Gender and Genre in the Folklore of Middle India

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The Sanskrit, pan-Indian epics of the Ramayana and Mahabharata are often paired in Western scholarship of South Asian texts, even as that pairing reveals significant differences between the two (see, for example, Shulman 1991 and Smith 1980). More recent field-based scholarship suggests that in folk performance, however, the two traditions are rarely paired and, in terms framing this study, do not fall within the same performative repertoire and intertextual system of genres (Hiltebeitel 1988; Lutgendorf 1991; Sax 1991; Smith 1990). In Chhattisgarh, the Mahabharata folk genre of paṇḍvāṇī (the name taken from the five Pandava brothers/heroes of epic) is called a Chhattisgarhi genre, whereas the much more commonly performed Ramayana tradition, available in a wide variety of performance styles, is not. In this chapter, I consider what difference it makes to indigenous understandings of performance that the genre is situated within the regional repertoire, or system of genres, in which it is continually paired with the regional candāini epic. Focusing specifically on performance of the paṇḍvāṇī narrative episode of Nal and Damayanti, what kind of commentary—sometimes only

1 The Sanskrit analytic terms for the two epics distinguish them as separate genres: itihāsa (history) for the Mahabharata and kāvya (poetry) or caritra (biography) for the Ramayana. The distinction is a literary one, however; one of the paṇḍvāṇī singers to whom I spoke used caritra for the Mahabharata narrative in the general sense of “story.”

2 Note that I use the Hindi transliteration Nal instead of the Sanskrit transliteration Nala. I specifically elicited the Nal and Damayanti episode from the paṇḍvāṇī singers I met in the summer of 1993 in anticipation of a paper I presented in November 1993 at the Wisconsin Annual Conference on South Asia on a panel titled “Nala and Damayanti: Varying Visions of Love and Self.”
hints thereof—does this intertextuality provide us for how the narrative may be received and interpreted in situated performance?

“According to Our Hearts”: A Chhattisgarhi Genre

In search of paṇḍūrī performers in the summer of 1993, I set out during an evening hot-season dust storm, on the back of the scooter of an anthropologist from Ravishankar University, for the village of Darba, about an hour east of the city of Raipur. Over ten years earlier in this village, I had recorded a paṇḍūrī performance, which happened to be of the Nal and Damayanti episode, from a middle-aged blind singer of the Marar (vegetable-seller) caste. I hoped that he would still be living, would be willing to perform this narrative segment again, and that he and others would be able to provide some insight on paṇḍūrī as a Chhattisgarhi genre.

During the year and a half I had spent in Chhattisgarh from 1980 to 1981 and on several return visits since then, paṇḍūrī was consistently mentioned as a central genre of the repertoire of genres identified as Chhattisgarhi. There had been, however, no paṇḍūrī performances during this time in any of the villages or urban neighborhoods in which I had lived or visited, except for that of the above-mentioned blind singer. At that time, although the memory of paṇḍūrī performance still helped to identify and characterize the Chhattisgarhi folklore region through frequent reference, few living performers still regularly sang paṇḍūrī in public, professional contexts.

In contrast, the candainī epic tradition was continually in the public eye (“ear”) through local performances, in government-sponsored competitions, in the news media, and on the radio. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, exposure of this epic tradition outside Chhattisgarh was promoted by the playwright and director Habib Tanvir (mentioned in Chapter 6), who wrote a contemporary dramatic work based on candainī. Using Chhattisgarhi actors and traditional performers, he staged this work in New Delhi and other urban centers, even as far away as London.

Over the last five to seven years, paṇḍūrī performance has experienced a dramatic performance revival and popularity comparable with that of candainī in the 1980s, particularly as representative of “things Chhattisgarhi.” Like candainī, it has come to represent the region among folklore and intellectual circles outside Chhattisgarh, in various government-sponsored performance competitions, as well as on radio and television. This has largely been due to the influence of one particular female paṇḍūrī singer, Tijan Bai, in whom, according to many Chhattisgarhi residents, the government (and
subsequent audiences and singing competition judges) showed particular interest because of her uniqueness as a woman in public, professional performance.\(^3\) Her grandfather was a performer and she says she informally learned from him at an early age, never having been discouraged from doing so for being a girl. Even after she began to perform publicly, she continued working as a laborer in one of the Bhilai steel mills and, at the same time, earned her high school equivalency degree. A few other girls have followed in her lead in \textit{pan\text{\textquotesingle}v\text{\textquotesingle}n\text{\textquotesingle}i} public performance, and the female performer of choice in the media in 1993 was the sixteen-year-old Ritu Varma. I heard several comments that year by residents in Raipur and Dhamtari that Tijan Bai was losing her popularity to Ritu Varma because of her age (the former was about thirty-five years old at the time).

Tijan Bai has appeared frequently on Doordarshan (the government-sponsored television channel), sings in various folk festivals in Delhi and other urban centers, has received various national-level performance and artistic awards, and participated in the Festival of India in Paris during the summer of 1993. She dresses the part of a “typical” Chhattisgarhi villager, wearing easily identifiable Chhattisgarhi jewelry, although some pieces are actually seen only rarely in the gullies and streets of Chhattisgarh today (because of both the expense of gold and the attitude held by educated women that this jewelry is “backward”). Tijan Bai accompanies herself on a colorfully decorated and painted \textit{tamburā} (single-stringed instrument), which has come to be identified specifically with \textit{pan\text{\textquotesingle}v\text{\textquotesingle}n\text{\textquotesingle}i} performance. Her success and popularity has revived \textit{pan\text{\textquotesingle}v\text{\textquotesingle}n\text{\textquotesingle}i} performance all over Chhattisgarh in a variety of contexts. Hence, I anticipated an increased awareness of the genre in the village in which we found ourselves on that hot, dusty evening in May.

