

## INTRODUCTION

### Gods, Gifts, Trouble

#### DEVADASI RITES

One day the *jogatis* took me to the river for a *puja* (worship, rite). Mahadevi came to our door early in the morning, saying: “Today we are taking the devi [goddess] to the river—will you come along?” As was often the case when they called us to go roaming with them and the two devis, Yellamma and Matangi, we set off with very little information about what might unfold. Usually, my research assistant Jyoti and I followed them from farmhouse to farmhouse, for festivals or for household rites on auspicious occasions such as the birth of a female buffalo calf or the successful drilling of a new bore well. On that spring day, for the festival of the river goddess, we climbed into a flatbed truck that was trailing a big green tractor: the four *jogatis*—Mahadevi, Durgabai, Yamuna, and Kamlabai—assorted children and devotees from the village, Jyoti, and me. The two traveling devis, in the form of faces cast in brass and wrapped in saris sitting in the middle of brightly painted wooden baskets, had been placed in the front of the truck. During our bumpy ride over the pockmarked roads characteristic of this district in northern Karnataka, an area rich in sugarcane but poor in infrastructure, I asked Mahadevi whose tractor we were traveling in. She pointed to the landlord farmer swaying in the tractor seat next to the driver and explained that, even after several years of marriage he and his wife were childless, so he had decided to sponsor the bringing of the devi to the Krishna River.

I recognized in this account the making of a *harake* (vow to a deity) in which devotees seek to secure blessings of fertility and prosperity from the devi through acts of propitiation toward her. Devotees make material or bodily offerings such as parched grain, saris, silver ornaments, pilgrimages, prostrations, renunciations, or ecstatic performances. I came to

understand the making and fulfilling of such *harake* as exchange relations between devotees and the devi. These relations are mediated through the bodies of *jogatis* and the rites they perform for devotees. As persons who are given, or who give themselves, to the devi in fulfillment of *harake*, *jogatis* themselves take the form of such offerings. Their dedication to the devi is conducted as a rite of marriage to her. This marriage authorizes them to perform rites in her name, such as the one in which we were brought to participate that day at the river.

Pilgrims from all the surrounding villages thronged the riverbank. Oxen drawn carts were pulled alongside big green tractors into the flowing river, where farmers splashed water on the implements of their labor. Having bathed and finished their *puja*, people sat eating, and children brandished their festival trophies: small plastic toys and candy. After overseeing the carrying of the two devis to a clearing in the crowd and appointing someone to watch them, Mahadevi told me to come with her and the other *jogatis* to bathe, a ritual purification made in preparation for the bathing and ornamentation of the devis. I followed Mahadevi, Durgabai, and Kamlabai to the river's edge, carrying a fresh sari to change into. Stripped down to our petticoats,<sup>1</sup> we immersed ourselves, laughing at the pleasing shock of the chilly water. Meanwhile, the other women in our village party—all *gandullavalu* (women with husbands)<sup>2</sup>—splashed their faces, hands, and feet in a more modest version of the same ritual cleansing. Bathed and clad in fresh saris, we rejoined the rest of the village party, and Durgabai and Kamlabai began to prepare the devis for *puja*. Reaching into the wooden basket where Yellamma sat, Kamlabai unwrapped the sari wound around the devi. Carefully untethering the silver *murti* (a form of the deity) of Yellamma's face from the supporting dowel standing in the middle of the basket, she placed it along with Yellamma's gold and silver ornaments in a large bowl of river water and began the process of bathing the body of the goddess. After repainting and reattaching her face to the dowel, Kamlabai wrapped the devi in her new sari, given by the landlord. Mahadevi, who had just finished the same process with the other devi, Matangi, said to be Yellamma's younger sister, reached inside the basket into the lap or womb (*udi*) of the devi and drew out a fresh coconut. Beckoning to the landlord's wife to follow her, Mahadevi led a small procession, including three musicians playing the instruments of Yellamma, to the water's edge. There she dipped the coconut in the river, anointed it with scarlet *kumkuma*, worshipped it with fire (*aarathi*), and placed it in the curved fold of her silk sari that the woman held outstretched at the level of her abdomen—into her *udi*.

## Writing Rites

Rites of *devi* propitiation are ubiquitous and quotidian in South India. What is noteworthy about this rite, however, is tied to the question of who or what *jogatis* are. The South Indian women this book is about do not marry men; they marry a goddess. *Jogatis* are given, or dedicated, to Yellamma as children by their parents. All those dedicated to Yellamma wrap themselves in saris and embody the *devi*. That is, whether they were recognized as boys (sexed male) or girls (sexed female) as children, they become women and are called *jogatis*, although male women are more commonly called *jogappas*.<sup>3</sup> *Jogatis* are also called and call themselves *devadasis*, which is a pan-Indian term usually translated as servant or slave (*dasi*) of the god (*deva*).<sup>4</sup> Dedication is their central initiation rite. They become Yellamma's *pujaris* (priests or caretakers), Dalit<sup>5</sup> women who transact the favor of the goddess outside the walls of her main temple and sex outside the bounds of conjugal matrimony. Their alliance with the goddess, however, is not recognized as a matter of legitimate religion or kinship within the law or by state authorities. Indeed, in the most recent wave of over one hundred years of reform, the practice of dedication, as well as all the rites it authorizes *jogatis* to perform, including the one described above, have been criminalized.

