CHAPTER 2

Yellamma, Her Wives, and the Question of Religion

Given the mass attendance at Yellamma's festival, it is evident that religious considerations continue to play a major role in the lives of common people against any social considerations. The reluctance to give up an age-old ritual is clear. It is for the government and voluntary bodies to help the masses give up superstitions and beliefs that do not augur well for a progressive society.
—“Persisting Evil,” Deccan Herald

They are the devadasis, girls from scheduled castes of a Hindu sect who dedicate their lives to the worship of the goddess Yellamma. But over the years, the religious role of these women has diminished. Forbidden to marry and seek any other forms of employment, they rely on sex work, concubinage or begging.
—Vinita D. Singh, “NGO Lobbies for Welfare Scheme of Devadasis”

Religion in Question

What counts as religion? This is a question about the politics of knowledge as well as about the status of any given set of practices and beliefs. In the first of the two commentaries above on the rituals surrounding Yellamma and the women tied to her who perform them, popular religion is cast as an obstacle to social progress. It is superstition, false belief—the sort of religion that secular institutions of government and civil society must work against in order to pursue the social good. In the second commentary, the religiosity of devadasis is consigned to the past. It has degenerated, and they have become degenerate: prostitutes, kept women, or beggars. This narrative of decline and the distinction between true and false religion are both standard features of religion as a modern form. Within this framework, the religion of dedicated women, if they can be said to have religion
at all, is both the origin and a sign of their fallen condition. It cannot be knowledge. It is superstition, an incorrect apprehension of the world leading to a mistaken way of being in the world. Eradicate it and you have redeemed them, reformed religion, and advanced society.

In contrast, consider the appraisal of a Dalit public intellectual and historian, Y. Chinna Rao, in an article titled, “Dalits and Tribals Are not Hindu”:

Numerous writings of foreign travellers and works of anthropologists show that before the advent of Christianity in India, Dalits had a religious system of their own. Dalits are concerned with their local village goddesses. The female goddesses appear predominant. Unlike in Hinduism they emerge as independent, unblushing erotic female figures. Be it the Mariamma, Poleamma, Pedamma, or any local deity, they have nothing in common with the goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. Other than the local village goddesses, they worship kuladevata (caste deity) and Jinti devata (family deity). Later these traditions were incorporated as “little” traditions by Brahmanical anthropologists and sociologists to protect their tradition as the “great” tradition, on account of its “intellectual,” “classical” and “higher” philosophy. (2000, 156)

Rao suggests that the rites and practices belonging to Dalits have been colonized as a historical consequence of Christian missionary activities, as well as a discursive effect of modern anthropological and nationalist conceptions of Hinduism as bifurcated between high textual and philosophical Brahmanical religion and low vernacular practices. Rao’s commentary is in keeping with postcolonial critiques of the category of religion as a Christian theological category that operates as a regulating and normalizing force in the variegated fields of rites; rituals; practices; and modes of address for and relationships with gods, spirits, and saints (Asad 1993; King 1999). In this view, the questionable status of the religiosity of dedicated women is the result of historical configurations of power and knowledge between imperial Britain and occupied India, nationalist elites and vernacular folk, Brahmans and Dalits, men and women.

As noted above, when I arrived in the central Deccan Plateau to begin my research, I did not expect to encounter women whose lives were organized around the performance of the rites to which they were dedicated. The scholarly and popular accounts I had consulted before I began my fieldwork suggested either that these rites had been abandoned or that they were negligible, empty in themselves, merely a false cover for prostitution.

As Rao suggests, such accounts constitute colonial modes of knowledge in which the designation of a set of practices as false or empty is a move of power. Before I read Rao, I encountered the dedicated women who reminded me—when I asked them what they were called—of the critical importance of the difference between modernist representations of religion and everyday lifeworlds of practice. “Pujaris,” they said, “What else would they call us? We keep the devi.”

In their world, who they are in relationship to the devi and her devotees is self-evident and unproblematic: “What else would they call us?” These dedicated women are not unaware of the state’s position on dedication. But, they are standing in and speaking from a different place, a different world. This world centers itself around the devi rather than around the state, or even against the state. This world can produce, and is produced by, ways of knowing that exceed Christian imperial, Brahmanical Hindu, and secular liberal appraisals of nomadism. ways of being in relation to gods and spirits as false or empty. Consider, for instance, what Yamuna had to say about would-be reformers: “People are confident in themselves and don’t believe in the goddess, they think what we do is shameful, but we know what we get from her, eat from her, wear from her. They don’t know this, those who are saying all this about Yellamma. If we keep her and serve her with devotion then all these things come to us. Our life will flow toward her and we will feel very happy—however much we roam in the world, in her name, belief in her will become strong, so we are not able to believe what people say.”

Precisely because reform is constituted outside of faith and devotional practice, she states, it makes no claim on her. She describes her knowledge of Yellamma’s presence and force in the world in material terms, as a recognition of what is true about the world. Yamuna foregrounds relationality, rather than rationality, as the ground of this recognition. The presence of those who roam in her name is her presence; as they move across the landscape, her influence is extended through space. The everyday ritual and performative work of and commentary by these Dalit female ritual specialists calls forth a world in which proper devotion toward the goddess is met with prosperity and happiness (sukha). In asserting that devadasis stand in an ethical relationship to the devi, who provides for their needs, Yamuna refutes the claims made by reformers about the economic and moral condition of devadasis. Moreover, she criticizes the stance of reformers as based on ignorance and the hubris of self-reliance.

Taking as my starting point the Yellamma seve and regard for devadasis
that is part of the fabric of everyday life in rural northern Karnataka, I ask what kind of world devadasis are making as they tell and retell the history of their goddess, enact forms of puja, devotion, and ecstatic embodiment, and comment on relations among human beings and between humans and deities. I then contrast this world to that of reform as a means of illuminating their respective politics of knowledge and recognition. I do not mean to portray customary rites as more authentic than projects of reform; indeed, this is one of the reasons I use the language of “world making.” Both devadasi rites and practices of reform are world-making projects with real effects. However, whereas one project entails a violent remaking of the other, the other project does not.

Keeping the Devi

It was a hot day, and my colleague—a professor of linguistics at Karnataka University—and I were taking a break from our observations and conversations at the main Yellamma temple in the shaded refuge of his car. Curious, or perhaps understandably wary about the presence of a white foreigner, an older jogati approached the car to ask why we had come. “To learn about Yellamma,” I answered, and I asked her: “Where are you from?” “From here,” she said. “I have lived here for over thirty years.” I realized as I listened to her that she had witnessed all the changes brought by the passage of the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982: the last time devadasis danced in front of the devi during the annual procession around the temple complex; the last time they processed en masse from the sacred well up the hill to take darshan clad only in neem leaves; the violent disruption of dedication rites by police; the arrival of journalists, filmmakers, and researchers; the destruction of the homes they had hereditary rights to on the temple hill, and their relocation several kilometers away; and the ongoing campaigns to cut the matted locks worn by dedicated women capable of entering states of possession and divination and to stop devadasis from playing sacred instruments and singing devotional songs. I asked her what she had seen change over the time she had been at Saundatti. “There is more and more sin (paapa) in the world, and fewer and fewer people coming to the festivals. The goddess has become angry, and people are dying of disease and earthquakes,” she said, then calmly turned and walked away.

With this speech act she occupied a place of moral authority and theological knowing. This dedicated woman appraised the consequences of reform, the condition of humanity (more sin, less devotion), and described the affective state of the devi. The subject position her speech act performs takes the world, not the nation, as its frame of reference. She invoked a moral economy in which sin varies in direct proportion to devotion and the anger of the devi is legible in the miserable condition of humanity. The authority with which she spoke rests in her relationship to Yellamma, for whom she spoke and who speaks through her during rites of possession and divination. The power of her position was embodied—and, indeed, it was literally marked on her body by the red and white beads tied at dedication and worn by all jogatis as well as by the long matted locks hanging down her back signifying that the devi had come into her body.

Those who keep the devi, who serve as her pujaris, world a world that places Yellamma at its center. The word for her vehicle, the jaga, translates into English as basket, world. That is, jaga means both basket and world at the same time. When jogatis carry her from place to place they often say: “We went with the jaga” (Naavu jaga hooggidi). Rather than referring to the devi, they refer to her vehicle, the world: “We went with the world,” or “That farmer called us to come and bring the world, he has arranged his daughter’s marriage and they want to fill the udi” (Aa raite naamam kardana jaga takondu baraka heleunari, magaldu madvi aiti udi tumb bekantari).

Keeping the devi involves a variety of practices, including washing and dressing the devi in preparation for biweekly puja, seasonal festivals, and the celebration of auspicious occasions in the households of devotees. Dedicated women receive offerings that devotees make and give Yellamma’s blessings in return. They perform rites of divination and enter states of possession in which the devi speaks, responding to the petitions of devotees. They accompany the devi wherever she goes, play her instruments, sing bhajans, and tell devotional stories. When the village makes its annual pilgrimage to the main Yellamma temple, the pujaris bring the devi and conduct her rites on the hill there. They assist devotees in the execution of a harake.

