Chapter 1

Introduction

Recent research on language and culture has opened up varied perspectives on where they interact with other aspects of society in a given social context, serving as inputs to each other. As a result, either of these can no longer be looked at as 'given', but as factors of social life which influence one another in a constant process of social exchange. The dichotomy between the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition has broken down and they are now viewed as two varieties on a common ground, rather than as independent of each other. Appropriations become crucial signifiers of context-sensitivity.

All this is particularly relevant in the context of Goa, a state in Western India, South of Maharashtra. Goa, like any other caste-based society, has had its share of the Great and the Little Traditions made distinct by the practitioners of the former. The state has witnessed a variety of regimes, experiences of which have often proved trau-
mantic for people of all classes, especially the lower classes who have suffered setbacks socio-economically, culturally and socially. The culture they practice today, commonly known as the 'folk-culture' indicates this, and their present desires to move up the class-hierarchy. What needs to be explored here is not so much their historical positioning in Goan society, but the system that they have carved out for themselves, given the circumstances they faced. As active interpreters, they have made sense of new experiences. Christianity in Goa, for example particularly among the lower classes, has been appropriated to suit indigenous practices, markedly distinct from its origins in the Roman Catholic Church. The Little Tradition in Goa, displays the complexities which characterize groups which try to assimilate themselves into a common discourse in order to cull out identities for themselves.

What is implied by a common identity? It is believed that although there are no fixed criteria, a group is considered to be an ethnic group with a specific identity when it is sufficiently distinct from other groups. This view on ethnic identity, as Phadnis (1990) observes, is a result of the recent perspectives on 'ethnicity' which basically refer to 'forms' of social life that are capable of renewing and transforming themselves. Ethnicity, according to this study is an elusive concept, as the type of identity usually referred to as ethnic can be manipulated for political purposes and thereby transformed. Ethnicity is said to have a primordial or ascribed quality, but it is also true that ethnic identity is shaped by historical experience. It is thus simul-
taneously objective, a given, and subjective, a creation. The many possibilities of shaping ethnic identity, the combinations of different primordial criteria and their interrelations with a changing historical context, make the concept both difficult and indispensable. Objective factors could be language, religion, territory, social organization, culture, race, common origin. The subjective factor is any particular combination (of endless possibilities) of the objective factors chosen by a group to assert its identity and then used as a common source to achieve a certain goal. Furthermore, attributing a motility to the identity, it is said to change in intensity over time (ethnicization, de-ethnicization, re-ethnicization). It is thus a variable rather than a constant.

Fishman (1977) talks of the relation between verbal communication and ethnicity in terms of an inherited constellation, linking ethnicity to a feeling of continuity, defining behaviours and views – concrete cultural institutions; in terms of the meaning people attach to this continuity and collectivity. For Fishman language is amplified by the fact that it is used to cope with other ethnic experiences – “People talk about all kinds of cultural or ethnic activities and issues and therefore language is connected with these. A kind of associative link is developed. Relevant cultural items – types of clothing, aspects of wedding rituals etc., find their expressions in the language, and it is often thought that it cannot be expressed in another language” (Appel and Muysken 1987:13).

In an attempt to understand any single culture, one faces the risk
of never being able to apprehend the symbolic core. But the simple fact that it is a meaningful exercise should be a good enough reason to undertake this enterprise. "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong. There are enormous difficulties to such an enterprise. . . Nor is it the only way that symbolic forms can be sociologically handled. . . But to regard such forms as 'saying something of something' and saying it to somebody is at least to open up the possibility of an analysis which attends to their substance rather than to reductive formulas professing to account for them" (Geertz 1973:451). Entering an alien world with the consciousness of an outsider brings us to the next question – what do we want to see there? We could, perhaps, begin by identifying cultures as a significant vehicle to self-expression which also serve as a reflexive means of self-criticism. Geertz, during his observation of the Balinese cockfight, fought that in them the Balinese forms and discovers his temperance and his society's temper at the same time. Or more exactly, he forms and discovers a particular facet of them (Geertz, ibid.).