The Brahmin village headman with whom I had stayed in Darba village and in whose courtyard I had taped \textit{pan\text{\textquotesingle}v\text{\textquotesingle}n\text{\textquotesingle}i} those many years earlier had since moved to Raipur to live with one of his sons. His large, double-storied house in the middle of the village was now empty except for a few servants and his Brahmin \textit{darogā} (overseer of the estate). After cups of tea and general discussion with the \textit{darogā} and several other men who had gathered in the courtyard about shifting caste dynamics caused by industrialization in nearby Raipur and an associated demise of many Chhattisgarhi folk performance genres, the \textit{darogā} assured us that the blind \textit{pan\text{\textquotesingle}v\text{\textquotesingle}n\text{\textquotesingle}i} singer, Mani Ram, was

\(^3\) I have made efforts to meet Tijan Bai over the last few years, but she has always been “out of station” whenever I have visited Chhattisgarh. In the summer of 1993, when she was constantly referred to as \textit{the pan\text{\textquotesingle}v\text{\textquotesingle}n\text{\textquotesingle}i} singer whom I should meet and record, my standard answer became that I would need to go to Delhi or France to hear her—an answer that delighted and amused her referees. Most of them had themselves heard her only over the radio or on cassette tapes, never in live performance.
still living and sent someone to call him. Meanwhile, he asked if we would like to watch a tape of the televised Mahabharata on the VCR while we were waiting. I hesitated, feeling somehow that this would “corrupt” the setting for what I hoped would be the forthcoming *paṇḍvāni* performance as soon as the singer arrived. However, the question was rhetorical; and soon, seated in the courtyard under a dark, moonless sky, a group of twenty or so children, women, and the male servants of the estate were gathered with rapt attention in front of a tiny black-and-white screen on which stiffly acted characters spoke Sanskritic Hindi that few of the audience could fully understand.

To my dismay, the drone of the Mahabharata on the VCR continued as a backdrop to our conversation when Mani Ram finally did arrive at 11:00 P.M. or so. It was now too late to start a performance; but, he assured me he would return in the morning to sing (albeit then without the naturally congregated audience that was present late that night). The TV performance, however, provided an important opening in my conversation with the singer. When I asked him what difference there was between this “TV Mahabharata” and *paṇḍvāni*, his answer was immediate and decisive: “The Mahabharata of the TV is according to the *sāstra* [authoritative, religious texts]; *paṇḍvāni* is according to our hearts. *Paṇḍvāni* is *Chhattisgarhi*.” In a neighboring village, another singer gave me a similar response: “The TV is for everyone; there are many written Mahabharatas. This [*paṇḍvāni*] stands alone. Those who read from paper, they know the TV Mahabharata.”

A third singer, Pancam, who makes his living as an electrical appliance (radios, televisions, fans) repairman was puzzled when I expressed to him my specific interest in the Nal and Damayanti narrative and asked him if this episode was in the repertoire of his performance troupe. He assured me it was, but asked:

[Pancam:] Can’t you do this research by reading? Whatever you want to know, you’ll find in writing.

[Indian anthropologist who accompanied me to this village]: No, there’s some difference between the books and what you sing. The things you enjoy [*ma-jedār bāt*], like the weddings of Sahadev and Nakula [the twin Pandava brothers], you won’t find those there.

[Pancam:] If you printed everything we sing and put it in the bazaar [that is, in books to sell], it would take up from here to there [extending his arms out wide]. But, that’s stopping now. At first, those who sang *paṇḍvāni* sang every

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4 “*tv sabhon ke hai; bahut likhe mahābhārat hai. yah ekton ke hai. jo khāgaz se parte, unko tv mahābhārat malūm hai.*”
detail: they came by this road, they passed this village—they sang about every well, river, and talāb [tank]. Nowadays, what do they do? They come from there 'direct'5 to here.

What does it mean for a performance genre to be “Chhattisgarhi,” to be sung according to the heart rather than the šāstra? Note that in the following discussion, I will use the word šāstra/shastric with the connotations implied in this statement by Mani Ram—as a textual or textually based performance tradition shared across regional boundaries, to be distinguished from what are perceived to be uniquely Chhattisgarhi (regional) oral traditions.6

I must admit that I first looked for the answer to this question in the verbal, transcribed texts of the three full performances of the Nal and Damayanti narrative that I recorded in the summer of 1993, suspecting that the Chhattisgarhi variants of the narrative would reflect a particularly regional, rather than what our singer calls “shastric” (and I gloss as Sanskritic/brahminic), vision of women, fate, and divine intervention (such as I had found in comparing the candainī regional epic with the caste tradition of U.P.). While many of these can be found, the pandvānī performance styles themselves and the genre’s place within a distinct repertoire are just as crucial in its definition as a Chhattisgarhi genre.

The Nal and Damayanti Narrative

These Chhattisgarhi performances reflect numerous regional variations and localizations, but on the level of plot, the performances follow the general contours of the Sanskrit narrative amazingly closely.7 Perhaps this should not be surprising, since the shastric narrative of Nal and Damayanti already shares certain features that seem to characterize the alternative regional vision expressed in genres such as candainī. As J. A. B. van Buitenen elaborates in the introduction to his translation of Book 3 of the Sanskrit

5 Words in single quotations indicate English words that were used in otherwise Chhattisgarhi or Hindi conversations.
6 The shastric/Chhattisgarhi distinction in this context is equivalent to the mārga/deśī distinction referred to by Blackburn and Ramanujan as “[the] contrast often cited by scholars (but rarely used by the folk themselves) as an indigenous Indian expression of a folk/classical contrast. In fact, these terms represent only different (the local and pan-Indian) expressions of the same tradition, not different traditions” (1986:14).
7 The skeleton of the narrative is quite readily available in the performance Mani Ram sang the morning after the video showing. The performance was only an hour long and disappointingly perfunctory, for he remembered having sung it for me over ten years before and could not understand why I had asked for this particular narrative again. I rather lamely explained that the tape had gotten old.