I witnessed the performance of all of these rites in the course of my observations at Yellamma’s main temple at Saundatti and her four regional temples across the central Deccan Plateau. At those temples I spoke with Yellamma women who continue to conduct the rites to which they were dedicated, in spite of—and sometimes in protest against—the state ban. The realization that a significant percentage of devadasis spent much of their lives doing ritual work prompted me to look for a rural location where I might learn more about the everyday lives of these Dalit female pujaris.
and the seve of Yellamma and Matangi that they preside over. A helpful colleague sent me to his father’s ancestral village. Off I went with my research assistant, Ambuja Kowli, into the northern reaches of the Belgaum District by a public bus with little more than the name of our destination—Nandipur—to guide us. We bumped along the poorly maintained roads in the blue bus, past green fields of sugarcane, millet, and wheat doted with yellow sunflowers. At the sight of my pale skin, a baby looking over the shoulder of its father burst into tears, offering an affective diagnosis of the disruptive presence of a stranger. His father laughed and patted him on the back.

Arriving in a cloud of dust, we descended from the bus at the center of the village into the shade of an enormous, widespread peepul tree. We asked the men gathered there for directions to the Yellamma temple. Following their indications, we walked down a little lane, past the openly curious faces of villagers washing dishes, repairing bicycles, carrying water, or otherwise occupying themselves with the intense physical labor required to sustain life in a rural village deprived of infrastructure. At the end of the lane and off to our left was a blue, one-room wooden structure on the door of which was painted Sri Yellamma Devi. An advance team of children had alerted those inside to our arrival, and we were beckoned inside and invited to sit on a mat.

The murti and all the ornaments of the devi and her jaga were spread out on cloths on the floor. Yamuna and Durgabai looked up to greet us as they continued to clean and polish these ornaments, preparing the devi as they did each Tuesday and Friday for puja. They asked questions about who we were and why we had come, and I answered in my then-halting Kannada or through Ambuja’s able translation. I said that I had come from America and wanted to learn about Yellamma. They directed me to scriptures and scholars. I said that I wanted them to teach me: “People say this and that about Yellamma, about devadasis, but I want to hear what you have to say.” The older of the two, Yamuna, listened very attentively as she patiently rubbed the tarnish off Yellamma’s brass face. When the bustling crowd of curious children pressing into the temple got too thick for her, she shooed them off with the small gesture and the quiet efficacy of a respected elder. At one point she put down her work to come sit beside me and take into her hands the small album of photographs of my family, friends, and home that I introduced myself with. I was struck by the calm deliberation with which she approached everything she undertook, whether it was paging through representations of a life elsewhere or wrapping a fresh sari.
around Yellamma. As she tucked and pulled at the sari she asked me: “Are you doing this study from the point of view that the gods are there, or the perspective that the gods are not there?” (Idanna neevu devra adanatheli madakhatteero yen devra illri annu driishti inda madakhatteero). “They are there.” I said, amazed by her question and thinking of Ashis Nandy’s (2001) observation that one doesn’t have to believe in the gods to recognize that they are alive and well in South Asia.

I came to see Yamuna’s question for me as a test, the passage of which admitted me to forms of participation in and access to the lifeworld of devadasis not granted to skeptics. Months later, when I traveled with the Nandipur jagatis to other villages, they introduced me to other jagatis and jogappas as a bhaktaru (devotee), despite my radically imperfect observations. I came to understand that they were not only making a claim about my relationship to Yellamma, but they were also making a claim about my relationship to them. As a devotee of Yellamma, I was responsible to them. They were entitled to make claims on me and my household, and they did. Those who keep the devi are entitled to make claims on those householders who desire what Yellamma can bestow.

The nature of this exchange was manifest in the performance of devadasi rites and in the interactions between dedicated women and devotees of Yellamma. Within days of my arrival in Nandipur, I took off on foot one morning toward the center of the village from the extension area where Iyoti I had set up house. Under the wide-eyed gaze of our new neighbors, most of whom I had not yet met, I walked down the rough track typical of this region, hoping to find a jeep on its way to the nearest town. If I could get a ride there and find a full-service post office, I might be able to send the permission forms I needed to continue my research by express mail to the United States. These bureaucratic preoccupations scattered as I came over the hill and saw a small but colorful procession of people walking from the center of the village toward me. I recognized the two distinctively painted jagas of Yellamma and Matangi, with their flower-printed skirts fluttering and waving around the heads of the two men on which they sat. Kamlabai—a tall, white-haired devadasi with a graceful carriage—led the procession, distributing the brilliant yellow turmeric associated with Yellamma (bhandara). When devotees came out of their houses toward her, she stopped, slipped off her sandals, and blessed them by pressing bhandara onto their brows as they bent to touch her feet.

As I came to learn over time, the passage of the devi was always an event, prompting villagers to put aside their work and come out into the road to pay her respect and take her blessing. Some would gather a precious pot of water to pour on the feet of those carrying the deity, playing her instruments, or giving her bhandara. On this particular day, the devi and her attendants were on their way to the new house of the Hanuman pujari family, where a female buffalo calf had just been born. This auspicious occasion and others like it—the healing of an affliction, arrangement of a marriage, completion of a house, or successful drilling of a bore well—were taken to be signs of the goddess’s favor and frequently celebrated by villagers by calling her and her pujaris to their home for udi tumbuwuda (filling the lap or womb), in which householders put uncooked rice, betel nuts and leaves, money, and new cloth into the laps of Yellamma, Matangi, and their attendants.

A couple of days after I encountered this procession, Iyoti and I were going with the devi ourselves, following the jagatis as they made rounds during the festival of Mahawanami phere, which begins on the day of the full moon before Navaratri. Navaratri (meaning nine nights) falls in the month of Ashwina in the Hindu calendar, or September or October in the Roman calendar. It celebrates the victory of the goddess, usually in her form as Durga but in this region as Yellamma or Matangi, over the buffalo demon Mahishasura. With his army of demons, Mahishasura has
defeated the gods in battle and they cannot fight back having previously granted him protection against any god, animal or demon. Born from the anger of the gods and endowed with their collective powers, the devi is beautiful and fierce. In his arrogance, Mahishsura does not imagine a woman, a devi, could do him any harm and she easily draws him into battle. Cutting off his head, she restores the cosmos to its proper order. On the ninth night of the festival, called Jagrani, when the final battle is fought, the jogatis guard the strength of the devi by sitting up all night tending the Navaratri lamp and singing songs. Before I had arrived in Nandipur, I had not known of this seasonal rite. As the jogatis explained to me over tea in the cool quiet of the Yellamma temple, “we take the jagas from house to house in the village asking for oil for the Navaratri lamp, and people will give us grain.” They make rounds like this twice a year at Navaratri (in the fall) and Panchami (in the late summer), and farmers fill the udi of the devi with newly harvested corn, millet, or wheat.

When we went on rounds with the devi, we traveled along narrow paths between fields of tall, waving grain ready for harvest, walking from house to house, usually lagging behind the devi, who was carried on the heads of male relatives of the jogatis. “We used to carry her ourselves,” they told me, “but she has become so heavy with these jaga, we ask our brothers to come and give them a share of grain.” This distribution of ritual labor in the kin network of Nandipur jogatis was not uncommon; it was but one of the ways in which prestations (offerings, payments) made by devotees to the jogatis extended beyond individual dedicated women and into their kin networks. By the time we caught up to them, the jagas would have been set down in front of the house on a sacred blanket, bedstead, or at least a tarpaulin made from sewn-together fertilizer sacks provided by the household. Untucking the ends of their saris from their waists and draping them over their heads, the women from the household came out with two fans—one for each devi—containing a measure or two of recently harvested grain: corn, millet, or wheat. After offering incense or camphor and applying vermilion and turmeric from their household altar to the devi, the jogatis, and often to Jyoti and me, they might touch the feet of the jogatis and take their blessing. Taking a rare break from their household and farming labors, they then sat in their doorway or on the outer ledge of the house to listen. After pouring their offering of grain into the udi of Yellamma and Matangi, the householders would take back a pinch that had touched the devi’s body and return it to the household’s fan. Then the jogatis sang bhajans. Closing

the ritual with a final harake for the household, they gathered their instruments, lifted the grain tied up in bundles onto their heads, and set off for the next house.

On one of the days that we went roaming from farmhouse to farmhouse with the jogatis, we followed the purple sari of the elegant Matangi pujari Mahadevi along the margin of a field of corn edged with bright yellow sunflowers. We moved toward the next house along a narrow track between tall, waving fronds of sugarcane, pilfered bits of which I extended toward children who shyly accepted my humble offering before quickly darting behind the wrap of their mother’s sari. The arrival of the devi at a household was an auspicious event that signaled a time to gather and put work aside. Sitting among the farmers gathered around Yellamma and Matangi, I listened to the jogatis sing into the slanted afternoon light.

Renukaa, Jagadamba; Renukaa, Jagadamba;
Renuka, mother of the world; Renuka, mother of the world;
Your name is very sacred,
Your feet are very sacred [this refrain is repeated after each stanza].