Events such as these are said to provide 'lessons' about other aspects of life and many more similar examples could prove a useful backdrop to comprehend the ways in which reality is comprehended and 'formally' invested. As Turner says, Man's status is an evolving life form. To understand this evolving life form, one has to be able to focus on the learned experience which according to Turner always al-
lusively and enigmatically communicated in the symbolic actions and forms of cultures. Folklore, where ethos, aesthetics, and worldview meet, is an excellent place to examine such notions. For instance, Ramanujan (1980) illustrates that classical texts like the Ramayana and the Cilappatikaram present no unchaste women; or where they are presented they are chastened by unchastity (Ahalya, etc.). But folklore, he says, is full of ingenious, promiscuous betrayers of the ideal. In legend, women saints break every rule in Man’s code book, disobey husbands, take on divine liaisons, walk the streets naked. In fact the contrast between ‘classical’ and ‘folk’ materials may imply the existence of more than one system; they are crucial to our very ideas of conceptual/perceptual system in a culture. By ‘context sensitive’ systems like these, Ramanujan and others are stressing on the rule-governed behaviour in society. Accordingly there are rules of structure and rules of use, which are an essential component of the communication channel.

All the ‘anti-structural’ events noted above, are a common feature of oral traditions. These structures found in the myths, tales and other narratives literally make tradition and values stand on their head. It is an upside down world. A widely agreed upon explanation is that these events are ways of resolving tensions which otherwise grip society and people are unable to come to terms with laws which are enforced as means of control. Folk narratives, in particular, express untamed fears. The folk interpretation of Sita for example, differs dramatically from the classical Sita. Valmiki’s Sita, according to Shulman (1985),
is said to have checked her violent potentials, in contrast to the folk Sita who is said to unleash her aggressive destructive instincts almost as if our author, unable to bear the tension embodied in the image of an innately powerful goddess holding her powers in stringent control for ten long months in captivity, decided to set these energies free in a controlled imaginative experiment. In this manner, the tensions regarding the complex image (the gentle woman endowed with unexpressed violent capabilities) have been resolved in the direction of what this context considers as primary.

The comic mode is another illuminating example of such experiences. The language, the gestures employed in this mode are far from any accepted norm of decent behaviour which is why they are relegated to a cheap, vulgar status. But the society in which these modes are utilized, consider it an excellent way of coming to terms with repressed sexual behaviour in their normal day-to-day lives. There are many other kinds of tensions resolved in this 'liminal' (threshold) space, like relationships, character-types, disputes, etc. These events like narratives help to make sense of an experience. They reflect reality in a way that the rational discourse does not know. The untamed fears and desires are tamed by rituals, which are closest to myths of all genres. The structure of a ritual binds the myth and makes any excess behaviour impossible as people would not want a ritual to go bad. And when they do, it indicates a changing context.

1 'Liminal' is here used in the sense of Turner's usage, the point of threshold of an experience.
The folk tradition in Goa displays the complexities which characterize mobile groups with shifting identities. Part of the reason for this mobility, is historical (living in marginal state due to the caste-system) and part of it is due to a desire to uplift themselves in a changing world. Traditions are crucial markers of any changes. Folklore, in this context, cannot be considered as a thing of the past. It is very much a part of the present and keeps renewing itself in accordance with the needs of the people. People identify with cultural forms. These forms themselves influence one another. The theatrical performances in Goa are very popular and the older forms are Khel, Zagor etc. which have influenced the recent and more modern theatrical forms. Traditional forms like Zagor are highly influential traditional performances which unfortunately have received very little attention for their function as fostering an identity. In a culture, everything signifies, as Barthes says. And it is worth exploring Zagor for its signification in the society which performs it.

Zagor is not just a theatrical form; it is a cyclic ritual, closely associated with the people who participate in it. This is clearly the distinguishing marker, as, it requires a participation by the community on the whole. All that is included and excluded in Zagor depends upon the reaction of the community. The overall interest of the ritual performance is to present a whole range of predictable issues as well as new interests which the community can relate to. Moreover, the community feeling is restricted to the village which performs it. The low, vulgar status accorded to it has a lot to do with the fact that
it is an uninhibited closed form of ritual entertainment unexposed to the refinement of more modern literate theatre forms. But the supposed vulgarity has a function; it brings people together in a shared discourse. And in any case, to judge it as a vulgar form is a relative evaluation. Just like any other folk form, it is of a reiterative nature and functions more like a ‘text’ which people read on, and through which they re-enter the shared world. Both the narrative structure and the ritual structure are fixed and it is at the level of ‘imagination’ that the enjoyment takes place. What binds the community is the symbolic discourse of performances like Zagor.