This story of the heroine Damayanti and hero Nal is told to the Pandava eldest brother Yudhishthira (in forest exile, mourning the loss of his kingdom through dicing) by the ṛṣi Brihadashva, as the story of a prince who had suffered even more greatly than he. Nal, king of Nishadha, was the most beautiful of men and Damayanti the beautiful princess of Vidarbha. A pair of geese serves as matchmaker between the two, sparking the love between them through descriptions of their respective beauty. Damayanti’s lovesickness is reported to her father, who decides it is time to call for her swayamvar (the ritual in which a princess publicly chooses a husband from among her suitors by garlanding him). Kings and princes from all over the world arrive in hopes of being chosen by the exquisite princess (the swayamvar characterized, in one Chhattisgarhi performance, as a ‘beauty competition,’ to which “kings from ‘America,’ ‘England,’ ‘Australia,’ everywhere” arrived). Nal adorns himself and joins in the migration toward Vidarbha.

The gods, too, hear of the swayamvar; and four of them decide to attend. In the Sanskrit version, they truly hope that one of them will be chosen as the bridegroom, whereas in the Chhattisgarhi version, they attend the swayamvar to test the love of Nal and Damayanti. On the way, they meet Raja Nal and ask that he serve as their messenger to the princess, informing her of their intentions. Nal miraculously finds entry into the palace and delivers the message, to which Damayanti replies that because this is a ritual of true self-choice, she will marry only Raja Nal. When the gods hear her reply, they arrive at the swayamvar as (what the Chhattisgarhi singer calls) ‘duplicates’ of Nal. In the Sanskrit version, the princess beseeches the gods, by the power of her truthfulness, to reveal their divinity; only then is she able to discern who among the five is the human Nal because only the gods do not sweat, blink, or touch their feet to the ground. The kings and gods return to their respective realms, rejoicing in what they know to be an auspicious match.

One god, Kali, however, was late to the swayamvar. Angered, he vows to make the princess pay for her choice of a human over the gods by unseating Nal from his kingdom. For twelve years, however, the nearly perfect Nal commits no transgression through which Kali can initiate his plan. Then, one morning, Nal fails to perform the appropriate ablutions before worshiping; this is Kali’s opportunity to enter his body and take advantage of his defects (durgun). As the Chhattisgarhi Kali says, “Every man has his defect, and Nal’s is dicing.” Kali sends his brother Dvarpa to persuade Nal’s brother Pushkar (who had already lost everything he owned through dicing) to challenge Nal to an all-out dicing competition. Protesting that he has
nothing to stake, in the Chhattisgarhi version, Kali gives Pushkar two oxen. The dices are loaded, and beginning with the oxen, Nal loses all his possessions until he and Damayanti are left with only a single garment each; and they are banished to the forest.

Upon Pushkar’s threat of hanging anyone who helps the couple, no subject offers them even a drop of water. After three days, Nal sees a pair of birds and throws his only garment over them in an effort to capture them for food; but they fly off, leaving the prince naked. Now the couple wanders the forest sharing Damayanti's single sari. Nal tries to persuade his wife to return to her mother’s place without him, but she is a true *pativrata* (faithful wife) and refuses. One night, as the couple has lain down to rest and Damayanti has fallen fast asleep, Nal carefully cuts the shared sari in two and abandons his love at the crossroads.

Damayanti awakens to find herself alone and desperately calls out for her husband before realizing her dreadful fate. She has numerous adventures in the forest and kingdom of Cedi before finally finding her way back to her father's kingdom of Vidarbha. Nal, meanwhile, has his own forest adventures. He saves a snake from a fire and is repaid with only a snakebite, which leaves him cruelly deformed. But the snake assures him that because of this deformity, no one will recognize him in his exile. He promises the prince that the poison that has entered his body will afflict only Kali and will cause him no pain; further, he will always be victorious in battle. He advises Nal to offer his services as a charioteer to the king of Ayodhya.

Meanwhile, Damayanti has sent scouts throughout the land to look for her husband. She instructs them to ask of all they meet a riddle that only Nal will be able to answer. One such scout enters the city of Ayodhya with the riddle, and the king’s charioteer gives the answer. When Damayanti hears his answer, she knows Nal is alive and holds a second *swayamvar*, hoping to lure him back from his exile. The king of Ayodhya instructs his charioteer, the disguised Nal, to deliver him to the *swayamvar* in a single day. On the way, they pass a *vibhītaka* tree, and the king, wishing to display his skill in counting, tells Nal the difference in the number of leaves and nuts on the tree and those on the ground. Nal insists on stopping to verify the count; it is exactly as the king has said. Nal then asks for the knowledge of this magic, offering in return the secret of his charioteering skills. As soon as Nal receives the secret of counting (the secret of dice), Kali is vomited out of his mouth.

At Vidarbha, Damayanti sends her servant to ask the identity of the deformed charioteer who makes the chariot fly as only Nal can do. She poses a series of tests through which she knows that he can be, in fact, only her

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8 See Shulman 1994 for a discussion of the riddle in the Nal and Damayanti narrative.
love. Finally, Nal admits who he is; and after a three-year separation, the couple is reunited. Nal returns to his own kingdom to challenge his brother Pushkar to one final dicing, through which he successfully reclaims his throne. And so, the narrator asks the Pandava Yudhishthira, “Hearing of the misery and grief of Raja Nal, what is the basis of your complaint?”