Daily for your seve, leaves and flowers are needed;
rose-water for your bath, pujari for your seve.
defeated the gods in battle and they cannot fight back having previously granted him protection against any god, animal or demon. Born from the anger of the gods and endowed with their collective powers, the devi is beautiful and fierce. In his arrogance, Mahishasura does not imagine a woman, a devi, could do him any harm and she easily draws him into battle. Cutting off his head, she restores the cosmos to its proper order.9 On the ninth night of the festival, called Jagrani, when the final battle is fought, the jogatis guard the strength of the devi by sitting up all night tending the Navaratri lamp and singing songs. Before I had arrived in Nandipur, I had not known of this seasonal rite.9 As the jogatis explained to me over tea in the cool quiet of the Yellamma temple, "we take the jagas from house to house in the village asking for oil for the Navaratri lamp, and people will give us grain." They make rounds like this twice a year at Navaratri (in the fall) and Panchami (in the late summer), and farmers fill the udi of the devi with newly harvested corn, millet, or wheat.

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![Figure 2.3 Singing a final blessing at a farm house. Photograph by the author.](image)

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Renuka, Jagadambara; Renuka, Jagadambara;
Renuka, mother of the world; Renuka, mother of the world;
Your name is very sacred,
Your feet are very sacred [this refrain is repeated after each stanza].

Daily for your seve, leaves and flowers are needed;
rose-water for your bath, pujaris for your seve.
I, thinking they were mine, went about trusting them, but my people were not for me a refuge.

We gather in devotion, make pilgrimage to you, Seek boons, seek compassion from you.

Devi, look, on Tuesdays, Fridays, Devotees smear your sacred turmeric, mother.

Flowers and sacred turmeric they shower on you, “Hail, hail” they circumambulate you.

Living among seven lakes, born in Nandipur, Protect us, we pray, I remember you, I sing your praises.

Bowing to people gathered, Laxmana composed this song. True goddess, Annapurna, he has held your feet.7

This song describes a flow of exchange between the compassion of the mother of the world and the devotion of her people. This devotion is expressed through embodied and sensual acts of seve and seeks the goodwill and protection of the devi in return. Her pleasure at being well propitiated is manifested in the fecundity of fields, wombs, and all other forms of human thriving. Her displeasure or anger at being neglected is evident in the lack of water or a fruitful harvest or the presence of disease. The terms of this give-and-take run through the songs and stories belonging to the jogatis, which they alone can sing or tell. The distinctive position of those who keep the devi vis-à-vis the devi and within their community is enacted through the performance of these songs and stories, which both describe and provide the occasion for the enactment of proper relationship between devotees and the devi, and toward the world. The jogatis’ position as mediators between the devi and her devotees is materialized through transactions in which the fertility of the devi is dispersed and renewed in the world.

Those who keep the devi also work to ward off, diagnose, and resolve affliction. One morning we found Kamlabai washing the devi’s murti and her ornaments in the Yellamma temple. She gestured for us to sit on a mat, and we came in and watched her prepare Yellamma for darshan. It was Tuesday, one of Yellamma’s days, and devotees would be coming to the temple. Kamlabai sat on the floor by the jaga, rubbing the silver murti with a gray powder, the tarnish from the metal blackening her quick-moving hands. A devotee came in, carrying a small basket covered with a hand-crocheted cloth. From under the cloth the slightly stooped older woman produced a small plate of curd (yogurt) rice and a bowl of ambli— buttermilk fortified with millet flour. The ambli was delicious—hot and spicy. She gave me a taste when I asked what it was, but not until after she had offered it, along with the rice, to the devi (or at least to the jaga, since the murti was still being transformed in Kamlabai’s hands). After pouring ghee into a lamp in a raised niche in the wall, she lit it. Kamlabai explained that a new buffalo had been born in this devotee’s house, and that devotees reserve the first five days’ milk for the devi, making ghee and buttermilk and preparing ambli to offer her. “My mother does this,” Jyoti added, “thinking that the goddess will protect the buffalo.”

We sat quietly, and I thought about the flow between the goddess and devotees of blessings and propitiating gifts, transacted in the space of the temple. Kamlabai brought up the terrible scarcity of water and commented on the domestic ill fate of a woman we could hear weeping: “Puapa [it is a sin], her husband beats her,” The lack of rains and domestic strife were commonly cited examples of the absence of Yellamma’s favor. Yamuna came into the temple and sat down, resting her back against the wall. More devotees came to offer ambli, rice, camphor, and incense and to touch the feet of Kamlabai and Yamuna. Without interrupting our conversation, Yamuna pressed bright yellow turmeric onto their foreheads in a gesture of blessing, while Kamlabai continued washing and polishing all the devi’s things in preparation for puja. Mixing water and white powder in the palm of her hand—using that as a palette and her index finger as the brush—she painted long arcs of white over the eyes of the devi. She added a circle of bright red on her brow, making the tilak, here an auspicious sign of married status. Using her middle finger to remove errant color, she smoothed the symmetry of the line. Like other amma goddesses found all over South India, Yellamma is ambivalent: she has the power to afflict as well as the power to cure. In the words of one of the bhajans that jogatis sing:

Adishakti Yellamma, our compassionate mother, In all the world, your name is the most transformative8 [this refrain is repeated after each line]. Devi, you wasted the bad people. Devi, you lifted up and protected your devotees, Generously granted them boons.9

“If we show her proper devotion, she will keep us well,” devotees explain. Maintaining a flow of give-and-take with the devi is fundamental to the possibility of any and all kinds of prosperity or fertility—the fecundity of
the fields, the fullness of wombs, the procurement of a salaried job, the restoration and maintenance of health and well-being, and all other forms of thriving are generally attributed to her. Affliction in the form of illness or misfortune of any kind is read as a sign of the devil's anger or displeasure and prompts soul-searching about possible failures of devotion. Not all kinds of misfortune and illness are thought to be caused by the devil, only those that have been sent by her. When unsure of the etiology of an affliction, devotees consult a jogati or a jogappa, usually the one attached to their village, who will conduct a rite of divination to discover if the trouble comes from Yellamma or not. It may be from some other god or spirit, or it may not have been sent by a god at all. Plenty of illness just is, in the logic of devotees, and will be quickly cleared up by a good doctor. The trouble of Yellamma, however, cannot be resolved by doctors or their medicines. Indeed, as devotees explained to me, Yellamma's kaadaata can only be aggravated by the ministrations of a doctor, who is applying the wrong medicine.

Regular devotion to Yellamma often aims to secure her favorable regard or to express gratitude after a serious trouble has been resolved. Devotees make harake to her as a means of attracting her goodwill: "Devil if you make my daughter well, I will bring you a new sari"; "Our son had lost his hearing; we told the devil we would call her to our house and fill her with tea if he became well, and since then he has become strong"; and "I am making offerings to the devil for a salaried job." The murti of the devi, her jaga, her gold and silver ornaments, her extensive collection of saris—everything that belongs to her has been given in fulfillment of a harake. Not only material objects of value but acts of bodily self-offering are pledged through harake, and at Yellamma's hill it is not unusual to see a muddy devotee making full-length prostrations around the temple. He or she will be accompanied by a jogati or jogappa who oversees the proper fulfillment of the harake. Coming regularly to the village temple is a form of devotion and a means of harake. Devotees, especially women, come for puja on Tuesdays and Fridays. Having bathed, they bring navedya (freshly cooked food offerings) covered with a cloth, or carefully wrapped in a shiny tin box. They wave an open hand over the food, fanning in an arc toward the head of the devil, a gesture of offering to her that transforms the navedya into prasada (tasted and thus blessed by the deity). They light incense and perhaps pour a little oil in the brass lamps. Sometimes they stay awhile, sitting in the quiet shade of the temple before they begin the long walk home; sometimes they leave quickly in order to get back to their work. Women from all but the highest communities come, and on big festival days—when women are busy with lots of cooking—men and children come to offer navedya to the devi, for she should be fed before anyone else eats.10

When the festival of Navaratri is celebrated in Nandipur, the lamp is lit for Yellamma, whose fight with the buffalo demon has both cosmic and decidedly local effects. Like other amma devis found all over South India in the form of rocks smeared with vermillion and turmeric and wrapped in saris, huddled under trees, or kept in small temples, she is identified with the village itself and thus is appealed to, relied on, and held responsible for not just household concerns but the well-being of the village as a whole.11 During the Mahawani phere, when Mahadevi, the feistiest of the jogatis, felt devotees who could give more were not giving enough money for the Navaratri lamp, she scolded them: "Is this enough to keep the lamp lit? Give some more." "How can we give more when she has sent only this much rain?" devotees replied. "Give more and she will provide," replied Mahadevi, undaunted.

Affliction, whether corporate or individual, is a sign of the presence of Yellamma. "The devil came" (devi bandalu) is a way of saying "I was troubled by the devil." People also describe the resolution of trouble in terms of the devil's departure: "She left us alone (Aki khalu)." The most common way people recount the resolution of trouble, however, is as the restoration of a relationship. In one of the most dramatic accounts of the kaadaata of Yellamma that I ever heard, my neighbor Lakshmi described a series of deaths and dire illnesses in her natal family that took place after her older sister, who had been dedicated to Yellamma, took the beads tied at dedication off her neck and married a man. This decision was in keeping with the wishes of her brother, who was concerned about the respectability of the family. He was the first to fall ill and almost die, Lakshmi told me in hushed tones. As is common in such cases of serious misfortune in a household, the possibility of the presence of Yellamma was considered, and this was confirmed through a rite of divination performed by a jogati in her capacity as a pujari. Lakshmi's sister attempted a compromise with the devi, which seemed to resolve the trouble in her family. She did not leave her husband or retie the beads around her neck, but she resolved to wear them on her body but hidden from public view, tucked into her blouse. In this way she restored her relationship to the devi, whose anger at her attempt to leave was said to have manifested as affliction in the household. Once she re-
commenced wearing the devi’s beads on her body, the devi’s presence in the household cooled and, as Laxshmi put it, “everything became all right” (ella arunya agoeti).

