,
In which only you have prostrated?"
And to the prince she says,

"I, too, have seated friendships and have seen those of others. And people feed each other, give drinks to each other, and prostrate before each other. Why is my daughter standing there like a tree? Only the princess has done the necessary ritual.

The dilemma is, of course, the disguise. In the "real" world, a man would never wash the feet of a woman and prostrate himself before her, but neither would they form mahāprasād friendships with each other that would require this mutual submission. The prince is using his female disguise only to gain access to his love; he himself is not transformed by that disguise and is unwilling to play the role of a woman to the point that he will prostrate
before another woman. Parmeshvara's performance of this scene, with its elaboration and transformation through the addition of the complications of this local mahāprasaṅga tradition, greatly delighted his audience.

In Parmeshvara's variant, the prince does not have a male companion, and so he has no motivation to leave the palace. He lives there long enough for the princess to become five-months pregnant. Her pregnancy provides motivation for the third major tale type, that of the exchanged babies, to be woven to the larger narrative. It is also the pregnancy that causes the queen mother to suspect that there is a "thief" in the palace. In "The Clever Carpenters," the palace intruder is exposed by a report given by the barber's wife; in "The Two Friends," he is never exposed, for he dies first from the poisoned sweets. Parmeshvara expands the episode of the palace intruder by introducing the motif of an ingenious trap that a woman devises when the king's wise men have failed to locate him. The minister's daughter-in-law suggests a plan, one dependent on her knowledge of human nature. She gives the princess some sandal paste in which she mixes gold powder. She knows that the princess will rub the paste on her lover and that, as it dries and begins to glitter and cause him to itch, he will have to wash it off. She instructs the minister to post men at every water source in the town, and the prince is subsequently caught.

Once the prince is caught, the narrative line returns to that of "The Clever Carpenters." In both tale variants, the palace intruder—in one the king and in the other the prince—requests permission to climb up a tree to get one last breath of fresh air before he is executed. He has kept his magical horse in the tree and escapes by flying away on it. Again, the kathāni kūhā elaborates on the simpler folktale. The king of "The Clever Carpenters" stops to pick up the queen, and the two escape together. The executioners in Parmeshvara's variant feign the prince's execution by showing the king an animal's liver said to be that of the prince. The princess, however, does not believe her lover is dead. She insists that every man in the kingdom be called together in one place so that she can identify the prince. He does not come out of hiding on the first summons but is later found in the flowerseller's house. This motif of the search is repeated in the third tale type of the exchanged babies, when there is a similar search for the prince and he is finally found in the prostitute's home. The repeated motif provides a structural parallel between the two tales and thus a coherence to the larger composite narrative.

After the princess identifies the prince, the two of them fly off together.

See Chapter 3 for a discussion of the uses of disguise in narrative and ritual.
The publicly performed tale and “The Clever Carpenters” again coincide. The final divergence comes when the prince/king stops the horse and goes to a nearby village for help: the king goes for food, and the prince goes for help for his wife and newborn baby. The king dies on the way when the horse catches fire. The prince figuratively dies when he is seduced by a prostitute in the village and forgets about his wife and child. The short folktale ends here, without answering the question of what happens to the queen who was left alone on the bank of the river waiting for the return of the king. Parmeshvara, on the other hand, answers the unspoken question in his performance by adding the tale type of the exchanged babies. With this addition, the public performance has a sense of closure and resolution not present in the variant of the independent folktale available to us.

Parmeshvara uses “The Clever Carpenters” tale type as a skeleton for his performance and dramatically expands the tale by carefully interweaving new tale types and motifs with the core tale. However, his narrative remains sufficiently loosely constructed and flexible so that it can be shortened or lengthened depending on the context in which he is performing and the response of his audience. This flexibility is noticeable especially near the end of the performance, when Parmeshvara abruptly brings the narrative to an end when the audience response dictates that he do so. In another context, he could have further expanded the story by adding more narrative knots/complications, to be resolved with another tale. Certain tale types and motifs naturally lend themselves to combination, just as other tale types are rarely found in combination. Parmeshvara is not unique in his skill to combine these separate tales into a unified narrative performance. For example, Charles Swynerton has published a tale collected in the Punjab in which the narrator has combined the motif of the flying horse and that of the prince as the palace intruder (1963:297–300). However, the skill for building a unified narrative from shorter tales and interweaving major motifs is characteristic of the professional storyteller and less so of the nonprofessional.