*Candainî* and *Paṇḍvānî*: A Dialogic Relationship

What most differentiates *paṇḍvānî* performance from *shastric* performance genres available in Chhattisgarh, most notably Tulsidas’s *Rāmcaritmānas*, are the identifiable regional styles and contexts in which it is performed: the instruments used in accompaniment, the use of a rāgī (echo voice and companion to the lead singer), the rāg (melodic structure) itself, as well as the identities of both performers and audience and the traditional and newly emerging contexts in which *paṇḍvānî* is sung. Further, its performance is episodic (characteristic of Indian oral epics such as *candidaî*), rather than approximating the recitation style of devotional texts such as the *Rāmcaritmānas*, which are often cited “from beginning to end” (either over the period of seven, nine, or thirty days or on a weekly basis) until they are completed. One young apprentice singer exclaimed, “Who knows the beginning; who knows the end!” A nonprofessional female performer said, “There are eighteen nights of *paṇḍvānî*, but I know only bits and pieces.”9 These performance elements situate *paṇḍvānî* in a regional, Chhattisgarhi system of genres and poetics quite distinct from the coexisting shastric repertoire. It is these genres with which *paṇḍvānî* interacts dialogically—these intertextual relationships that provide the primary lens through which *paṇḍvānî* performance, including that of the narrative of Nal and Damayanti, is interpreted by the Chhattisgarhi folklore community. M. M. Bakhtin characterizes this process of intertextuality as follows: “Utterances are not indifferent to each other, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another. . . . Each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the community of the sphere of speech” (1986:91).

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9 There are a limited number of episodes of the “unending” Mahabharata narrative current in *paṇḍvānî* performance, although many more episodes of the narrative may be part of the oral tradition, that is, known to the audience members through other performance genres as well as the televised serialization of the Mahabharata (see footnote 15 below for those available on cassette tape in Raipur in the summer of 1993). I have not attempted to contextualize the Nal and Damayanti narrative within this unbounded Mahabharata oral tradition/repertoire of episodes except as the performers themselves have done so, for it would be conjecture on my part as to what episodes are known or unknown to Chhattisgarhi audiences.
As mentioned earlier, the genre with which *paṇḍvāṇī* is most closely associated in Chhattisgarh is the epic *candainī*. In fact, the Brahmin overseer of the rural estate in Darba village, as someone who does not participate directly in the tradition as performer or audience member but who is quite conversant with the folk repertoire performed in his village, frequently confused the two genres in our conversation. When I asked him the contexts in which *paṇḍvāṇī* is performed these days in his village, he began describing a performance group in a neighboring village that was hired for particular festivals. I recognized that this was the same *candainī* troupe that I had recorded twelve years earlier and asked, “Do you mean *candainī*?” He quickly caught himself, “Yes, yes. *Candainī*. Well—*paṇḍvāṇī*; they do it all.” The electrical-repairman singer mentioned above, the leader of a six- to eight-member performance troupe, characterized contemporary *paṇḍvāṇī* performance:

These days, anyone can sing *paṇḍvāṇī* [that is, it is possible that a group that had sung *candainī* exclusively twelve years ago would have begun to sing *paṇḍvāṇī* in the interim]. Harijans, whom we call Satnamis, used to sing *paṇḍvāṇī*. Rauts sang *candainī* and the songs of the flute [*bās gīt*]. And we [Sahus] sang *rāmsaptah* [term used for particular style of Ramayana performance in Chhattisgarh]. In the old days, a few people knew *paṇḍvāṇī*.*Tambūrāvālā* [literally, belonging to the stringed instrument *tambūra*]—that’s what people called *paṇḍvāṇī*—and *maṇīrā* [a kind of cymbal]; there used to be just two [instruments]. Now there are lots of instruments. [To add the phrase] “Listen, son; listen, brother”—that’s Mahābhārata *caritra* [literally, biography, but here, more generally “story”]. You can tell the story [*kathā*] in two minutes or two days; that’s what it’s like.

*Paṇḍvāṇī* and *candainī* have followed a remarkably similar course of stylistic development over the last fifteen years. Initially, both were sung a cappella, with a lead singer and a single companion (*rāgī*). The Darba singer Mani Ram, who still sings in this style, said the only difference between *candainī* and *paṇḍvāṇī* is that singers of the former add *tor* or *mor* to the end of every line and *paṇḍvāṇī* singers add *bhāīya* or *bhāige* (literally, brother). The style is composed of short, almost staccato couplets of nearly repetitious lines. Each couplet advances the story line, and little room exists for elaboration of scene or emotion or for commentary on motivation. Mani Ram added rather sadly that this traditional singing style is extremely rare these days in Chhattisgarh: “People have no interest without instruments.”

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10 Notice the characterization of *paṇḍvāṇī* by its “tag phrase,” *bhāīya mor*, a characterization repeated below by the singer Mani Ram.
Of these two traditions, *candaini* performers were the first to experiment with shifting styles, adding instrumentation (minimally a harmonium and *dholak* [a kind of drum]) and more singers. Songs are interspersed with the narrative line of the lead singer, elaborating a *bhāv* (emotion) or indicating passage of time or the transversing of space. These days, the most popular *candaini* style is that of the dance-drama with costumed actors (*nācā*). The chief identity of the singers shifted in this period from that of the Rauts to primarily Satnamis. It was during this period that urban elites began to show interest in the regional epic.

The *panḍvānī* tradition followed a similar development about a decade later: the performance style of the “old days” with the single singer and a companion; and more recently, the addition of instrumentation (specifically the brightly decorated *tambūrā*) and a large performance troupe, which have become crucial to reviving *panḍvānī* as a popular style. It has not yet been adapted, however, to the *nācā*. Like *candaini*, the identity of *panḍvānī* singers has expanded beyond the boundaries of its traditional performance group, Satnamis, to include a wide spectrum of castes. Finally, the “exterior of the text,” to borrow a phrase from Wendy Doniger (1991:32), has come to represent the region to intellectual and cultural performance communities outside Chhattisgarh with particular interests in “things ethnic.”