In South Indian idiom, Yellamma is a hot goddess in her aroused state. In his analysis of the cult of Yellamma as an example of a South Indian system of classification relating color, heat, sexuality, and affliction (Beck 1969), Nicolas Bradford describes some of the possible means of resolving the trouble of Yellamma:

If the trouble is relatively minor . . . then it is likely that you or your family have been neglecting Yellamma. It may turn out, for instance, that a family icon of Yellamma, carried by an ancestor, has been left unattended in a cupboard. Matters may be put right by paying visits to the Saundatti temple and performing various purificatory rites and acts of humility to the goddess. You may even decide to carry Yellamma yourself, or dedicate the task to one of your children. To some individuals, however, there is no question of choice or of trying to appease the goddess. The persistent growth of matted hair, for instance, would indicate that Yellamma has already caught you, that she fancies you (devi nammye manas aatu), that she has entered your body (devi nanmeiga bandala). To try to go against such a clear indication of the goddess’s desires would be to sign your own death warrant. (1983, 309)

The moral economy of Yellamma’s trouble is not a simple calculus of good and bad conduct met, respectively, with reward and punishment. What emerged in my conversations with people about the manifestation and remedy of kaadaata is not only that she troubles people who have neglected her, but that she troubles those she desires. As Bradford’s account suggests, the resolution of trouble may be as simple as a trip to Saundatti with a new sari for the devi, but her appeasement may require much greater offerings, up to and including the dedication of a member of the family. The establishment of closer ties is a means, perhaps the principal means, of cooling her anger and securing her favor. Yellamma’s presence may manifest itself as an affliction or a blessing, and the difference is negotiated through personal and collective acts of propitiation. Just what kind of harake she may require is worked out in extended consultation with others about the nature of the trouble and its possible causes. I observed this kind of moral reckoning not only among devotees but also among those who have renounced Hinduism and embraced philosophical Buddhism.

The embrace of Buddhism, inspired by B. R. Ambedkar’s conversion in 1956, is widespread among young Dalit men in the region who reject Hindu deities and their worship as implicated in the reproduction of caste hierarchies and incompatible with Dalit self-respect. This does not mean that they do not also perform Yellamma seve and make harake. The idea that conversion should mark a total break from the past is itself a modern, and arguably Protestant, notion (Vishwanathan 1998; Kent 2004). Mahesh, for instance, told us that he would go to Yellamma when he was in trouble but would abuse her when things were fine. His older brother, Ishwara, struggled for days over whether or not to celebrate Laxshmi puja in his new phone shop, the license for which his mother, Yamuna, had helped him secure. His Ambedkarite friends discouraged him. Still, he felt his mother—who in her characteristic wisdom expressed no opinion on the matter—would want him to honor the devi for bringing prosperity into their lives. In the end, he celebrated Laxshmi puja by setting up an altar featuring Yellamma (as Laxshmi) directly underneath twin portraits of the Buddha and Ambedkar. He made offerings of fire and food to this unusual trinity.

Jugatis world a world in which all forms of renewal and prosperity depend on the ongoing cultivation of exchange relations with the devi. A farmer who has an especially bountiful crop is expected to enact his gratitude for this manifestation of Yellamma’s favor by filling her udi. If he does not, he is considered to be vulnerable to her trouble. Should someone in his household be troubled, those who perform rites of divination will not hesitate to offer a diagnosis: he has not served the devi well, so she is troubling him. The failure to share one’s good fortune is a moral liability, one that those who keep the devi turn to their advantage. They depend for their livelihood on the flows of offerings from devotees to the devi and to them. They, in turn, must cultivate their ties to the devi by embodying her in various ways and performing the rites to which they are dedicated. In particular, they see to the regular bathing and feeding of the devi, for which they must rise early, bathe, open the temple, wash the murti and all the ornaments of the devi, play her instruments, sing her songs, and stay with her to receive the offerings of devotees and to give her blessing in the form of turmeric and prasada. They take the devi to the homes of devotees and wherever she might travel outside the village for a jatra (festival or pilgrimage). They are dedicated to perform these forms of labor and care for the body of the devi, which they learn over time in apprenticeship relationships. They wear her beads around their necks and, if they get them, her matted locks of hair down their backs. To carry the devi on your body is to be respon-
sible for her and to make her devotees responsible to you; it is to cool her wrath, to transform her troubling presence into an auspicious one. To keep the devi is to cultivate her presence in your body and through your body, in the body of the place and people you keep her for. Her presence in the fields, the livestock, the home, the womb, and the world ensures the renewal and preservation of life. Jogatis world a world that is centered around Yellamma and situates them favorably within the predominant moral and material economies of everyday rural life. These, however, are not the only moral and material economies circulating, especially in the places and among persons striving to become modern.

Leaving the Devi

The reform movement that led to the criminalization of the rites jogatis conduct began in the 1980s and resulted in the passage in 1982 of the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act.22 The stage was set by regional intra- and interstate politics, in which politicians in Maharashtra depicted Karnataka as a sending state, filling the brothels of Bombay with dedicated women. At the same time, politicians in southern Karnataka—where the capital city, Bangalore, is—portrayed northern Karnataka as a backward region based on the ongoing occurrence of dedications. Legislators directly addressed the concern that this law might be seen to deny religious freedom. For example, K. H. Srinivas "affirmed the right of the state to discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate religious expressions [and] asserted that the government could not protect the downtrodden from exploitation if it did not reject the dogmatic superstitions that were often intertwined with religion," according to the historian Kay Jordan (2003, 153–54). Like modern forms of religion everywhere, Hinduism is understood here to be entangled with, but separable from superstition. "Superstition" is defined as that form of nonreligion that the government may eradicate in order to fulfill its dual duty to protect its vulnerable citizens, without trespassing on their rights to religious freedom.

The interests of three social movements converged to produce this recent wave of devadasi reform. Christian feminists, concerned about the sexual exploitation of Hindu women under the cover of false religion; public health workers, for whom devadasis were metonymically and inextricably linked to prostitution and the spread of HIV; and Dalit activists, who were opposed to sexual liaisons between upper-caste men and Dalit women, together created sufficient publicity and public pressure to generate the passage of the antidevadasi act.

A key actor in the generation of feminist concern, Jyotsna Chatterjee, described how she came to be concerned about devadasi dedication in an interview with me in 2003 in her Delhi office. She was then the national director of the Joint Women's Programme, a Christian women's non-governmental organization (NGO) with regional offices all over India. Chatterjee had come from Delhi to serve a four-year stint in the Bangalore offices of the Joint Women's Programme in 1979:

I was organizing a meeting of tribal women in Bellary District. I got down [off the train] at Bellary station, and I saw a woman with a basket with mango leaves and a lota [pot] of water. I asked my local guide, "Who is she?" "Don't go near her, she is a devadasi," he said. So I said in Bengali—because I am a Bengali, I am not a Kannadiga—"In Bengali the word 'devadasi' means a woman who worships in the temple." But he said, "They worship in the temple, but they are also prostitutes, they are dedicated as little girls." This upset me very much because I have always been a human-rights person. My concern was the religious sanction, even though I was attacked: "Who are you to take the support of this Christian organization to attack a Hindu practice?"

Chatterjee's anxieties about the specter of Christian imperialism were close to the surface, and she acknowledged her Christian family background in our interview. But she stressed the principles of humanism this background had instilled in her, especially the universal principle that no religion should sanction the violation of human rights. In short, for her, this was not a contest between religions. Rather, it was a matter of humanist religion (whether Christian or Hindu) versus a repugnant custom. Her motivation and commitment were inspired; she was determined and effective.

Chatterjee organized a public meeting of concerned women on the issue in Bangalore in 1981, commissioned a study, and called a press conference. The study, first published in the agency's journal Banthi in 1981, represented the practice of dedication as one that had been legitimately a matter of religion in the past but that was currently "nothing but prostitution practices under the garb of religion" (Joint Women's Programme 1989, 30). A draft of the recommended antidevadasi bill was included in the journal, along with the demand that the Joint Women's Programme was making of the government: to take immediate economic, educational, and social mea-
sures of reform. This report and Chatterjee’s skillful exercises in lobbying and publicity played a primary role in making the devadasi problem a matter of public concern in Karnataka and in the passage of the antidevadasi law in 1982.13 The law was implemented in 1984.