When I began field research in northern Karnataka and southern Maharashtra in 2001, I did not expect to encounter *devadasis* actively performing rites. *Jogatis* are typically defined exclusively through their illicit sexuality. When their rites appear in scholarly or popular accounts, they are marked as something that is not religion. Ethnohistorical accounts of *devadasis* formerly attached to temples in Orissa and Tamil Nadu detail the significance of their ritual performances in the temple complex (Apffel-Marglin 1985; Kersenboom-Story 1987; Srinivasan 1984), however, ethnographies of *devadasis* in Karnataka have tended to frame these rites as empty remnants of the past (Shankar 1994; Tarachand 1992) or as once abundant but now effaced (Assayag 1992; Epp 1997).<sup>6</sup> The practice of dedicating daughters is widely represented in newspaper articles and reports by nongovernmental organizations as based in superstition, driven by poverty, and resulting in prostitution. The *Times of India*, a major national English-language daily newspaper, reported: "Every day at dawn [at the time of the annual pilgrimage], poverty-stricken people from neighboring areas gather at the Renuka Yellamma temple, ablaze in a cloud of yellow and red turmeric, to 'marry off' their daughters to the presiding deity. . . . Temple priests persuade the parents, adrift in a sea of superstition, to gift their daughters to

the deity, which they do, little realizing that most of the girls will end up as sex workers in the brothels of Mumbai and other cities” (Sehgal 1999).

Schooled by such representations — and no doubt having failed to read them critically enough — I went to the field thinking of *jogati* personhood as wholly defined by illicit sexuality. I was surprised to learn otherwise. One day in 2002 at one of the four minor outlying Yellamma temple complexes near the town of Athani in northern Karnataka, I encountered two dedicated women. They were seated on either side of the dark goddess Matangi, for whom they were receiving offerings and giving blessings. “What do they call you?” I asked. “*Pujaris*,” they said, laughing at my ignorance. “What else would they call us? We keep her [the devi]” (*Matten karitarri namna? Naavu akinna itgondeevi*).

What does it mean to “keep the devi”? This question has been answered in different ways. The scene I described above by the Krishna River might be read as (yet another) ethnographic rendering of timeless ritual in the Indian subcontinent, an episode in the story told by the West about the East through an Orientalist lens (Said 1978). Many of the elements of such a story are there: customary enactments of rituals meant to propitiate the gods, hierarchical caste relations, sexualized others, an agrarian scene seemingly unmarked by any significant incursions of modernity (Inden 1990). Alternatively, this story might appear as an account of female religious leadership and ritual balance between cosmic, earthly, and human well-being in a wider record of universal feminine power and ecological value (Shahrukh 1997; Starhawk 1979). From the point of view of Dalit, Christian, and feminist social reformers, the scene by the river displays the degraded position of outcaste women dedicated to a life of superstitious ritual enactments and sexual exploitation (Joint Women’s Programme 1989; Rozario 2000; Shankar 1994; Tarachand 1992).

In this ethnography I offer another way to think about what was unfolding at the river that day in 2003, one that I came to by taking the question of who and what *jogatis* are as an open question best pursued by working closely with those whom have come to call themselves *jogati*. This method foregrounds the terms *jogatis* use to describe themselves and the world. As I show, these terms often exceed received categories of social scientific knowledge. As persons who call Yellamma their husband, *jogatis* conform neither to prevailing South Indian patterns of kin making nor to dominant modern definitions of marriage as an alliance between two persons of the opposite sex. The ways that their kin making practices exceed received conceptions of kinship are productive in two ways: they bring another in-

terpretation of devadasi lives into view, and they demonstrate some of the limits of modern forms of knowledge.

I take the practices that *jogatis* enact to be what they and devotees of Yellamma call them, *puja*. Similarly, I take the relationship between *jogatis* and the devi to be what it is called by the people for whom it is an everyday phenomenon: a marriage (*maduve*). Like all marriages, this one has effects. I draw on contemporary debates in anthropology, postcolonial feminism, queer theory, and religious studies, to investigate the effects of kinship with the goddess and to situate devadasis as cultural producers and commentators, rather than as simply objects of moral appraisal. Through the conduct of their rites, including that of marriage to the devi, *jogatis* are “worlding, the world” (Heidegger and Hofstadter [1971] 2013, 179). As they describe it, their goddess is with them and in them, a material presence and force in the world that is not outside social life, but rather part of its making. Thus, *jogatis* inhabit and enact a form of life and mode of being that exceed secular accounts of humanity as ontologically singular.

This delineation of devadasi lifeworlds is not only an invocation of a way of life that is under erasure, but also an occasion to consider what counts as religion, and who and what marriage is for. To ask what counts as religion is to pose a question about forms of knowledge as they intersect with relations of power. Whose ways of talking to gods and spirits are designated as religion, and whose are stigmatized as superstition? To inquire who and what marriage is for is to pose a queer question about whose relations and which desires can receive the mark of legitimacy. It is also to pose a feminist question about the material economies underwriting and animated by sexual and domestic arrangements. These questions matter because religion and marriage are normative categories of knowledge as well as terrains of statecraft. As such, they configure the terms of social, sexual, and political recognition (Povinelli 2002a, 2006)—or of livable life and grievable love (Butler 2000, 2004). The answers to the questions of what can count as religion and who and what marriage is for offer one kind of diagnosis of the wounds of modernity.