*Panḍvānī* and *candaini* “new style” singers employ almost identical formulas to indicate breaks between episodes or the passage of time: “And so, they began to say, began to speak, ohhh” or “began to go, began to move, ohhh.” Contemporary *panḍvānī* and *candaini* performance styles also share the presence of a *rāgī* (respondent), who interacts with the lead performer in spoken narrative. The *rāgī*’s comments are often the occasion for local humor; they differ from the humorous interludes in *rāmtilā* dramatic performances because they are not performatively distinct episodes or interludes but punctuate and are integrated into the primary narrative. “Listen” to the following excerpt taken from the first few minutes of the performance, when the lead singer, Manmohan (whose performance we will look at more carefully later in the chapter) is describing Damayanti’s fragile state of *viraha* (separation from her love, Nal):

Singer: The *rājkumārī*’s [unmarried princess] condition deteriorated.

Damayanti burned in the fire of separation, in the separation from the love of Raja Nal.

*Rāgī*: Oh, with the fever of *timbu* [local vegetable]?

11 “*kathāvan lāge, bolan lāge, ooo*” or “*calan lāge, jāvan lāge, ooo*.”
Singer: No, in the fever of love. The rājkumārī worried twenty-four hours a day; she was struck with worry; she was immersed in thought.

Ragi: Oh, she worried about the tap [play on words between word for tap/nal and name of the hero/Nal]!

Singer: No, no! This is about Raja Nal, not about ‘boring’ [the term in Chhattisgarh for tube wells]!

Beyond the emergence of similar performative styles, performers of the two genres of candainī and pāṇḍvānī employ several narrative motifs and formulaic descriptions that resonate with each other in performance. The heroines Candaini and Damayanti are both Chhattisgarhi daughters, identified by the formulaic sixteen śṛngār (adornments),12 several of which are unique to Chhattisgarh and worn by female professional pāṇḍvānī singers such as Tijan Bai (for example, the bandūriya necklace and kaṅkaṇī armband). In contrast, the Ramayana heroine Sita is described and visually portrayed in lithographs and rāmāli as wearing vaguely generic north Indian royal clothes and jewelry. The two heroines are also accompanied by the formulaic “fourteen companions, seven in front and seven behind”; they live in similar seven-storied palaces, in quarters tightly guarded, into which the heroes of their tales must try to enter.

Because of the generic association and performative relationship between candainī and pāṇḍvānī, audience members who hear of the daughter Damayanti stranded in the middle of the jungle, threatened by a hunter, are more likely to make an association with the heroine Candaini in the jungle (described in Chapter 6), where she relies on her own ingenuity to get out of a similar situation, than with Sita in her forest dwelling, from which she is kidnapped. Damayanti is not, of course, the eloping Candaini. She is a pativrata (faithful wife) and finally depends on the power of her sat (truth, that is, chastity) to escape the hunter who attempts to accost her in the jungle after she has been deserted by Nal; but the power is humanized. In Mani Ram’s performance of this episode, Damayanti successfully curses the hunter but then wanders the forest as a crazy woman whose sanity is restored only when she tells her story to those who take her in as a daughter (an indigenous commentary on the power of story and performance). In these lines, Mani Ram specifically uses the term nonī, the affectionate term for daughter in several dialect variants of Chhattisgarhi. In the performance by the Sahu-

12 These include ankle bracelets, a silver waist belt, bracelets, a chain in the part of her hair, a beautiful sari and blouse, red dye (mahu) on her feet, and henna on her hands.
caste singer, Damayanti also finally resorts to her power as a *pativrata* to curse the hunter to die, but not before trying a strategy available to all Chhattisgarhi women, that is, appealing to the stranger as a daughter, a sister. His own inhumane self is underscored by the fact that he cannot be shamed into responding appropriately to this strategy.

The dicing motif shared between the two traditions, and yet distinctively different, is of particular interest to us here, given the centrality of dicing to the Nal and Damayanti narrative. Recall from our discussion of *candainī* that as Lorik and Candaini are passing through an all-female kingdom, Lorik, disguised in a sari, is sent into the city by Candaini to buy some pān. He is enticed into the home of the pān-seller, who threatens him with a series of physical abuses unless he promises to marry her. When Candaini finally comes looking for him, she secures his release by winning him back in a dicing duel with the pān-seller. The motif of women, rather than men, winning and losing partners through dicing is common in several other Chhattisgarhi folk narratives as well (for example, in the Song of Subanbali discussed in Chapter 3), a motif that presents us with an alternative to the more shastric pattern of male dicing for a woman (or a man putting up a woman as stake in that dice game). The latter is, of course, central to the main story of the Mahabharata in which Yudhishthira dices against Duryodhan (whose uncle Shakuni throws the dice on his behalf). The Pandava king stakes his wealth, his brothers, himself, and finally his wife Draupadi. Dicing in the Nal and Damayanti narrative follows this same pattern, and Chhattisgarhi audiences surely make the association between the two narratives of dicing and loss, as it is explicitly stated by the narrator of the story-within-a-story.

However, because *pandvānī* is itself situated with a “Chhattisgarhi” repertoire, alternative dicing images and gender ideologies from this repertoire also come into play and frame the reception of Nal’s dicing. It makes a difference to this reception that Damayanti is characterized as a Chhattisgarhi daughter (interestingly, Nal remains more distant, always addressed

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13 Damayanti uses this same strategy to persuade the gods who appear at her *swayambhū* in the form of Nal to reveal their true forms.

14 Alf Hiltebeitel reports an episode of female dicing from a Telugu folk Mahabharata tradition in which Draupadi (wife of the five Pandava brothers) plays a game of dice to recover her husbands’ lost kingdom, even after she herself has been humiliated in the dice game between Yudhishtira and Duryodhan. She is triumphant in her efforts (dicing directly against Duryodhan this time, not Shakuni); but the Pandavas refuse to take back their kingdom under these conditions, “preferring to win it back in battle and on their own” (1988:238). Hence, the suggested alternative ideology of gender and power is not totally “played out,” as it is, for example, in the Song of Subanbali.
as Raja, "king"). In one performance, the singer directly localizes or resituates the dicing between the brothers Nal and Pushkar when he characterizes it to be like the custom of male friends and relatives gambling through the night as they celebrate the Chhattisgarhi festival of gaurā. The performer rhetorically asks his audience, "After all, don’t all brothers play dice at the festival?" In this variant, there is no mention made of the influence on the dicing scene of Kali or any other outside force.