The passage of the law, however, made for very few changes on the ground. As I. S. Gilada described to me, when he went to the temple at the height of the festival season in 1983, dedication ceremonies were taking place in the temple and the police were not registering cases.14 A medical doctor and an indefatigable public health activist and organizer, Gilada promoted sexual health and the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases among sex workers, their children, and their clients for decades. Gilada is also the founder of the Indian Health Organization, a health and social welfare NGO working in Kamathipura, Mumbai’s largest brothel district. In 1983 he went to the temple with a team of doctors and social workers to set up medical camps as well as to protest against and publicize the ongoing dedications. In an interview with me in 1998, Gilada described ending dedications as a means of fighting against “child prostitution, forced prostitution, and HIV.” He went to the temple every year for several years and was very successful at generating publicity and pressuring the government to enforce the ban. His trip in February 1987 generated articles in virtually all the Karnataka newspapers as well as a couple of national ones (Shankar 1994, 131).15

Each of these movements, as well as the Dalit movement I describe in more detail in the next chapter, conceived of their aims in liberal terms, as efforts toward emancipation from exploitative and harmful practices. The terms of emancipation were more black and white for outsider activists like Gilada and Chatterjee than for local observers. Those familiar with the practices surrounding Yellamma sought to defend the region against charges of backwardness. They also worked to separate good religion from bad superstition, a distinction that the oft-invoked idea of prostitution with religious sanction (Joint Women’s Programme, 1989) fails to capture. The district commissioner in Belgaum, for instance, was quoted in the Hindu as saying: “Dr. Gilada and many others like him fail to appreciate myths and legend connected with the goddess . . . even decent women also don beads. It is only to fulfill their religious vows” (as quoted in Epp 1997, 230). Reform projects were sometimes developed in conversation with, and in deference to, devotional attachments to Yellamma. In the context of a traveling antidevadasi public drama, Laxshmi—a Dalit social organizer—simulated a possession state and spoke as the devi’s oracle:

Here this pujari is sitting in my temple and doing all this to people. This is very bad. I have not told him to do all these things. You come to me and tell me. I’ll see how the pujari is handled. You stop giving money! You stop giving gold and silver! You stop giving a girl or boy to this pujari! . . . There are hospitals. Medicine has progressed so much. In my name you should take all the facilities which are available to you and get all these things cured. . . . Jogula bhavi [the sacred pool at Saundatti] is so dirty. These priests are not getting it cleaned, you go and take a dip in that [water tank] and get all kinds of disease. . . . You think goddess Yellamma likes this stinking smell? I want you to be in good health, have a clean atmosphere. (quoted in Epp 1997, 253)

The anthropologist Linda Epp, who interviewed Laxshmi, notes that her oracular performance lent the authority of a possession event to a modern agenda for social uplift and health. It also introduced a distinction between a corrupt and filthy priesthood and a benevolent devi interested in hygiene and health.

The idea that Yellamma might be such a benevolent devi was not necessarily readily embraced by devotees. In 2011 I interviewed a playwright in Belgaum who staged a reformist drama in 2000. A Brahman homemaker and mother, she had put her own acting ambitions aside upon marriage but continued to write poetry and dramas. She described the actors’ reluctance to rebel against Yellamma: “We did this drama. And then I prayed. Nobody was willing to play the role of Renuka. Nobody was ready to play the role of the devadasi Renuka, who rebels. What to do? Everybody said: ‘We are worried. If we play that rebellious role, what will happen?’” After describing the plot of the drama—in which a girl is dedicated, falls in love, comes to a tragic and murderous end as she avenges the killing of her beloved, and decides to renounce the devi, who has not taken care of her—the playwright continued:

Saying “I don’t want this devi,” she throws the whole devi in the river. “She is not there, if she were there, [my lover] would not have died. I committed a murder, and for what? I didn’t commit any sin. What kind of fate has she given me? She is not mother [amma—a name for the devi].” She threw the jaga, all of it. . . . This is my drama. But nobody was ready to throw it. Instead of cowrie shells, we used popcorn. From a distance they look the same. Instead of a stone [murti], we placed a picture. We said, “Just lift it as a symbol [of throwing]. I will do penance, fasting for five weeks. No harm will come to you people.” It took so much convincing.
In the experience of this reformer, separating the real benevolent devi who responds to fasting and prayer from the false dangerous devi who punishes those who fail to recognize and embrace her presence was an arduous, if worthwhile, task.

The good intentions of reformers notwithstanding, the means of reform have often been repressive. Initial government reform efforts focused on enforcing the 1984 ban on dedications. According to the police inspector stationed at the main temple complex in the late 1980s, this often involved violence. At the height of the main pilgrimage season, at the time of the full moon, his teams of officers would patrol the far reaches of the temple complex and break up camps of devotees conducting dedication rites with billy clubs and shouting. In my conversation with him in 2003, he regretted beating up poor farmers but described this force as necessary by invoking a pedagogy of coercive transformation for the ignorant and unreasonable: “This is the only way they will learn, through violence—otherwise they won’t understand.” This sometimes violent enforcement of the ban was accompanied by rehabilitation schemes promoting tailoring, animal husbandry, basket making, and so forth as alternatives to ritual and/or sex work. Widely acknowledged to be ineffective, these economic rehabilitation schemes have mostly been abandoned in favor of an approach that more directly beckons devadasis to inhabit a new subject position, that of the ex-devadasi (maji devadasi).

In the early 1990s, the Karnataka Women’s Development Corporation subcontracted with an NGO, Myrada, to start a new kind of campaign. The architects of this campaign, whom I interviewed in their Bangalore offices, determined that in order for the devadasi system to be eradicated, the auspicious status and income-generating power of these ritual specialists would have to be undermined. The activists mounted a major education campaign and recruited young Dalit men, many of whom were sons or brothers of devadasis, to paint posters in bus stations and put on skits dramatizing the social evil of devadasi dedication and the criminal penalties that might be imposed for practicing any of the devadasi rites. They created mechanisms of surveillance and reporting that extended into the smallest village community. The primary agents of these mechanisms are ex-devadasis, women who have refashioned themselves through renunciation of their dedication and participation in reform. They are warned and, in turn, warn others to break the beads tied at dedication and throw them in the river; to stop roaming with the devi, singing devotional songs, and asking for grain; to stop playing Yellamma’s instruments, the shruti and

FIGURE 2.4 A mural at Saundatti warns: “Don’t give joga [alms].” Photograph by the author.

chowdiki; to cut their jade and groom their hair as respectable women do; to stop practices of divination and possession—in short, to leave all devadasi practices behind or face the possibility of fine or imprisonment. In 1997 a cooperative organization of ex-devadasis was formed under the supervision of Myrada; it was called Mahila Abhivrudhi Matru Samrakshana Samsthe (MASS), which translates as the Women’s Welfare and Protection Association.

This second phase of the reform campaign is taking a distinctly different approach than the first phase. In the first phase, the logic was that if you managed to stop the flow of girls into the practice and offered women who were already dedicated alternative means of livelihood, the devadasi institution would die out. In the second phase, necessitated by the failure of the first, the criminalization of the devadasi rites aims to transform the embodied subjectivity of the dedicated woman. She is called on to renounce her unique tie to the devi and join the campaign against the devadasi tradition. What becomes apparent in the context of the production of the ex-devadasis’ subjectivity is that one must become either an object or a subject of reform in order to be modern. The discourses and practices of postcolonial modernity produce two possible positions: reforming selves and reformed selves. Especially for Dalits and others framed and produced as backward, survival can depend on figuring out how to produce oneself.
as a reforming body. My thinking here is in part informed by the politics of recognition I was subjected to. As a self-evidently white and seemingly respectable woman, I presented what was consistently read as a reforming body. This fact was confirmed by the strong reluctance and, in many cases, refusal by devadasis and their allies to talk to me based on the suspicion that I was taking names for the government. It was also evident in the strong presumption made by every reformer and virtually every middle-class person I met in the region that I had come to stop the practice of dedication.

This developmental form of subjection, in which the backward peasant stands in need of uplift and improvement, has an obvious colonial history in the formation of social reform as a demonstration of the worthiness of self-rule. It also helps explain the intensity of investment in devadasi reform. Protecting society against the danger of sexually undomesticated Dalit female pujaris is not the only aim of reformers. Those who become reformers are invested in their own projects of self-fashioning, in which the stakes are their own relationship to modernity. To direct one's self toward the reform of backward practices is to be modern.

Increasingly, the rehabilitation of devadasis is being carried out by the objects of reform themselves, remade over into the agents of reform. Ex-devadasis now throng the temple at the height of pilgrimage season, dressed in uniformly navy saris and sporting visored caps befitting the policing function they now serve. They pass out flyers detailing the banned rites and threaten those who would dare play the sacred instruments of Yellamma with arrest, imprisonment, and fines. One of the condemned practices is the wearing of locks of matted hair.

If the goddess Yellamma wants a person, devotees explain, there are several ways she might call them to her, all of which manifest in the body of the one she desires. One of the most common signs of Yellamma's vocation is the appearance of a lock of matted hair. This hair is taken to be an indication of the presence of the devi in the body. To ignore it, devotees say, is to risk the wrath of the devi, whose ability to afflict is as well known as her ability to cure. At her temples across the central Deccan Plateau, Yellamma women can be seen wearing heavy locks of matted hair anointed with brilliant yellow turmeric. To see one of them is to take darshan of the devi, to enact a Hindu practice of visual encounter with the deity, to see the god and for the god to see you (Eck 1996). Devotees worship this hair as the devi herself and perceive the women wearing it as especially capable of entering states of possession and giving oracles. Called jade, these matted
locks of hair mark the bodies of those chosen by the goddess to manifest her presence in the world. In the words of one Yellamma woman whose jade reached to her knees, “not everyone gets matted hair. Only if the Goddess wants you to be her dasi does she give you matted hair” (Seethalakshmi 1998).