### *Jogatis* as Performers of Rites

According to a 2007 government survey, some thirty thousand devadasis<sup>7</sup> are living in Karnataka, across fourteen districts. Every village in the northern part of Karnataka, and many more in western Andhra Pradesh and southern Maharashtra, has a small Yellamma temple in it. The *puja* in these

temples is virtually always conducted by a *jogati* from the Dalit community. Yellamma is the most popular deity in the region; half a million devotees from all castes throng to her main temple during the pilgrimage season, making her temple by the side of the Malaprabha River the most significant pilgrimage site in northern Karnataka. Until recently, dedications of girls and sometimes boys were performed at this temple. As the result of reformers' pressure on the government to enforce the 1982 law criminalizing these dedications and the significant presence of police and reformers during the pilgrimage time, they are now mostly performed quietly in out-of-the-way places. They are also significantly on the wane—with two exceptions, the hundred or so devadasis I spoke with about the future of the practice said: "This will end with us, we will marry our daughters [to men]."

Dedications are achieved, as conventional Hindu marriages are, by the tying of a string of *muttu* (beads or pearls) around the woman's neck. Once dedicated, devadasis do not otherwise marry. They say, "Yellamma is my husband (*Akine nam gandari*)." As one put it to me, "How many times should I be married? I am already married to her" (*Yesht sate madkoludatri, aki joti agetallri*).

As wives of the deity—always married, never widowed—they are auspicious women associated with all forms of fertility and well-being. Trained as ritual specialists through apprenticeship, they enact household, temple, and festival rites and roam throughout their communities giving blessings and taking grain.

Once past puberty, many of these young women begin exchanging sex for means of livelihood—in villages usually through a local system of patronage by a higher caste man and in towns often through brothel-based sex for cash transactions. Between a third and a half of all those who have been dedicated work or have worked in brothels, but many spend their entire lives residing in their natal villages, where they usually take or are given to a patron (or keep—*ittukondaru*).<sup>8</sup> Patrons are typically otherwise endogamously married men of a higher caste with whom devadasis have long-term if not lifelong exclusive sexual relations. The relationship between a devadasi and her patron is a public secret: everyone knows about it, but it is not accorded the recognition granted endogamous marriage. The children born of such unions belong to their mother's patriline. "Good" patrons support the extended household of the woman they keep and see to their children's well-being, education, and marriage. They are not expected to give their name or any of their land, forms of wealth maintained within caste lineages. "Bad" patrons, like bad husbands, "give you children

and leave you to fend for them on your own,” as the *jogatis* explained to me. “Very bad” patrons, like very bad husbands, “take your money, drink, and beat you.” Many *jogatis* transitioned from taking patrons to taking clients in the 1980s. This shift took place in the context of broad economic transitions including land reform, the advent of widespread cash cropping, and general patterns of rural to urban migration for wage labor.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike most village-based devadasis, brothel-based devadasis in towns or cities are not monogamous; they find cash for sex transactions to be more lucrative than patronage relations. Urban-dwelling devadasis are more readily associated with “bad work” (*kettada keilasa*) and more likely to describe themselves as being “in business” (*dhandha*), an expression for sex work used across India. In the context of the HIV pandemic, many have come to situate themselves within a transnational category, that of the sex worker peer educator. All dedicated women, whether based in a village or a brothel, share three key features: marriage to the devi, lack of respectability, and economic responsibility to their natal family.

*Jogatis* come from landless or small landholding outcaste families eking out a subsistence living in an area prone to drought and largely dependent on dry land agriculture. Often dedicated to ensure the line of descent in the absence of male heirs, *jogatis* are entitled to pass on their name and property to their children and frequently function as the head of the household, supporting extended families. They typically fulfill the obligations and claim some of the privileges of sons, including those of arranging marriages, paying for jobs, purchasing land, and building houses.

In the villages of northern Karnataka and in provincial and urban red-light districts as far away as Mumbai (Bombay), *jogatis* are still very active as *pujaris*. In the village I call Nandipur, in which I lived for nine months in 2002–3, there are four devadasis actively involved in daily ritual work.<sup>10</sup> During the festival of the first harvest season, they make rounds (*phere*) walking from farmer’s house to farmer’s house. They carry the devi in a large *jaga* (basket or world), singing devotional songs, giving blessings, and asking for grain. They play a central role in the village celebration of all the major festivals and respond to calls from households to bring the devi, perform *puja*, play the *shruti* and *chowdiki*<sup>11</sup> and sing on auspicious occasions such as the successful drilling of a new bore well, a marriage, the completion of a new house, recovery from illness or affliction, and even the successful completion of a research project. Women living in red-light districts are no less active as performers of rites; from Bangalore to Pune, I sat in Yellamma temples and participated in festival celebrations with *jogatis* and



FIGURE 1.1 Mahadevi preparing the devi Matangi for *puja*. Photograph by Brett Fisher.

FIGURE 1.2 Making rounds. Mahadevi leads, playing the *chowdiki*. Photograph by the author.





other devotees. Nonetheless, after over a hundred years of reform begun in the colonial era, devadasi dedication and devadasi rites are disappearing.