Finally, both candainī and the pāṇḍvāṇī narrative of Nal and Damayanti are love stories in which the love is first characterized by the heroine’s self-choice and then her determination to hold onto that choice against overwhelming odds. The heroes of both stories are seemingly less committed to their love when obstacles are placed in their way. Lorik gets cold feet and tries to back out of the elopement several times before he is almost literally dragged by a washerwoman to the tree where he is to meet Candaini; Nal carries the message of the gods to Damayanti with the suggestion that since they are gods, whose anger can destroy the world, she should really choose one of them as her bridegroom.

The heroines, however, are undeterred in their choice. Damayanti asserts that the choice she has made in her heart, long before the swayamvar, is equivalent to marriage itself: “I’ve already accepted you as my husband; I’ll marry no one else.” Furthermore, she orders Nal to take this message back to the gods, with the following instruction about the nature of true "self-choice" in the swayamvar: “The meaning of a swayamvar is that one chooses according to her heart. In this darbār [court], there is no fear; there is no force. Whomever the girl garlands, that is her husband. Whomever I desire, that is whom I will garland. There’s no sin in this, no reproach; it’s nothing like that. Go and tell them this!”

Kali, the god who is angered over having missed the first swayamvar and instigates Nal’s downfall in the dicing match of the Sanskrit variant of the narrative, in the Chhattisgarhi version later criticizes the heroine for this very independence, which she had declared to be above reproach at a swayamvar: “This ordinary [sādhāraṇ] girl is too proud [ghamanḍ; thinking she can choose a human over the gods]. I’m going to tear apart this union,” which he succeeds in doing only temporarily.

The traditions of candainī and Nal and Damayanti characterize an ideal love as one of not only erotic passion but also companionship. The forest scenes give literal space for this companionship to be externalized. Candaini and Lorik face obstacle after obstacle together, alone against the world they encounter in foreign countries and the jungle. They cook together, make rafts together, plot against and trick enemies together. Of course, the story of Nal and Damayanti dwells on the betrayal of just such companionship.
In summarizing the story for me outside of performance, one singer started with the frame story of the Mahabharata hero Yudhishthira:

The story begins here: there was Arjun; Arjun leaves them all, the four [other Pandava] brothers and Draupadi; . . . and over here, there's Bhim; Bhim also goes by himself to wander; Dharm Raj is left all by himself, Yudhishthira. . . .

[A rśi finds the weeping king, who complains.] "What's the use of having so many brothers and such a big family? There's no one in the world with greater grief than I have. . . . Having left behind such a large kingdom, leaving the entire family, I have come into the jungle . . . but . . . now there's no one here to give me companionship."

The rśī, standing in front of him, says, "Son, do you think that you're disconsolate? You're most fortunate; you won't find anyone so fortunate, even if you look. . . . I know everything: that your kingdom has been lost, your brothers defeated. You came to do tapasyā [austerities] in the jungle, and now in the jungle, you have no company. . . . Son, if you think you're disconsolate, you haven't even seen sorrow. What you think of as sorrow is actually your flower. What is sorrow like? Let me tell you about Raja Nal."

The singer continues,] Whoever tells the story in our caste [Sahu] has to start the story with this question, "What is sorrow; what is happiness?"

Yudhishthira's sad state is attributed by the rśī as one resulting from lack of companionship; by so framing the story that follows, he characterizes the sorrowful separation of the lovers Nal and Damayanti as the loss of companionship. Yet the tale of sorrow that follows is actually more that of Damayanti's sorrow than Nal's.

Another singer elaborates on what true companionship means in the uniquely Chhattisgarhi terms of ritual friendship (ritually solemnized friendships between same-sex, cross-caste friends). This test of true friendship/companionship, rather than that of erotic love alone, is the test that the hero Nal fails. In this performance, Damayanti responds to Nal when he tries to persuade her to leave him in the forest and return to her mother's place:

[She first calls on shastric authority and then switches to “Chhattisgarhi” authority when she recalls the mode of ritual friendship (mahāprasād).]

The śāstra say, "Whatever patience, whatever stamina a man has, it will be tested [pankṣa]. Whatever dharma he follows, the test of that dharma is the test of friendship: that is, [the test of] mahāprasād, phūlphūlvarī [names of specific kinds Chhattisgarhi ritual friendships]—these are tested.

One could say a woman's test is calamity. Yes, it's good to have a mahāprasād friend and for this friendship to survive calamity. Whoever stays with another
in sorrow and happiness, that is the friendship of mahāpāsād. . . . You’re experiencing such suffering, such trouble; I won’t leave you, my master.

The king then understood that she was no ordinary woman who would leave him.

A Performative Crossroads of Two Poetics

In contrast to the candainī tradition, paṇḍvāṇī has been picked up by many “shastric,” Ramayana performance troupes. The consecutive, year-long television serializations of the Ramayana and Mahabharata that riveted India in the late 1980s have placed these two traditions in a performative/generic relationship with each other that did not traditionally exist in Chhattisgarh; the Ramayana tradition is dharmic/shastric, whereas paṇḍvāṇī is regional, local, not normative in the sense that the shastric devotional text of the Hindi Rāmacaritmānas is. It is difficult to say whether the television phenomenon “permitted” Ramayana performance troupes to add paṇḍvāṇī to their repertoire by legitimizing the Mahabharata in some way, or if this innovation has been in response to the increasing popularity of paṇḍvāṇī in Chhattisgarh itself.