Newman (1981) in an insightful anthropological accounts of the Goan popular festivals describes what he considers to be a ‘common Goan identity’ which cuts across religious boundaries. “There is an emphasis on values of faith, piety and submission to God (and so to authority). Goans learn that for all men suffering and penance are ways of getting closer to God and so, to power and good fortune. Given all the accompanying circumstances, these festivals, especially those of a cross-religious culture, create a greater awareness of the wider unity of Goan communitas, liminality and leaving of social structure and routine, there is a strong educational element” (Newman, 1981). The underlying order and discipline reflect the solid social structure, according to Newman. While we conceede with his notion of common identity, the account however gives the illusion of a stable ethnographic present (though Newman himself is at pains to describe the unity in diversity phenomenon). By doing so, it under-
states the impact of occupations by various rulers in Goa, particularly on the lower classes. Though to a large extent the enterprise concurs with Newman's in pointing towards the imaginary construction of a cohesive identity, the approach is different. Drawing an analogy with the demands of the Mother Goddess in Goa, one has to silence something in order to be another; if you have to be part-Hindu, then you will have to give up a part of Christianity. It is this 'gap' that we venture to capture. While imposing this view on the lower classes, we are by no means seeking to objectify them or present them as an exotic species. And here, we agree with Newman's concern over presenting the texts of others as a painful exercise. But more than just presenting, we consciously comply with the perceptions of the natives and raise important issues which apply not to them alone, but to humanity at large. We are with the people in their moments of *rasa*.

An ethnographic account like Newman's stresses on the cohesive nature of the lower classes. While such an account stresses on the synchronicity of society, it leaves out valuable diachronic details which could give us clues to the metonymic displacements and why identities in Goan popular festivals are constructed in a relationship of equivalence. It would be unfair, however, to criticize Newman for something he does not set out to do. But there is something intriguing about this seeming cohesion. If all the pilgrims are worshippers of this, or that, then who are they? How have people from various classes come together in an imaginary world? What were the barriers and how did they overcome them? And finally, but most importantly, where
is the 'centre' of these texts? Does it lie in some over-arching sym-
bolic references like \textit{Dharma} and \textit{Karma}, or is it far more immediate
and intimate like an individual \textit{Dharma}? The meaning must lie in an
immediate knowledge of 'how to live'.

In a society like Goa, which has seen the influence of a series of
religions, the lower classes particularly have strived to create self-
sufficient forms which is their mirror of creation. Every discourse
is governed by social factors. What is more illuminating is to try
and comprehend the process of becoming, rather than the finished
product itself. It is imperative to retrace the history of Goa in order
to understand the dialectical status of the lower classes. The paradox
in the unnegotiable relation between the \textit{Self} and the \textit{Other} in periods
of domination (by the upper classes and the Portuguese) led to the
putting of oneself in another's shoes - where one's subjectivities were
constituted. While there is cause to celebrate this form of agency, it
still suppresses details. The intention to highlight these suppressions
is evidenced by the fact that they do not remain so. They become
manifest in the way people represent their perceptions of reality. Thus,
commonly held tensions in society are treated to illusory solutions
in a public discourse, and the structure turns to anti-structure as
\citeauthor{Turner} puts it. Most anthropological theories, particularly the Levi-
Straussian kind, have tried to locate the cultural specificities through
the content of the immanent discourse.

It is proposed that a certain section – the marginalised groups
in Goan society perpetuated a collective identity in the context of
domination by more powerful groups. This identity as stressed often is neither inevitable nor fixed and is hegemonic only as long as it appears to offer a viable solution to the dilemmas of the people it constitutes as an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1991:5-7). The elements which make up this identity – not only the persons brought together within the definition, but also the interests and the antagonisms believed to beset them – are labile, and redefinitions of any of these can lend to a shifting of the entire field of identity making enemies of former neighbours and allies of previous antagonists (Bowman, 1993). On the lines of Bowman's argument then, in the interest of the marginalised groups in Goa, it is possible to state that unlike a stable ethnographic present, the ‘inside’ is neither stable nor systematic, but is itself a response to the assault on its ‘inhabitants’ from outside. These ‘liminal’ public spaces which Newman talks about, serve as monuments to imaginings of community and such monuments prove to be as labile as are those communities themselves. Particularly in an improved socio-economic condition when the discourse changes from that of symbolic unity to that of power relations.