Between April 2001 and March 2002, one thousand jade were cut from the heads of Yellamma women, according to the report of the NGO that organized the cutting (MASS 2002). This is but one year in a campaign that began over twenty-five years ago. The primary rationale for this cutting is that jade are manifestations not of the devi but of dirt and disease. Jade-cutting campaigns have been an abiding feature of governmental and nongovernmental efforts to rehabilitate devadasis.

I quote at length from a flier distributed at the main Yellamma temple complex during the height of the pilgrimage season in 2003:

Clean hair makes for a wise head and greater beauty. Wise people, have you seen people worshipping hair that is unclean, knotted, dull, smelly, and full of dust, dirt, and lice being worshipped as the Goddess’s jade with turmeric and oil? Join in the meritorious work of social change and raise the awareness of people. When hair is not properly combed, oiled, and washed clean, it knots and a microorganism called “fungus” [English word] gets into the hair, causing a disease called pica neuropathica. This disease can easily be cured. [A lengthy description of hair cleansing and grooming is omitted here.] It is a misconception that the Goddess troubles those who clean knotted hair. Some grow such hair, tell people it is god, and frighten them as a means of earning and acquiring position. Such fake practices push society in the wrong direction. Devotees should not be misled, they should clean such tangled hair. Thousands of people have gotten their knotted, dirty hair cleaned and are living a healthy life. This is evidence that the appearance of jade or knotted hair is not due to the Goddess.

The flier is addressed to an audience of would-be reformers, who are enjoined to bring an enlightened perspective to the matter of hair and religion. Jade, it states, are not a manifestation of the devi but simply matter out of place: dirt (Douglas 2002). Dirt can be disentangled from the hair through a careful process of grooming, and disease and superstition can thus be averted. Yellamma has nothing to do with such hair; she is clean, purified. The implication here is that those who persist in wearing jade, whose diseased and dirty state can no longer be attributed to ignorance, are nefarious actors promoting “fake practices” and inspiring fear in people as a means of advancing themselves. In this view, jade mark not the dangerous or auspicious power of Yellamma’s presence but a threat to social progress.

Within the discourse of reform, jogatis’ embodiment is said to pose a danger not only to themselves, but also to society at large.

The medical rhetoric of contagion linking diseased bodies, ignorance, and social decline draws on unstated but widely held beliefs that associate jogatis, illicit sexuality, and communicable disease. This rhetoric has been successful in raising doubts about the provenance of jade. In my conversations with devotees and other observers of reform, I was asked over and over again: “Is it really from the devi or is it disease?” Anxious to dispel the notion that I was somehow especially capable of this discernment, I tended to respond to this binary choice between divinity and pathology by introducing a third option: fashion. “In the United States, some people go to the beauty parlor to get such hair,” I would offer. According to his research assistant, another anthropologist working at the temple complex in the early 1980s sent a sample of a jade to a laboratory in England for analysis. The idea that the presence or absence of a fungus in matted hair could prove or disprove the presence or absence of the devi is consistent with a biomedical logic of single etiology, but not with Shakti epistemologies of the body, in which some forms of affliction are understood as the effect of the heating and troubling presence of the devi in the body. The belief that American or British anthropologists might have a particularly reliable grip on biomedical logic and its presumed powers of discernment is not particularly surprising. Nor is the fact that the state government would draw on such logic to better discipline, police, and manage unruly bodies for their so-called own good. This rationality, however, is not the only one at work on Yellamma’s hill.

On the walls of the main temple complex, painted posters illustrate proper and improper modes of bodily comportment. One such poster features a woman with long jade next to another with carefully groomed hair bound together at the back of her head. A big black X marks the woman wearing jade, while a check mark endorses the properly groomed woman. On one of my trips to this temple I encountered two Yellamma women with long locks sitting under this poster. I asked them what they made of the poster and the jade-cutting campaigns. “Who is the government to cut our hair?” one of them demanded. “We have been living here for several years and we know the tradition and customs. If it was unhygienic, we would have cut it ourselves. They cannot force us to cut it.” In the face of the government’s desire to refashion her as a proper subject of bourgeois
femininity and bodily constraint, this Yellamma woman was defiant. She claimed superior knowledge of "tradition" and the right to judge her own cleanliness.

In fact, many Yellamma women have had their jade forcibly cut. In the context of a discussion about the reform efforts of mass and the government, one devadasi offered the following account of an incident at a jade-cutting campaign she had witnessed:

There was a great pativrata [celibate ecstatic] and she had jade. These people [members of mass] cut her jade against her will—she was screaming. There were old women, and they were made to bend over and their jade were cut... Even though they said we are old and we are not like "that" [not prostitutes], they beat them and forcibly cut the jade... The police and the sangha [mass] people were here together.

More than packets of shampoo and lessons in hygiene are being dispensed in this violent enforcement of a hairstyle. According to the architects of the campaign, the elimination of this superstitious practice, along with all the rites and bodily practices specific to Yellamma women, is necessary to undermine a system that results in the prostitution of Dalit girls. But it is not only the extended sexuality of the devadasi that is being rehabilitated, it is also her religiosity. Indeed, as the reformers recognize, the two are inextricable and bound up together in her hair.

How have jade come to be such powerful representations of everything that is wrong with devadasi dedication? Anthropological reflections on hair practices offer some helpful, not to say provocative, ways to think about the potency of hair and its sexual implications. In 1958 Edmund Leach wrote a delightful article titled "Magical Hair," in which he considers the general problem of the interpretation of symbols through readings of hair behavior. Leach disparages the use by psychoanalysts of ethnographic material about hair symbolism from primitive societies to extend clinical observations of individual patients into universal features of the human unconscious. Along the way, he concedes that the ethnographic record offers many cases of sexually significant hair rituals. Examples from the South Asian context include the imposition of celibacy on the Hindu widow symbolized by the shaving of her head, the tonsured Brahmanical tuft as an indication of sexual restraint, and the wearing of matted locks by ascetics as a sign of bodily detachment from the phenomenal world. Leach offers a general formula: "long hair = unrestrained sexuality; short hair or par-

![Page 98](image-url)
Many devadasis I spoke with who had been given locks were afraid to cut them, an act that for them amounted to refusing to embody Yellamma, rejecting her call to serve her. Some whose locks had been cut had renounced the possibility of such a vocation and proclaimed the truth of the reformer’s claim that jade were nothing but dirt and disease: “Look,” one said to me, pulling her wavy, untangled hair around her shoulder to show me. “They cut them and nothing has happened to me, the devi has not troubled me.” Others told stories about intensifying affliction and loss of divinatory and healing powers associated with failing to embrace, and thus please, Yellamma. For all of the women, associations among cutting locks, ceasing ecstatic practices, marrying in the conventional way and rejecting Yellamma’s call were explicit.

This suggests that jade-cutting campaigns might be framed as projects of sexual conversion. Conversion here is not a matter of sex acts (who does what to whom), but rather a question of the disposition of sexuality, the uses to which it is put. Ganneth Oeyesereke (1981) has described the trajectory of Saivite female renunciates in Sri Lanka as moving from one phallocentric economy to another (husband to god). Yellamma women have been implicated in a different sexual order, one in which generalized and abundant fertility is cultivated and distributed. In this sexual order, rather than circulating around the phallus, Yellamma women with jade might be understood as having incorporated the phallus as a part of their own bodies. I am drawing here on a point that Veena Das makes in a critique of the phallocentric readings of female asceticism as the substitution of one form of male domination for another. She writes: “The material on female ascetics described by Oeyesereke would point to a different direction—asceticism as a means of transforming the oppressive demands of heterosexuality into the power to heal” (1985, 323). Furthermore, as Judith Butler has argued in “The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary” (1993), it is not necessary to have a penis to incorporate the phallus. The jade of Yellamma women might be seen to point to the lingam of Yellamma, the phallic power of a devi who manifests herself most often as an autochthonous devi. Marry her to a god, or her dasi to a man, and you will have tamed her shakti (Gatwood 1985; Kapadia 1996; Kinsley 1988). Left unconstrained, this fierce feminine energy may become too hot; autochthonous goddesses are known for their ability to trouble and destroy as well as their ability to heal and create.

Magical hair marks the bodies of some Yellamma women, called by the devi away from family life and endowed with the capacity to heal afflictions and disperse the blessings of fertility and well-being in their communities. These capacities and powers are locked up in their hair as a sign of their renunciation of conjugal sexuality and their primary attachment to this hot devi. But this hair is not merely a communicative sign: it constitutes their incorporation of the devi. Thus to have their jade cut is to have their body severed from the body of the devi.

A radical and violent refashioning of the sexuality and religiosity of the body is at stake in these campaigns, as well as the very nature of the body itself. The body figured in jade-cutting campaigns is whole in itself, atomistic, and self-contained, and matted hair is a matter of unwanted intrusion of dirt and disease. In contrast, the ecstatic body is open to incursion, which can manifest itself as affliction but may be cultivated as a form of power. One may renounce this possibility of ecstatic embodiment and undertake this refashioning voluntarily, as a modern subject of reform, or be forcibly subjected to it, as an object of reform. Subjects of reform get access to state-sponsored micro-lending programs and new forms of respectability; objects of reform are disciplined by state power and threatened with fines and punishment. Reform campaigns resignify jade as a problem of dirt and disease within the logics of hygiene and biomedicine, thereby seizing on a potent symbol of social, sexual, and religious distinction but redirecting its efficacy toward the production of citizens.