Let’s look more closely now at a performance by such a troupe, whose repertoire includes rāmsaptaḥ, paṇḍvāṇī, and periodically even candainī (although Ramayana performances are most common). As its lead singer says, “Whatever people call us for, that’s what we’ll sing.” The newly emerging performance configuration between paṇḍvāṇī and Ramayana has influenced the paṇḍvāṇī performance style of this troupe dramatically. In the performance under consideration, the performer negotiated between a regional poetics and a more shastric and devotional poetics, a Ramayana-like performance style, incorporating elements of each. This particular audience, however, still understood paṇḍvāṇī to be firmly situated within the regional repertoire. This variance in the intertextual context the audience and singer brought to the performance resulted in audience-performer negotiations at some point and, finally, for the audience, a disappointing ending.

In my search for Damayanti in the Chhattisgarhi countryside, I had initiated this performance, although it played itself out before a “traditional” audience in a Gond neighborhood on the outskirts of the town of Dhamtari. I had learned of the lead singer, Manmohan Sinha, from a man who periodically had performed with his troupe and who was a neighbor of the Gond friends I was visiting. The performance took place in the front courtyard of their house, next to the major thoroughfare of the villagelike neighborhood.

Manmohan is a forty-five-year-old high school graduate who makes his
living as a day laborer (and was, at the time of this performance, hired as a construction worker). He said his grandfather had also been a professional performer; and it was from him that he had learned “whatever it is that I know.” After what I, as a nontraditional *paṇḍvāṇī* patron, felt to be some rather awkward negotiations of an appropriate performance fee, Manmohan agreed to come the next night to perform for three hours. He contemplated whether he would be able to sing the entire Nal and Damayanti *kathā* in that time but concluded it would, with some effort, be possible. He was rather emphatic that, after working all day in 115-degree heat, he would not be able to perform longer than this. The initially scheduled performance was can-
celebrated because of an unexpected, dramatic hot-season downpour. My Gond hosts assured me, however, that the troupe would show up the next night, since I had given Manmohan a “good faith” down payment; and they did.

Arriving at 9:30 from a village five to seven kilometers away, the performers were served tea and biri before Manmohan carefully unwrapped his brightly painted and decorated tambūnā, creating a key performance frame for pāndvānī as a Chhattisgarhi, rather than “Hindi,” performance. He set up a large lithograph of the divine baby Krishna on a folding chair at one end of the courtyard, performed ārtī (lamp offering to the deity), and lit incense. By this time, word of the troupe’s arrival had spread through the neighborhood, and an audience of approximately fifty had gathered, two-thirds of whose members were middle-aged or older women. As Manmohan was setting up, I asked several of the women whether they knew this kathā of Nal and Damayanti that was about to be sung. They assured me that it was common knowledge, but one woman said she (and probably most of the others) had not heard it performed for ten or fifteen years. “Still,” she said, “we should know it, shouldn’t we?”

Manmohan’s opening scene is that of the geese (hānis) who, through their descriptions of the beauty of our hero and heroine, “awakened the bhāv (emotion) of love in the hearts of Nal and Damayanti.” Love was born on both sides.” The kathā is set up, then, as a love story, one whose full ripening is assured when the performer then calls upon the authority of Swami Tulsidas, author of the authoritative Rāmcaritmānas (which came as a complete surprise to me, based on my experience of more traditional pāndvānī performances), whom he quotes as having said:

If love remains true,
If love one for another remains steadfast,
Then the two will surely meet each other.
One will receive the other.

In this variant, the gods come to Damayanti’s swayamvar not as serious contestants but to test the unusual love about which they have heard. The gods say, “We’ll go to the swayamvar. If their love is that great, we’ll go to test it. If

15 Nal and Damayanti is not part of the recorded repertoire on radio or television of either Ritu Varma or Tijan Bai (as of summer 1993). In the cassette tape stores of Raipur’s bazaars, I was able to locate two cassette tape recordings of Tijan Bai and one of Ritu Varma, titled, respectively, subhadra hanan (The Seizure of Subhadra), abhimanyu vadh (The Slaying of Abhimanyu), and kunti aur gandhari dvāra śiv pūjā (Kunti’s and Gandhari’s Worship of Shiva).

16 He did not provide the Yudhisthira frame story, which the singer mentioned earlier had told me was crucial to its performance.
the love is true, from the heart, then, we'll have to find out about it; we'll have to test it.”

When the four gods come to the ceremony, all in the guise of Nal, Damayanti calls on the goddesses Sharada Mai and Sarasvati Dai; but then “an idea comes to her” to appeal to the gods as a daughter (the same strategy used with the hunter in the jungle):

Prostrating at their feet, joining her hands, Damayanti said, “You’re the father; I’m your offspring, like a daughter. With my heart, words, acts, and soul, I’ve [already] accepted Raja Nal as my husband. Protect me, help me, so that I can identify Nal, so that I can garland Nal.

I’m like your daughter; I’m dependent on you. . . . And if you test me in this, if you challenge me, and I can’t identify Nal, I’ll commit ‘suicide’! All my faults and sins will be on your heads.”

[Rāgi responds,] ‘Murder’ will be committed.

“All my faults and sins will be on your heads.” In this way, Damayanti spoke to the gods; and the gods understood that her love was genuine. “Her love is absolutely true; it’s a love from the heart. She has ‘passed’ the test of love. She’s succeeded. We’ll give her our true darśan.” And the four gods took their true forms and went away.

Of course, the rest of the narrative continues to test that love; it is guaranteed fruition not only because of Tulsidas’s reassurance that true love is rewarded (particularly in the context of devotional texts) but also because of the inter-textuality with genres such as candainī, in which the heroine is resourceful and clever and finally succeeds in achieving her goals.