There are a number of regional variations of dedication, generally recognized by distinct terms (*basavi*, *matangi*, *jogini*, *matamma*, *murali*, and *kalavant*) that imply different relationships to a variety of performing arts, ritual occupations, deities, temples, and social and sexual arrangements.<sup>12</sup> The majority of women I spent time with identified themselves as *jogatis* or *jogammas*, as do most dedicated women in Bombay Karnataka (another name for northern Karnataka). In ethnohistorical terms, the distinctions among patterns of dedication are salient.<sup>13</sup> However, in the context of bureaucratic, journalistic, and policy reports, all of these women are referred to as devadasis, a term they have come, increasingly, to apply to themselves. In this book I use the ethnohistorically specific terms (*jogati* and *jogamma*) and the pan-Indian term (devadasi) as well as my own terms, *dedicated women* and *Yellamma women*. *Jogati*, *jogamma*, and devadasi are all ethnographically correct in the sense that they are the local terms in contemporary usage. *Dedicated women* and *Yellamma women* are anthropological designations that foreground the most salient features of their category of personhood: the rite defining their mode of being in the world; the devi to whom they are attached; and their gender.<sup>14</sup>

### Kinship Matters

Renunciates of ordinary family life, these Dalit religious mendicants may command respect but not respectability. As *pujaris* whose ritual efficacy derives precisely from their alliance with a devi, *jogatis* and *jogappas* are powerful, but not within modern registers of significant personhood. That is, their power and value cannot be reckoned through capital logic or easily accommodated to citizenship. This is a matter of kinship and a consequence of the anomalous configuration of their families.

The goddess Yellamma has her own complicated family history. The universalizing modern family ideal in which men provide, women are protected, and children are innocent goes unrealized in her life, as it does in the lives of those male and female women who wander in her name. According to the history her devotees tell, Yellamma—or Renuka, as she is also called—was married to a great sage, Jamadagni. She was so pure that she was able to perform miracles. Forming a pot from loose sand on the bank of the river and coiling a cobra into a pot rest, each day she brought water to Jamadagni for his morning *puja*. One day as she was walking, bal-



FIGURE I.3 Yellamma is distracted by pleasure. Offprint poster from the bazaar at Yellamma's temple in Saundatti, circa 2001.

FIGURE I.4 A *jogati* carrying Yellamma on a pot of water on her head. Photograph by the author.



ancing this pot on her head, she saw *gandharva* (otherworldly beings; literally, fragrance eaters) playing in the river. She lost her concentration, the pot dissolved, and the snake slipped away. When she returned home, Jamadagni immediately recognized that she had strayed. He became very angry and ordered their three sons to cut off her head. The two eldest refused and were cursed with impotency by their father for this failure of loyalty to him. However, the youngest son, Parashurama, dutifully swung an axe and cut off his mother's head. His father was so pleased with him that he granted him three boons. Parashurama asked for his mother and his brothers to be restored and for his father to forswear anger. Jamadagni granted only the first of the three boons, and Yellamma was restored.

Yellamma failed to maintain the feminine ideals of ritual purity and sexual chastity; she was distracted by pleasure. This turned out to be a capital offense, the punishment for which was ordered by her husband and executed by her youngest son. The failure to comply with the father's injunction to punish the mother's transgression results in the loss of masculinity. The idea, basic to feminist analysis, that the regulation of women's sexual capacity is fundamental to patriarchal social organization and symbolic production is dramatically conveyed through the story of Yellamma. So too is the terrific power of feminine sexual desire, here capable of destroying the calm of a great sage and inspiring matricide.

As a fact of social life and a means of the organization of sexuality, kinship is trouble for Yellamma.<sup>15</sup> It is also trouble for the women who are married to her: their alliance with the goddess sets them outside locally dominant social norms of patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence. Furthermore, their kinship with the goddess exiles them from sexual citizenship, the mode of national inclusion and state protection afforded those whose families conform to the national ideal. As an anthropological category, kinship is troubled by Yellamma and her wives. They enact a form of kin making that exceeds the logic of the kinship chart, the liberal conception of relatedness as a matter of autonomous choice making, and the secular reckoning of alliance as limited to the territory of the human.

How are we to think about this kinship that is not kinship? My approach to this question is shaped by two commitments. The first is methodological: I consider devadasi kin making through the categories used by dedicated women and their families, rather than those supplied by the kinship chart. The second is theoretical and bears the imprint of two major schools of thought within kinship studies: I take kinship to be systematic, as struc-

turalist approaches have (Lévi-Strauss 1969), and inventive, as culturalist accounts do (Schneider 1984).

What kind of kin work are families doing when they dedicate their daughters? The gift of a child to Yellamma produces a distinct mode of intelligible human life. It changes one kind of person, with a particular kin position and reproductive and familial trajectory, into another kind of person. It reconfigures relations between those dedicated and their natal kin, as well as relations among devadasis, the devi, and her devotees. Kin making is practical and innovative; it is also patterned and disciplinary. It is a means of transforming persons that is translated across a field in predictable forms. These forms reiterate techniques of the body (Mauss 1990) such as gender and caste, as well as forms of knowledge about the nature of persons and their place in the world (Strathern 1988). Possibilities of human being and doing are made and unmade through everyday practices such as marriage, adoption, and domiciliation. Innovative kin-making practices open new pathways to forms of social and political recognition and inclusion. For instance, marriage is sometimes pursued as a pathway to legal citizenship, access to health insurance, or other means to and forms of human thriving. As a way of securing the positive regard of the state, however, marriage is not a tool within everyone's grasp. Kin-making practices are thus also constrained: they occur in regulating and normalizing fields of power that shape legitimized forms of relations, recognizable kinds of persons, and possible relations to the state.