There is considerable heterogeneity inside this supposed ‘communitas’. Each of these festivities, which bring together the Hindus, Christians and Muslims, seem to serve as a ‘floating signifier’ (Derrida, 1972) for the people. Each individual is able to attribute personal meanings to the place, and yet, because the time and place serves as an inscription for so many diverse meanings and motives, the events constitute the community. People recognize that community at the
same time as they recognize the multiplicity of its character; it is in a very real sense, a concentration of the community which they moved in day to day, but in a more diluted form (Bowman, ibid.). Identities move from context to context, hence as much as one would like to account for objective factors like language and discourse (as part of this identity) on a synchronic axis, their immediate relevance lies at its intersection with the diachronic axis. Society being in a constant state of flux, one cannot talk of closed structures. One needs to look at the process rather than what happens once the discourse has been created, for the lower class in particular have constantly recreated themselves. The Gawadas have moved from one experience to another - from being Hindus, to being Catholics and now to being Hindus again.

The symbolic core of these events pursues reified universals like 'good', 'evil', 'nature', 'culture', in order to dissolve contradictions. The logic of the symbol is thus 'causative' and leads to consequences like a 'belief-system'. The specificity of the symbol lies in its context-sensitivity. Symbols are appropriated because in them people see a new experience. The forms are highly suggestive of both a formal division and its eventual illusion. The ancient Indian thought captured this most effectively in the "vision in the Gita where Krishna is both a specific form and the ground of all forms. The form called *katha* is said to have done away with any formal division (Sivaramakrishna, 1986).

Symbols which are collectively regarded foster a common iden-
tity, an identity that also converges on shared habits, rituals, food, clothing, language, as part of a common thinking. The value of symbolic activity is generally agreed upon despite a considerable heterogeneity among the members of the group. The relationship of language with its objects is itself a problematic. Even if one conceded that the linguistic sign carries a cultural and historic weight, they carry an unrepresentable, constantly shifting relationship with the intended meaning. This was a major preoccupation of the early Sanskrit grammarians who had theorised this in terms of an arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. When we identify formal properties in a text and attribute minimal representative qualities to it, this is not to say that one has exhausted all possible meanings. Rather, one has captured one possible significance. Each significance comes with a silence. By taking one interpretation one leaves out the other possible meanings. And this is the core of all signification. Bharata Muni in the Natyashastra has given signification a class-based perception. People of different classes are perceived to perceive things differently. This possibility lies in the nature of the sign itself supremely brought out in the Bhagavadgita where Krishna says - “aham kratur, aham yajnah” ‘I am the sacrifice; I am the worship. . . ’ (Bailey, Indian culture and the sublime, South Asia, No. 1, 103-114).

More recently, psychoanalytical thought has talked of the endless

\footnote{We modify this to describe the effects of exposure to alternatives forms of reality.}
imaginative possibilities of the human mind which when unchecked leads to mental disorders (See Kristeva 1980, 1982, 1984). But as the organized world around us evidences, there are sufficient checks in the symbolic order which tries to negotiate a dialectic between the Self and the Other. But since this is unnegotiable, the meaning keeps slipping and there lies its endless commutability. As a result this symbolic order is full of 'gaps' and 'traces'. In Goa, for example, the reigning Mother-Goddess, Shanta Durga, is the ultimate symbolic figure. She is divine (resides in exalted sanctoriums of the temple), and also human (demanding for material objects like a chest of drawers from Christian devotees). She protects (a goddess of the fertility cult) as well as destroys. Where then lies her central significance? It resides in every single perception of her. She, as a sign, is indeterminable and in every perception she creates an illusory reality.

The unstable symbol is constantly a point of complicity and contestation. In this is found the inter-subjectivity and conscious collaboration. But at the same time, at another level it is also 'Imaginary'. When symbols are appropriated, it offers possibilities of a new experience. Ricouer (1981) says that appropriation 'gives' the subject new capacities of knowing himself. It is the process by which a revelation of new modes of being, new forms of life take place. "Thus appropriation ceases to appear as a kind of possession, as a way of taking hold of ... It implies instead a moment of dispossession of the narcissistic ego" (Ricouer, 1981). Culture to an extent generates metaphor self-consciously, and this is the 'form' that we talked about earlier. In
this sense then it is self-reflexive. It is also Imaginary, in which fictive identities are established without any sense of the historical or social real. Thus, while Shanta Durga means differently to different people, she also refers to one common symbolic order which everyone, despite their class- caste differences identifies with, and this is the moment of Rasa, the ultimate state of receptivity, of experience, of bhoga. And this is the point of cohesion.