But now, to return to Tulsidas’s voice of authority—it suggests a shastric performance frame for the Ramayanization, if you will, of pāṇḍvāṇī. We will see that this process is not complete, however, and finally causes the audience some consternation. The narrative recitation of the lead singer is interspersed with sung portions by the mandalī (performance troupe) of men accompanying him. Some of these songs simply repeat or elaborate what the lead singer has sung; but many others end with lines that approximate those of Ram bhajan (devotional hymns), unrelated to the narrative story line. For example, Manmohan sings of the gods’ meeting with Nal on his way to the swayamvar:

[Spoken] The gods arrived in front of Raja Nal and said:
[Sung, with accompanying musicians joining in]
Oh Siya Ram, Lakhan, Siya, Ram; oh Ram, oh Siya Ram.
The gods spoke, oh Ram, Siya Ram; they joined their hands and spoke, oh Ram, Siya Ram.¹⁷

These bhajan-styled songs, usually ending with the line, “Bolo brādāvan bihārī lāl kī jai” (“Recite/speak the praises of Brindavan’s Biharilal [the god Krishna]”), are the most obvious indication that the lead singer has situated his panḍavānī performance in a shastric bhakti (devotional) repertoire and intertextual sphere. He also uses periodic bhakti idioms in the narrative line itself, such as that voiced by Damayanti when she expresses her commitment to Nal as her husband when he brings the message from the gods that they will be coming to her swayamvar: “Ever since I heard your praises from the geese, I’ve worshiped [pūjā] you like a god. If I marry anyone, it will be you. Maharaj, whatever happens, I don’t want the happiness of heaven. I want only the happiness of your feet [caran]. I’ll be content only in your service [sevā]. I won’t marry anyone else.” The word used for worship (pūjā) carries specific connotations of worshiping a deity, as does the word sevā when associated with pūjā. So, too, the word caran is used in devotional contexts, rather than the more colloquial Chhattisgarhi word for feet, pair.

Echoes of the shastric and Chhattisgarhi repertoires with which Manmohan’s performance of Nal and Damayanti is in dialogue continue to play off of each other throughout his performance. Even as he is citing Tulsidas or singing Ram-type bhajan, a consistent relationship with the Chhattisgarhi performance repertoire is maintained through the instrumentation and especially through the active dialogue with the rāgī (companion), whose hā, ho, or humorous one-line responses (often misinterpretations of particular words used by the lead singer) literally punctuate the performance, line by line, even phrase by phrase.

Two and a half hours into the three-hour performance, Manmohan had carried the narrative only as far as the swayamvar. He told his audience, “Time is precious; I’m going to have to shorten this a bit,” to which the rāgī responded, “Yes, hurry it up!” This created a dramatic break in the performance rhythm. The singer intended to skip over the wedding with the cryptic line, “And so, according to our Hindu ‘customs,’ the wedding was fulfilled and wedding songs were sung.” But the women of the audience insisted on more—that the Chhattisgarhi bride Damayanti be sent off to her sasural (in-laws’ place) with the appropriate wedding songs, Chhattisgarhi vihā git (one of the genres regularly mentioned as part of the Chhattisgarhi performance repertoire). Manmohan resisted their pleas and tried to con-

¹⁷ “Siya Ram, Lakhan” is a variant of “Sita Ram, Lakshman,” which are the names of the hero, the heroine, and Ram’s brother, of the Ramayana.
Chhattisgarhi Daughters

The expectations of the shastric/bhakti performance style and that of Chhattisgarhi pañdvāṇī came into direct conflict only at the very end of the performance. By 1:30 in the morning, Nal and Damayanti had only reached the crossroads in the jungle, where, exhausted, Damayanti fell asleep. Like the Sanskrit hero, Nal experiences great inner conflict about whether to leave Damayanti; but he finally turns from her:

He was of two minds, arguing back and forth.
Half said, “Yes, yes”; but he came back.
He saw in front of him the body of Damayanti.
He cried...tears filled his eyes.
There, a king’s daughter, sleeping without being bid farewell.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

He went and came several times; but Raja Nal finally left Damayanti.

[Song]: My queen was left all alone, bhāīya mor [the pañdvāṇī performative end phrase].
He left her all alone in the jungle.

The singer then describes the nature of the “vehicle” of a household, one needing both man and woman, that has now been broken: Nal leaves the union, alone; Damayanti awakens and calls out for her partner but realizes she has been left, alone. Manmohan ends the narrative performance with the line: “The woman was left alone in the jungle”—Damayanti abandoned at the crossroads. And the audience is left with the closing frame: “Bolo bhīndāvan bīhārī lāl kī jal.” Turning to me, Manmohan asked that I turn off the tape recorder, then said, “It’s late. I’m finished.”

18 In Chhattisgarhi women’s Ramayana māndalī performances of the episode of Sita’s wedding, the narrative is feminized by the elaboration of the wedding scene, the bride taking leave of her maternal home, and the singing of wedding songs; but the songs are not drawn from the Chhattisgarhi repertoire, for Sītā is not a Chhattisgarhi bride, not “one of us.”
The women in the audience were aghast, “But you can’t leave our daughter in the middle of the jungle!” Manmohan answered simply, “Well, you know the story.” Perhaps the performer was capable of suspending the performance in the middle of an episode because of the influence of the traditional shastric style of the Rāmcaritmānas performance, where the goal is to create and elaborate the various bhāv of bhakti rather than to sustain a narrative. V. Narayana Rao has articulated this difference as one between performances whose purpose is “communion” and those whose purpose is “communication” (oral communication, May 1992). In the recitation of a devotional text, an episode or scene may be suspended midway, to be picked up again the next day or the next week. But this is a bhakti aesthetics. Here, in a Chhattisgarhi performance, for an audience of Chhattisgarhi daughters, it was not acceptable to leave Damayanti at the crossroads overnight, and the women were still complaining at the community tap (nal) the next morning as they filled their water vessels. Perhaps this image, more than any other, articulates what it means for the Chhattisgarhi pāṇḍvānī to be sung “according to our hearts.”