Individual Creativity in a Regional Repertoire

The kathāni kūhā stands as an interesting case study of a genre not identified with a particular community within a repertoire whose classification and commentary centers around the identification of genre with community. Rather, it is a term associated with individual professional performers, and as demonstrated above, the focus becomes the individual’s performance style rather than the content of the narratives. Unfortunately, Parmeshvara was the only kathāni kūhā performing in Phuljhar during the year that I lived
there, and therefore, I am unable to make comparison-based generalizations about the kind of individual who becomes a kathānī kāhā. But to look more closely at Parmeshvara's identity within the social/cultural context of Phuljhar and the performative space that has been given him suggests to us another level of flexibility within the repertoire of genres and of community boundaries in the folklore region of Chhattisgarh.

Parmeshvara stands on the social margins of contemporary Phuljhar society on several levels: he is functionally nonliterate, without any occupational skills other than singing, living on the poverty line; and he is a Christian (whose parents converted from a low caste) in a predominantly Hindu culture. Perhaps more important, he is gifted in performative skills that the Christian community of Phuljhar does not (or cannot) support financially; and his Christian jāṭī precludes him from performing professionally in a genre that is identified primarily with a Hindu jāṭī or festival. Yet, as a creative individual whose special gift is to “remember stories” (a quality gifted, according to him, by bhagvān [god]), he has found entrance into public, professional performance through the loosely defined genre of kathānī kāhā, associated with individual performance style rather than with a set narrative repertoire or a particular community. With his skills of engaging and captivating an audience, in a framed performative moment, Parmeshvara creates a temporarily bounded community that cuts across religious, caste, and economic boundaries, a community over which he wields performative authority and in which he is granted temporary status. As the editors of Creativity/Anthropology observe: “Marginality itself is a cultural category with its own institutional practices and its own space for creative innovation. Creativity often dissolves, or perhaps more precisely redraws, the boundaries of social institutions and cultural patterns” (1993:5).

In many ways, Parmeshvara and Kaushalya Bai occupy similar marginal positions, albeit for slightly different reasons, positions from which they have developed creative, idiosyncratic performance styles. Kaushalya Bai’s style, however, remains unnamed as she has not entered the public, professional performance arena. I was referred to her for her knowledge, not her performative abilities; and when she spoke about “why we do things the way we do,” she, too, temporarily stepped out of the margins into a central, authoritative position.16

15 There are exceptions to this preclusion, such as the bāhak mentioned in footnote 5. Generally, however, first-generation converts to Christianity from professional musician castes in Phuljhar, who had previously supported themselves through professional performance, felt like they needed to “give up their instruments.”

16 There are other individuals in the folklore regional that have found space for individual creativity through slightly different modes. I think specifically of two Gond women in the
Perhaps if Parmeshvara had lived in the Chhattisgarhi plains where the epic tradition of candainī is common, this performance genre would have been available to him. Its narrative is nonreligious, the genre is identified with the region of Chhattisgarh rather than with any specific caste, and it is performed by a spectrum of low castes. Its performance articulates what it means to be “Chhattisgarhi” in ways very similar to Parmeshvara’s narratives that draw on local culture and identity. In the next chapter I examine the ways in which the Chhattisgarhi candainī epic interacts with and reflects the regional community to which it belongs, primarily by comparing it to the epic variant that is performed as a caste epic in north India.

Chhattisgarhi heartland town of Dhamtari who sang for me in an idiosyncratic genre that they called both dhārī (literally, stream) and bās gīt (bamboo song). They stylistically imitated with their voices the bās gīt, a genre associated with the Raut cowherding caste and performed by males only, narrative verses sung in alternation with playing long, heavy bamboo flutes.