Another important issue at stake here is that of the mode of communication. Everything in a communication channel is a 'sign' but there is something else to language in the form of oral and written discourse. The non-verbal, gestural signs signify in fixed spaces, but this is not the case with the verbal discourse. The oral and written discourse have no limits like the spaces inhabited by gestures, at least in principle. They live in infinite inter-subjective spaces. And in that sense it only prefigures, what in a written text can be stated, for the latter imposes a distance in time and space. In a complex manner, one can relate the oral tradition to the restrictions experienced by the people who were aware of alternate realities. The role repertoire of the people was limited and the systematic appeal of texts in an oral tradition is motivated by the necessities of recall. The choice was in this sense restricted to improvisations upon existing patterns, which were governed by rules of rhyme and metre. The discourse was representational as it was required to operate within a definite semantic space.

Literacy, is a discourse in which, to borrow Lacan's (1977) term,
the letter 'insists'. And it is through the letter that the structure of society and of the political order can be disclosed. The relations lived in an oral tradition make it impossible to disengage oneself. The distance enabled by the written text allows for a metalinguistic structure. A non-literary narrative for example cannot become an object for itself. Writing and literacy create dispersions, while the symbolic order in an oral tradition provides cohesion. But then if there exists orality, writing will necessarily follow.

Symbolic discourse operates in the realm of myths, folktales, legends and fables. It offers a dream-like passage towards resolution. And this has often been contrasted to the proof ridden tenets of scientific knowledge. In a hasty decision to prove the superiority of technological advancements as a result of 'writing', the merits of orality are forgotten and also obliterated is the fact that all writing has come through orality and vice-versa. Symbolic communication carries over into another mode. Narratives (stories) have been used since the Vedic age, when they were used to illuminate experience. If an oral tradition falls back upon its narratives, then, can one accuse it of being devoid of any legitimacy? For, in today's world, legitimacy is the privilege of scientific knowledge. And yet, one of the most developed 'technology' was part of an oral tradition in ancient India. The ancient texts illustrate the use of highly developed means of transport, of warfare, etc., and the Vedas themselves were recited orally.

Perhaps the ultimate legitimacy for any kind of knowledge lies in its 'practice'. And underneath this practise lies the crucial factor of
justification. One practises something ‘because’. . . ; and there begins the story. Barthes was so correct when he said that there are narratives all around us. If that is the case, then judging by present standards, we are all ‘primitive’ ‘savage’ and ‘underdeveloped’. The needs of society have undergone a drastic change. Literacy has taken over, but the difference is that we all pursue the same questions, but the modes have changed. “This is why it is no longer the Word (Christ as idea) which retains the meaning; instead it is the combination of ‘markings’ (images of the Old Man, the Sky, the Stars) which produce it.” (Kristeva, 1986).

Thus, in retracing the footsteps of the Kunbi-Gawadas in Goa, we are not only discovering them, but all humanity. It is a passage we all go through, if not as adults, as children, and unconsciously even as adults. This is the passage of the ‘mirror-stage’ (Kristeva, 1974) to discovering oneself. To see oneself as worshippers of ‘Shanta Durga’, ‘performers of Zagor’ is one stage – to see oneself as ‘Gaudos’ performing Zagor, worshipping Shanta Durga is another. The Kunbi-Gawadas have travelled this oft-trodden path. But like all search for identity, underlying the whole of the drama is the ‘flying Dutchman’ motif (Heble, 1988). According to legend, the flying Dutchman was a ghost-ship condemned to sail the seas forever without the hope of reaching shore.

In order to explore these issues, the thesis has been divided into the following chapters. In Chapter II, all the major theoretical inputs into the notions of Narrative, Folklore, Ritual, Performance, Structure,
Aesthetics, etc., will be discussed. The strategy adopted, is to move between theories in the Indian tradition and the recent theories in the West about these concepts. This will be done on the basis of generalized notions about crucial concepts like the 'sign', 'structure', 'performance' etc..

In Chapter III, we will, first, trace the sociological and historical background of the marginal groups, in order to validate our claims about the nature of their cultural and religious discourse. This will be done by highlighting the cultural discourse in a Narrative form as it circulates in this fashion, creating redundant and repetitive forms which people relate to. Next, we will try and establish a formal structure to these narratives on the grounds that there exists some similarity in most of these religious narratives. Also, the fact that these are part of an oral tradition gives it a different flavour and we will attempt at a description of the distinct orality, its implications and the differences between an oral tradition and a written tradition, bringing to fore the literate status of these communities today.

In Chapter IV, we come to the actual performance of a Narrative, and particularly Zagor, in order to link the final performance to the notion of identity, and also to attribute an active imagination to the audience. The renewed interest that this audience brings to what is a predictable episodic performance is very crucial for the success of this ritual performance. For the purpose of understanding the role of the audience, we explore the relevance of the concept of Rasa in the powerful Indian theory of performance aesthetics.