In spite of the vast differences among them, evolutionary, structuralist, and symbolic anthropological accounts of kinship have all centered their analyses of human relatedness on the conjugal pair. As feminist and queer appraisals have shown, this focus on human sexual reproduction as the sine qua non of kin making has produced exclusions in the field of kinship studies (Hayden 1995; Rubin 1975; Weston 1997). Modes of relatedness that do not conform to what are presumed to be universal facts of binary sex and sexual reproduction have been excluded, or designated as fictive. These exclusions have circumscribed kinship as a knowledge project, and many anthropologists have failed to describe relatedness where they did not see reproductive heterosexuality replicated over time. In short, they have discursively reproduced the social death that awaits those exiled from kinship (Borneman 1996). Posing relatedness as a question rather than assuming that it has been described by the kinship chart is a way to open up this field and to denaturalize the dominant form of the family, including binary gender and always already sexed bodies that have been carried

into the anthropological project through the genealogical imagination and the form of the kinship chart (Borneman 1996; Povinelli 2002b; Strathern 2005). Rather than simply mapping kinship in a field of fixed and inevitable coordinates of biogenetic ties and conjugality, asking about particular and located ways of enacting, conceiving, and valuing relations, as I do here, has been widely endorsed in new kinship studies (Carsten 2000; Hayden 1995; Franklin and McKinnon 2001; Weston 1997). In this ethnography, I elaborate the forms of kinship trouble that devadasi kin making makes and the forms of life and possibilities for an anthropology of relatedness that such trouble opens up.

### Modernity, Secularity, Reform

The reform of devadasis is a story about what kind of work the body is made to do to become modern. It is also, and critically for this book, a story about the remaking of forms of life with implications for how modern categories of religion, marriage, and sex can be understood. I take modernity to be an uneven and incomplete project that understands itself to be rationalizing, secularizing, civilizing, and progressive. Those who see themselves as modern subjects (respectable, educated, scientific, and urbane) compare themselves favorably to backward others (superstitious, promiscuous, illiterate, and rural). In other words, the possibilities of social and political recognition and livable life take shape in relation to normalizing designations of personhood taken to be neutral rational forms of knowledge (Asad 2003; Butler 2004; Cohen 1998; Povinelli 2002a). This book contributes to a conversation about how categories of sexual and religious personhood come to specify who does and who does not qualify as secular, modern, and thus admissible to the rights and protections of citizenship in its broad sense as positive state recognition. In everyday conversations with me about caste politics, Dalits frequently captured the terms and stakes of this threshold of admission in a simple and affecting formulation: “We are also human beings, aren’t we?”

Devadasi dedication is subject to reform not as a marginal form of kinship or religion but as illicit sex and superstition. This character of reform is a feature of modernity as a normalizing project. Both kinship and religion are normative categories. They do not merely describe, they delimit. The formulation of the devadasi system as prostitution under the false cover of religion is predicated on ideas about what constitutes proper and improper sexual activity as well as true and false religion. The terms of these dis-

tinctions—proper from improper and true from false—have taken shape over time as marriage and religion have shifted from terrains of variable if ranked socially recognized and sanctioned practices to fields in which the true can and must be distinguished from the false (Flood 1998; King 1999; Sturman 2012). The rise of a homogenized and purified Hinduism, the normalization of the patrilineal family form, and the advent of sexual purity campaigns are pathways of national assertion and modern subject formation in India that have profoundly transformed the possibilities of devadasis' lives.

As persons whose relationship to a devi cannot qualify as religion, *jo-gatis* can figure only as a remnant of the past that must be left behind. The eradication of some forms of life in the name of national progress is by now a familiar story, and a feature of what has been called the “postcolonial predicament,” in which signs of civilizational lack or backwardness must yield to social improvement (Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993). This imperative clearly shapes governmental and nongovernmental practices of reform. It also constitutes one of the ways modernity is inhabited.<sup>16</sup> Those who perceive their backwardness and participate in projects of improvement become modern. As ex-devadasis—those who have embraced reform and removed the string of beads tied around their neck at their dedication—put it to me: “We have become better” (*namage chalo agetri*).

Secular projects of governance and liberal modes of reform do not generally see themselves as interfering in religion as such. According to the political doctrine of secularism, religion and secular government each have their own proper domain; neither should impinge on the other's. In India, this doctrine of secularism has been articulated as the state's neutrality toward all religions equally. In Nehru's words: “We talk about a secular state in India. . . . Some people think it means something opposed to religion. That obviously is not correct. . . . It is a state which honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities” (quoted in Madan 1998, 311). This secular principle of neutrality is broadly supported, even championed as the critical safeguard against the atrocities of communal violence. At the same time, secular discourses and practices are reconfiguring what is admissible to that domain as a recognizable form of religion worthy of protection (Asad 2003; Galanter 1971).

In postcolonial India, one of the sites of this reconfiguration has been the effort to purify Hinduism of superstition and to ground it in rationalist conceptions of truth and error (Sen 2010, 86). This reform of Hinduism

by the state has been shaped by a dual mandate inscribed in the Indian constitution, which seeks both to protect the freedom of religion (article 26) and to restrict or regulate any secular (defined as economic, financial, or political) activities associated with religious practices (article 25). A boundary between protected religious activity and state-managed secular activity has emerged as a result of these two mandates and through the doctrine of essential practices, which holds that essentially secular practices are a proper domain for state intervention and what is essential to religion stands apart from economics, politics, and sexuality (Sen 2010, 89). For devotees of Yellamma and the women tied to her who perform rites for them, this configuration of the domains of protected religion and secular power has significant consequences. The state finds no impediment to the eradication of a set of practices that offend modern sensibilities about what female sexuality should be for and that do not conform to what can be demonstrated to be essential to Hinduism as a modern form of religion.

I turn here to an elaboration of three features of the chain linking modernity, secularity, and reform, features critical to the conceptual framework of this book about the emancipation of Dalit women from backward practices. These features are the category of religion, the modern formation of the global religion Hinduism, and the emancipatory ambitions of anti-caste and feminist projects of reform.