Within the rhetoric of reform, the cutting of jade from the bodies of devadasis represents the surgical removal of superstition and disease from the social body as a whole. Jade-cutting campaigns serve as an especially dramatic example of the reification of a social problem as a medical one that can be neatly excised from the body. I am drawing here on the idea of surgical logic and the concept of operability developed by Lawrence Cohen in his work on state campaigns for sterilization and kidney selling as modes of biological citizenship. He writes: “To be operable is to be assimilated to norms of modern citizenship and its constitutive will—despite oneself—through a radical, here surgical act of subsumption” (2004, 167). Cutting reorients the sexuality of dedicated women, turning it from the generalized cultivation of auspiciousness and the devi to the reproduction of the heteronormative patrilineal family form and the state.

To submit one’s jade to the scissors of the state is a means of becoming assimilable as a citizen subject, to become embraced, rather than censored, by the law. The effect of this cutting is not simply the redemption of individual outcaste women from vice, dirt, and disease, but the collective uplifting of Dalit men and women who, as participants in reform, become
admissible as rights-bearing citizens worthy of protections and eligible for loans. The biomedical language of isolable disease and the modernist distinction between superstitious practices and authentic religion produce reasonable bodies shorn of magic, backwardness, and contagion, and thus eligible for inclusion in the national body.

The medicalization of jāde as a manifestation not of the devi but of disease resignifies the body as secular, a biological system vulnerable to infection, virus, or fungus but not to divine incursion. In this way, the medicalization of jāde also shifts the truth value of religion toward the status of the body, especially its sexual orientation. Ecstatic embodiment characterized by possession, oracular powers, and renunciation of procreative marital sexuality (jannah, family life) is thus cast as superstitious, and the milicer devotional bodily practices consistent with Brahmanical Hinduism and Virashivism are upheld as true religion. Dalit female pujāris are displaced from the main temple and dispossessed of their rites.

Reform campaigns seek not only to rehabilitate Yellamma women—but to introduce and enforce new modes of bodily comportment among them, modes that correspond to norms of femininity and domesticated (contained) sexuality—but also to rehabilitate Yellamma. Within discourses of reform she is figured as a goddess who neither claims nor enters the bodies of those she desires, nor becomes angry if she is thwarted, but rather as a devi who merely requires a devotional and chaste orientation of the heart. Such a goddess is not involved in the messy substance of fertility and its renewal. She has no udi. She has no sex. More precisely, her udi is not open to the world for filling, and her sex is only for her consort, Jamadagni—who, it turns out, as the pamphlets widely distributed at the main temple complex describe, has secured from her a vow of chastity.

Devadasis, Ex-Devadasis, and Faux Devadasis

In the summer of 2002 I went with Jyoti and Ambuja to the annual business meeting of mass, held in one of the great halls built on Yellamma’s main temple grounds. This construction was part of a long-term project run by the temple trust to improve the facilities at the site. One of the first improvements was the destruction of dwellings built around the outer wall of the main temple that were occupied by and passed down through a lineage of devadasis dedicated to service on the temple grounds. When I interviewed temple trust officials, they emphasized the need for clean water and toilet facilities for pilgrims, and outlined a master plan including destruc-

tion of all the dwellings belonging to hereditary Lingayat pujāris and Dalit devadasis as a necessary prelude to the construction of large plazas and market halls allowing for the easy passage of thousands of pilgrims. The spatial remaking of the temple complex entailed shifts in the organization of the care of Yellamma and the material economy circulating through her. Hereditary pujāris were being replaced with ones licensed by the temple trust, and devadasi pujāris were exiled entirely.29 There was, then, a certain irony in the fact that Mass held its annual meeting of ex-devadasis on the temple grounds, inviting the women there to participate in their own reform.

We entered the hall and walked into a sea of women arrayed in their best saris, feet tucked under them, sitting on the vast floor for hours awaiting the commencement of the program. As it began, we sat among a thousand ex-devadasis, listening to the annual report being read out loud. The secretary of the organization, herself an ex-devadasi, told us how many new members had joined, how many educational tracts had been distributed, how many jāde cut. None of the women there, that I was able to observe, wore jāde. However, many, perhaps a third of the women there, especially the older women, still wore their muttu, tied at dedication. Visible as flashes of red and white when they adjusted their saris, these beads suggested that a less than complete remaking of devadasi embodiment had been accomplished. An especially beautiful woman sitting near us kept coming in and out of the hours-long meeting. On her return from one of these excursions, she sat back down among her friends, leaned forward with a radiant smile and said, “I just took my third darshan of her.” The women evidently took pleasure in taking darshan, singing bhajans on stage, and being with each other. Apparently there were motivations to attend besides hearing the annual report or avoiding the fine the NGO threatened to impose on all members of Mass sanghas who did not attend the meeting. As one woman on the bus we traveled on said, explaining her excitement at arriving, “How often do we get the chance to be among so many of our people?”

Others exhibited no such mixed motives and described a clear break from a past and mistaken way of being:

I don’t feel bad for removing the beads. We are also human beings like you [deserving of respect], now I go to the temple simply to take darshan, and nothing has happened to me [the devi has not troubled me]. I noticed a case of muttu being tied to a twelve-year-old girl in my village, so I contacted the [mass] officers by phone and told them what was happening. I
also helped the girl. The devi has not asked us to tie beads, but our parents may have tied them because of tradition (paddati).

I learned that it is not good to have jade when they found maggots [in my jade]. The devi does not ask us to wear these jade, it is a disease. Devotion is sufficient.

The narratives of ex-devadasis emphasized a break with bad (degraded, exploitative, or unhealthy) practices mistakenly thought to be called for by the devi and a continuation of devotion as an internal orientation of the self toward the goddess. This devotion was described as the relationship any devotee might cultivate with the goddess, rather than as an attachment enacted through a set of embodied practices specific to a particular relationship with her. Respect was a common theme, much evident in the speeches of the NGO staff and in the rhetoric of ex-devadasis generally. From the stage came the message that their newfound respectability was more important than any material benefits they might or might not gain from the government. After explaining the importance of participating actively in the mass sanghas, taking independence from the NGO Myrada, and “standing on their own two feet,” the representative from the Myrada, the NGO most closely involved in setting up the membership organization MASS, said:

So you should pay back your [government] loans, and attend meetings properly. You are not all directors [of MASS], [but] even being a member entails a great deal of responsibility. Everyone may not have gotten a loan or a house or a buffalo, and you may not all get them in your lifetime, but your children may and will definitely get the benefits, and your membership itself means you get a lot of respect, you are respected. People have come to see how you conduct your meeting—would they come if you were not doing something worthwhile? So what do you want a buffalo, or respect?

As she hit this question, a voice rang out from the crowd of gathered women, “A buffalo!” and the hall erupted in laughter.

That buffaloes might turn out to be more valuable than respect is a possibility I will return to, but first I want to consider the relationship to reform cultivated by two dedicated women I came to know through a series of life-history interviews. Both of these women lived in villages neighboring Nandipur. Pratima was the secretary of the mass sangha in her village. She was a lively, alert woman who simultaneously tended her grandson, cooked us lunch, and patiently responded to my questions. She was dedicated as a very young girl, when she contracted a bad case of boils taken to be a sign of Yellamma’s presence in her body. As she described it, she stopped performing the rites she was dedicated to when she met her husband, a Maratha (dominant caste) man who was not content to be her patron but wanted to take her parents’ permission and get married in court. After six months of clandestine meetings, they went to the court for a registered marriage. He also wanted her to stop roaming with the devi. She was willing to stop performing rites and was very proud of their sixteen-year marriage, which had cost him his place among his natal kin. Pratima described a shift in the attitudes of devotees who had in the past received dedicated women with respect, giving grain and blouse pieces for the devi. As the reform campaign begun in the 1980s intensified, devotees began to accuse dedicated women of doing bad work (kettada keilasa—a common euphemism for prostitution) and turned them away when they came with the devi, saying, “what is she, nothing but a jogi, a vesha (prostitute).” Although Pratima had some complaints about how little Myrada had delivered on its promises of loans for small businesses and houses, she described the life she and other former devadasis had chosen, in the wake of this shift, as full of happiness:

When a devadasi goes asking for joga, men look at her badly. “Come back tomorrow,” they say, insulting her. There was no happiness in it for us; we used to cry to be spoken to like this. Now we have left this. There was no value for us as human beings [worthy of respect]. No human being derives value from being a devadasi. Now we cover our heads with the end of our sari and work into the evening in the fields, earning twenty rupees. There is value in that. We are beautiful and the people call out to us, amma [mother], tangi [little sister], they regard us with respect.