Only some ways of talking with and relating to gods and spirits qualify as religion, as a modern category of human experience and practice. Enlightened religion is understood to be a matter of theistic belief, rather than embodied practice or mere ritual. This understanding presumes a divide between the territory of the human and the realm of the transcendent and dematerialized divine. The idea that enlightened religion consists of interiorized belief and private devotion to a spiritualized being has a specifically Christian and European genealogy (Asad 1993, 2003; Chakrabarty 2000; King 1999).<sup>17</sup>

This genealogy has had consequences for how Hinduism took shape during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Western observers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many of them Christian missionaries, saw idolatry and orgiastic frenzy in Indian religiosity, but later scholars discovered in Vedic texts<sup>18</sup> evidence of a more evolved religion marked by monotheism, soteriology, and belief in life after death (Dalmia and Von Steitencron 1995b; Viswanathan 2003). Textual Brahmanic religion, predominantly Vaisnava, was produced as the “real religion of the Hindus”

(Dalmia 1995) and the unifying basis for the nation of India. This staging was accomplished through both the purification and the homogenization of Hinduism and the alienation of Islam as the foreign religion of invaders.

The installation of Hinduism as a world religion unifying the citizens of India is, in the language of Michel Foucault (1978), an effect of modern power and its productions of new technologies of the self and forms of governmentality. For instance, as many scholars have argued, colonial courts relied on the interpretations of Brahman pandits when making distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate religious practices. These distinctions resituated practices such as sati (widow immolation) and hook swinging (ecstatic piercing and suspension from hooks) (Dirks 1997; Mani 1998) as repugnant and barbaric customs. Such transformations in turn implied, incited, and sometimes juridically enforced new norms of bodily comportment for relations to gods, spirits, and the state.<sup>19</sup> The shift from marginal religion, in Brahmanical reckoning, to false religion, in the Protestant Christian framework of the British, has had enormous implications for the viability of subaltern religiosity. The folk religion of aboriginal people, members of outcaste communities, and women has been increasingly understood as superstition (Dalmia and Von Steitencron 1995a, 14).

For this ethnography of rites and their reform, this history is critical in two ways. First, it has prompted me, along with other anthropologists of religion, to move away from conceiving of religion as a transhistorical and universal essence and toward an ethnographic invocation of embodied practices occurring in fields of power (Asad 1993; Keane 2002; Mahmood 2005; Ram 2013). Second, it demonstrates that the designation of practices as superstitious is a move of modern power. Such a designation does not simply signal the worship of false gods but rather it points to a mistaken apprehension of the world, a wrongness of reason, or a lack of reason. As such, the designation of superstition cannot be taken for granted.

In his characterization of superstition as a secular and evolutionary version of early modern Christian concepts of idolatry and devil worship, Talal Asad suggests that objects and relations designated as superstitious had to be “constituted as categories of illusion and oppression before people could be liberated from them” (2003, 35). “Liberation” from false religion was a feature of colonial, national, and imperial projects of civilizing mission that sought to eradicate social evils and barbaric customs such as sati, hook swinging, and devadasi dedication. It is also a familiar aspect of any number of more contemporary emancipatory projects, two of which are at issue in this study: anti-casteism and feminism.



In colonial modernity, missionary critiques of Hindu superstition combined with Enlightenment principles of natural rights and freedoms to frame the emergence of anti-caste politics (A. Rao 2009, 31–32). For nationalists, Brahmanical religion (purified of superstition) served as a basis for anticolonial self-assertion. For anti-caste activists, in contrast, politicized identity and rational self-assertion emerged in an antagonistic relationship to Brahmanical religion as well as to superstition.<sup>20</sup> Arguing against the reformed Hinduism espoused by Gandhi and other nationalists, anti-Brahman activist and founder of the Self-Respect movement in South India, Ramasami Periyar, wrote: “It must be said that god and religion are erected on the foundation of the superstitious beliefs of the people. Our daily life is regulated by superstition . . . if anything of old, based on blind faith and superstition, is sought to be retained or tolerated, the result will be the total failure of reform” (2003, 70). Whether all gods and forms of religion were seen to be an obstacle to emancipation, as for Periyar; only Hindu gods and practices, as for B. R. Ambedkar, who called for Dalits to convert to Buddhism; or only Brahmanical religion, as for Jotiba Phule, clear agreement existed among these architects of Dalit emancipation in southern and western India about the relationship between superstitious beliefs and practices and the perpetuation of untouchability. Here, superstition is understood less as a problem of the degradation of Hinduism (which is how it was seen in the context of nationalist reform) and more as a problem of Dalit false consciousness and upper caste hegemony (Vijaisri 2004, 174).

The subject of Dalit emancipation, as Anupama Rao has argued (2009), has taken stigmatized existence as the basis of his or her political assertion. The distinct lifeways, occupations, and modes of cultural production that attach to outcaste *jatis* (subcastes or communities) find no way into this formulation of Dalit distinction as the basis of social exclusion, economic exploitation, and therefore, the ground for politics. They must be left behind in order for the community to progress. However, not all Dalits who perform work designated as polluting seek to escape such labor.<sup>21</sup> Forms of power and possibility can be entangled with stigma in the embodiment of caste-specific labor. Secular humanist visions of Dalit emancipation, such as that articulated by Ambedkar, whose poster adorns most Nandipur homes in the Dalit community, cannot accommodate these forms of power and possibility.<sup>22</sup> In my attention here to the forms of power and possibility that *jogati* lifeways and forms of knowledge manifest in the world, I am pursuing a consideration of Dalit modes of life that exceeds secular reckonings (Abeysekara 2008; Ganguly 2005).

As have Dalit emancipatory projects, feminist programs for liberation in India and elsewhere have tended to conceive of religion as a bond from which one must break free. When we equate freedom with emancipation *from* custom, culture, and religion (Mahmood 2005), we have fenced off these terrains as potential resources for those who find themselves at the margins of social and political life. Furthermore, and of particular concern to me, we have rendered some lives unlivable under the sign of progress. Over a long period of time and through my own efforts as an activist as well as an anthropologist, I have become skeptical of liberal accounts of what constitutes freedom and unfreedom and wary of the unintended effects of efforts to “save” others. I am here in agreement with Saba Mahmood who—in the context of her study of an Egyptian women’s piety movement—has asked: “Are we willing to countenance the sometimes violent task of re-making sensibilities, life worlds, and attachments so that women of the kind I worked with may be taught to value the principle of ‘freedom?’” (2005, 38).

In the context of the research for and writing of this book, my engagement with the daily lives of dedicated women whose life circumstances can be understood only as difficult has been deeply informed by this skepticism about emancipatory projects conceived in liberal secular terms. For instance, I eschew the terms “exploitation” and “oppression,” which rightly characterize the effects of dominating forms of power, but which also assume a liberal subject who can only be either free or unfree. This is not to dismiss the harsh effects of the radically uneven distribution of the resources, forms of recognition, and protection that make life livable. Rather, it is to attend to how difficult lives are lived, and how *jogatis* mobilize and materialize forms of power, possibility, and knowledge, given their difficult life circumstances. It is not my hope to ignore or diminish these difficulties, but to refuse a binary view in which *jogatis* can be seen only as subjects of chosen lives or objects of coerced conditions of survival. I am writing here in between and against the dichotomy of choice and coercion.

As an example of what this representational effort entails, I do not use the term “prostitution” as a descriptive or analytic category in this book. When it appears, it appears as a designation used by others or as an object of analysis itself. As a term of sexual personhood, “prostitution” can imply any number of sexual and economic arrangements and legal, moral, and social statuses. Instead, I use the term “sexual economy,” which allows me to include *jogatis* and *gandullavalu* in a single analytic frame and to demonstrate that different sexual economies entail different forms of possibility

and difficulty.<sup>23</sup> My method is to specify the terms of these possibilities and difficulties, rather than to assume them. When they are assumed, as when *jogatis* are called prostitutes and conventional marriage is posed as the solution to the difficulties of their lives, normative assumptions about prostitute and wife as categories of sexual personhood are reproduced. We have learned very little, however, about the lives of *jogatis* or the institution of marriage in Dalit communities in South India as a specific disposition of sexuality. By “sexuality” I mean the organization of sexual capacity, not the secret of the modern self, as Foucault has uncovered it (1978). How is sex deployed? What is it for—pleasure, reproduction, earning, intimacy?

I am arguing that the reform of *jogatis*, as people who are understood to embody exploited sexuality and false religion, needs to be considered within a framework that admits prostitution and superstition as objects of analysis. As figures of sexual and religious personhood, the Indian customary prostitute and the idolatrous Indian have been made to constitute the faultline between modernity and backwardness. My effort here is to get beyond the limitations of categories such as prostitution and superstition—indeed, to bring these categories themselves into crisis. Thus I ask not only what kinship with and *puja* for the goddess *mean*, but also what they *do*. What kind of world do *jogatis* world?

#### WRITING DEVADASIS

The woman question does not travel by itself across borders.

—Susie Tharu, “Problems in Theorizing Feminism”

The Woman Question is, in fact, the hinge or point at which a politics of the nation becomes that of international relations. It is there that absolute freedom and absolute lack of freedom turn on each other. Which is to say, the Woman Question is also always the Eastern Question.

—Rosalind Morris, “Theses on the Questions of War”

Why does the history of the East appear as a history of religions?

—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion*

Recognizing that “the woman question does not travel by itself across borders” has profound implications for the politics of feminism, theories of gender, and representations and readings of those positioned as women. This recognition has been taken up widely in postcolonial and transnational feminist scholarly writings (Kaplan, Alarcón, and Moallem 1999; Mohanty

1991; M. Sinha 2006), which insist that to pose the woman question is necessarily to pose the nation question. Karl Marx's point that representations of the East seem always to manifest as problems of religion complicates the formula.<sup>24</sup> The slippage among these three—woman, East, and religion—is what makes it possible for photographs of Afghani women throwing off their burkas to stand for the liberation of a people from oppressive religion and government. Such images circulated widely in the American press shortly after the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001. As commentators have noted, these kinds of representations do more work for the identification of the West with freedom than they do for Afghani women, whose material and political conditions have by many measures been worsened by the war (Abu-Lughod 2002; Stabile and Kumar 2005). The ways that these questions—of woman, the East, and religion—have been made to stand in for each other in discursive and political relations between the putative East and the West haunt any attempt to think about them. Such specters can be good to think with, however, and I take the questions of woman, the East, and religion all to be imbricated in postcolonial modernity. My insistence on this point marks an intervention in studies of devadasis. Before I elaborate on this intervention, I introduce the history of devadasi dedication and its reform.