Anusha, another rurally based former ex-devadasi I met with many times, felt the heaviness of the burden of supporting her children more acutely than Pratima did. She spoke at length about the difficulty of providing for her two children’s schooling and maintaining their household of three. She had had a good patron who paid for the delivery expenses of both her children and regularly gave money to help support them. He died, however, leaving his wife and Anusha with nothing. In her role as an elected member of the gram panchayat (village council), she had helped her former patron’s widow obtain a pension. Anusha was entitled to a share in the family land, but her brothers, who oversaw its cultivation, gave her only a small amount of the yield. They lived in the same small lane, at the end of which was a
small Matangi shrine. Anusha’s brother’s relative prosperity was evident in the respective condition of their homes, which faced each other across the lane. On one of the many occasions when Jyoti and I rode our scooter over to the village of Mandovi where Anusha lived, she greeted us at the door, her head wrapped in a towel, fresh from washing her hair. She combed and braided her daughter’s hair, talking about how worried she was about finding the money to pay for the daughter’s marriage. Anusha earned a little money working for Myrada. She traveled from village to village in the district, gathering devadasis to encourage them to begin sanghas in their communities and to leave all the devadasi rites behind. During previous conversations we had spoken about the work she did with mass, so I was surprised on that day when a woman came in and touched her feet while we were talking. Anusha let go of her daughter’s hair to press turmeric into this devotee’s brow and asked, “Has he become well?” “Yes,” the woman replied with evident relief.

Dedicated women cultivate different kinds of relationships with devadasi identity and embodiment. Both Pratima and Anusha identified themselves as ex-devadasis and were involved in the reform and policing of other devadasis. Anusha was also continuing to act as a pujari in her community. In other words, she was conducting the very rites that she was encouraging others to renounce, citing economic necessity as the reason for her seemingly paradoxical position. This explanation offers an interesting perspective on the investments of dedicated women in reform as a means of access to state benefits, as well as on the new forms of respectable identity and community status articulated by Pratima.

I return to a consideration of one of these state benefits, loans for dairy buffaloes. Virtually all of the forty village-based devadasis I surveyed mentioned the loan for a buffalo as a benefit that they had received. At a certain point in my fieldwork, however, I noticed that these buffaloes were nowhere to be seen. Where had they gone? When I began asking, I heard many stories about sick and dying buffaloes, and some tales about the difficulty of paying for their fodder and the decision to sell them. These stories did not emerge readily; indeed, in Yamuna’s case, it was months before she told me about her buffaloes. In a room full of devadasis telling their stories, good and bad, about their experiences of reform, she began laughing. She had given a farmer some money, got his two buffaloes branded, had her photograph taken with them (the necessary proof of purchase), collected her money from the government plan, and then returned the buffaloes to their owner. Many women took advantage of the loans for buffaloes to acquire badly needed funds to service debts and pay medical bills, but turning buffaloes into cash didn’t necessarily serve them well: the debt for the animals remained, and without the income from milk that the plan was calculated to produce, they were simply saddled with a new form of debt.

The fact that the buffalo scheme was not working the way it was intended to was obvious to me, to every devadasi I spoke to about it, and even to evaluators sympathetic to the goals of reform.28 Consider the following critique of the buffalo scheme as a figure for reform in general:

Since you are on rehabilitation, I must tell you about myself, as I was also a subject of rehabilitation. They gave me a buffalo. Well, I had this small room, which I now found myself sharing with the buffalo. You see the buffalo eats a lot, and as I was expected to stop sex work after rehabilitation, there was not much money. I didn’t mind for myself, but I couldn’t bear to see the buffalo wasting before my eyes. So soon I found myself doing twice the sex work to feed the buffalo and me. Well, now the buffalo was in heat, and I had to get her crossed [mated]. I was told that it would cost 100 Rupees per attempt. So there I was now being forced to do sex work to pay for the buffalo to have sex! That was enough. I decided I had enough with rehabilitation. (Sampada Gramin Mahila Sanstha, Point of View, and Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad 2002, 18)29

This commentary was offered by someone who is neither a devadasi nor an ex-devadasi, but who nonetheless assumed the latter position in order to authenticate her critique of government policy. Revathi is a hijra (“neither man nor woman”), an activist on issues of sexuality rights generally, and, like many hijras in Karnataka and Maharashtra, a devotee of Yellamma. Her remarks, made in the context of a Karnataka State Women’s Development Corporation meeting evaluating rehabilitation schemes, use both humor and irony to demonstrate that reform often works to worsen, rather than better, the economic position of devadasis.

State loans to buy dairy buffaloes are meant to provide a means of economic rehabilitation. Supplied with a buffalo to milk, devadasis need no longer be dependent on the support of patrons and devotees. Deprived of its material basis, the practice of dedication will wither away, or so the logic goes. However, as Revathi deftly notes, the buffalo is just another mouth to feed, another member of the household for whom a mate must be found, and the jogati’s obligations to others are increased. She may exchange indebtedness to the devi for indebtedness to the state and thereby acquire a kind of social capital in the currency of respect, as Pratima did. She may,
like Anusha and others who sold their buffaloes, cultivate both kinds of obligation in an effort to maximize the possibility of return and maintain her ties to Yellamma.

The reform of devadasis produces new kinds of subjects with new kinds of relations to the state, including indebtedness. The effort to eradicate modes of being seen to be backward may seem to constitute a loss, but reform campaigns have also made new kinds of mobility, respectability, and identity available to dedicated women. The ways that women position themselves in relation to these new modes of life does not necessarily entail a renunciation of their ties to the devi. The ongoing cultivation of devadasi embodiment may be combined with the adoption of modes of being and relating befitting the norms promoted through reform. This possibility of the incorporation of both is, in the end, not surprising given the epistemology of Shakta religion, but it is clearly not what the reformers had in mind. My aim here is not to gloss the forms of violation inherent in reform campaigns, but rather to emphasize the agency of dedicated women in mobilizing all possible means of livelihood and thriving. Reform projects are remaking forms of life; however, these lives are at the same time remaking themselves and not necessarily toward the same end.

As I have argued in this chapter, the reform of devadasis is not only eliding a distinct form of life, it is also reformulating religion. More precisely, in this case, it is reformulating what among the embodied practices performed in the name of Yellamma might count as religion, setting others aside as superstition. The designation of practices as superstitious in the Indian context has a long history, both in the presence of Christian missionaries on the subcontinent and in native reformers of Hinduism. For instance, Vivekananda, widely credited for situating Hinduism as a world religion in the late nineteenth century, had this to say about place of superstition in the national body: “The fact is that we have many superstitions, many bad spots and sores on our body—these have to be excised, cut off, and destroyed—but these do not destroy our religion, our national life, our spirituality. Every principle of religion is safe, and the sooner those black spots are purged away, the better the principles will shine, the more gloriously” (quoted in Sen 2010, 99).

As we have seen, superstition is that religion which is not religion, which cannot be accommodated to modern social mores or find its justification in the shastras, and which therefore may be excluded by the law. This distinction has its historical roots in the first-century Roman designation of foreign cults, especially that of the Egyptian goddess Isis, which at the time was becoming very popular among Romans. Roman authorities applied the term to the early Christians, who eventually turned it back on the Romans: in Europe, superstition became the term Christians applied to pagan religion, as the worship of false gods (Bailey 2007, 20). This distinction was planted in Indian soil by Christian missionaries and propagated through the colonial courts when they were called on to arbitrate disputes over religious matters. In the postcolonial Indian state, it has come to be codified as a matter of constitutional law and state legislation. As “superstition,” devadasi rites are festering sores on the national body; they must be excised in order to safeguard the health and longevity of that body. The unique modes of life that these rites animate; the worlds they world; and the ties they bind between the devi, her women, and their communities are all subject to erasure. The devi herself is being exiled from her autochthonous manifestation, her power to destroy as well as to create. She herself has not been exiled from the temple, as her wives have been, but through the discourses and practices of devadasi reform, she has been reformulated as a spouse devi and resituated within devotional religion. She is barred from materializing herself in the bodies of jogatis, from disseminating and renewing fertility through the rites they conduct, and from displaying her dissatisfaction in affliction. The devi, reform discourses and practices insist, does not manifest herself in these ways, nor does she matter in these ways in the bodies of Dalit women. The devi does not work in the world in the ways jogatis world it, according to reform.

However, as I was reminded again and again by the jogatis, more than one world is being made in the name of Yellamma. One day, somewhat sorrowfully, I asked the jogatis as we roamed: “What will happen to the devi when all this stops? When there is no one to keep filling the udi, to do her pujar?” “Oh,” responded Mahadevi, quickly and in her usual defiant manner, “I am not worried about her, she can take care of herself.” My worry that the devi herself was somehow fragile was thus dismissed by one of her wives. Indeed, it is not evident that the eradication of the rites by which she is most evidently made manifest across the Deccan Plateau will somehow diminish or easily domesticate her. This was most eloquently suggested to me by a temple trust official at Saundatti who kindly granted me an interview in 2002. He was a very gentle man, whose tremendous devotion to the devi was quietly manifested in the mindful quality of the full-bodied prostrations he made when he took us for a special darshan. He had been working at the temple for fifteen years at the time of the interview. His attitude toward reform was that of a diplomatic bureaucrat. “The government
has made these changes, so we comply with them," he said. At the end of
our conversation, I asked him what he thought of the fact that dedications
and rites were continuing despite reform, of the presence of the police and
reformers at the temple, and of the murals illustrating improper and proper
forms of seve that were painted all over the temple hill. He responded: "The
rites, the reform—it is all due to her play (aata)." In this formulation, re-
form is not a matter of cleansing superstition from the bodies of the igno-
rant and vulnerable, it is yet another sign of the playful and troubling pres-
ence of Yellamma in the world.