Histories of temple women date the practice of dedicating girls to deities and temples across South India back to the ninth century, based on epigraphic evidence (Kersenboom-Story 1987; Orr 2000, 5). A specialized class of temple servants, these women were choreographers, dancers, musicians, and ritual performers whose sexual capacity was harnessed to their position in the temple as wives of the deity. Their significance in the wider political life of the deities, temple economies, and the institution of kingship materialized in the significant usufruct rights in land (*inams*) and other forms of royal patronage they received (Srinivasan 1988). In other words, they were public women whose performing arts were dedicated to, and supported by, the reproduction of kingship—which itself was inseparable from the temple (Dirks 1988).<sup>25</sup> The practice of dedication reached its height in the tenth and eleventh centuries at the peak of the importance of the Hindu temple complex as a political institution. As royal patronage diminished, the practice declined, but it continued to be an integral aspect of temple life up until—and, in some cases, beyond—a period of intensive reform that began during the colonial period (J. Nair 1994, 2011; Srinivasan 1988; Vijaisri 2004).

The particular ritual duties and performing arts attached to dedicated

women varied by region. However, all dedicated women's lives had certain sociostructural features in common, including kinship with a deity and a relationship to a local temple, its economy, and its patronage. In the part of the central Deccan Plateau that currently comprises northern Karnataka, temple inscriptions from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries detail grants of land, as well as sometimes gold, grain, and houses to temple women (Parasher and Naik 1986). In Saivaite temples, dedicated women were referred as *sule*, *patra*, *sule patra*, or *bhogam*. *Sule* is generally translated into English as prostitute, *patra* as performer of dance or song, and *bhogam* as pleasure (Parasher and Naik 1986, 68; Vijaisri 2004, 1). Although the term "devadasi" does not appear in this region in early temple inscriptions, it can be found in a twelfth-century Kannada poetic form belonging to a devotional denomination of Shaivism that focused on the worship of the god Shiva.<sup>26</sup> The Kannada term *basavi* is the feminine form of *basava*, bull—especially that bull that is dedicated to Shiva and roams the village (Mahale 1986, 125). The etymological roots of the term *jogati* are less clear, but most scholars point to the Tantric Yoginis, renunciates who embodied the goddess, as precursors (Bhattacharyya 1982, 110; Vijaisri 2004, 81–82). *Jogini* remains the prevalent term for dedicated women in present-day Andhra Pradesh. Although some have suggested that temple women were originally chaste, most scholars agree that they were sexually active, as an aspect of their ritual efficacy as well as a feature of their place in the system of temple patronage (Apffel-Marglin 1985; Kersenboom-Story 1987; Parasher and Naik 1986).

Their uncontained sexuality has attracted the attention of generations of reformers. Investments in reform have varied depending on the period, region, and social position of the reformer. That said, the overall effect of reform projects has a discernible pattern, in which the performing arts formerly attached to dedicated women were shifted into newly configured public spaces of aestheticized, secularized, and classicized national arts, and the women were ushered into the privatized domains of domesticated sexuality or personal (rather than royal) patronage.<sup>27</sup> In the colonial period this reform took shape along with the reform of practices of sati and child marriage, in the context of debates between officials of the British Empire and Indian elites who sought to demonstrate their worthiness to rule India. These debates typically focused on women as the bearers of culture and tradition and the embodiment of the future of the nation, as elaborated in the work of Lata Mani, Kumkum Sangari, Mrinalini Sinha, and others.<sup>28</sup>

This civilizational discourse converged with the politics of religion in

the colonial-era nationalist rhetoric surrounding devadasis, but in the end it was their lack of chastity that became the basis of their exclusion from temples. The mix of active sexuality and religiosity that they embodied was taken—especially by Christian missionaries—to be a sign of the fallen state of both. The public character of their religious and sexual conduct scandalized Christian observers of Hindu temple rites, and nationalists rushed to cleanse the temple of the stain of scandal.<sup>29</sup> Missionary opinion thus mixed with discourses of social purity and national uplift to incite reform. The pace of reform, however, varied. In accordance with Queen Victoria's 1858 proclamation of religious neutrality, officials of the East India Company initially resisted calls from Christian and Hindu activists in the social purity and temperance movement to refrain from entertaining nautch (dance) performances and to bar further dedications (Presler 1987). In Madras, where South Indian performing arts flourished under the patronage of the Tanjore kings between 1565 and 1856 (when the kingdom of Tanjore was annexed by the British), the reluctance of British officials combined with resistance from devadasi associations and other defenders of temple dance to produce a period of debate over the possibility of abolition that began in 1872 and lasted until 1947 (Soneji 2012, 121–27).

Devadasis' resistance to reform in the princely state of Mysore, in contrast, was quickly dispatched. They opposed efforts by bureaucrats there to ban dancing in Muzrai (government supported) temples by submitting a petition in 1906 calling on the Maharaja of Mysore to protect their right to fulfill their hereditary occupation and be supported through *inams*. The officials looked to the scriptures governing temple conduct (*agamashastras*) for a textual basis for the ban they sought, but pandits affirmed that dancing and ritual conduct by devadasis was authorized by the texts.<sup>30</sup> When pressured for information on the requirements of chastity in such women, however, the pandits produced the desired opinion.<sup>31</sup> In short, the newly illegitimate sexuality of devadasis trumped the religious justification for their temple services found in the texts that were held to define temple rituals, and in 1909 the conduct of and government support for devadasi performances was abolished.<sup>32</sup>

In colonial-era debates over reform, the extended sexuality of the devadasi was repeatedly set against the law and respectable society. Nationalists drew on an idealized Hindu ancient past in order to cast devadasis as formerly chaste, but now degraded, figures in need of rescue (Kannabiran and Kannabiran 2003, 24). British Victorian and textual Brahmanical ideals of exclusive conjugal monogamy converged in a new ideal of respect-

able womanhood, and temple women were placed in the English-language medicolegal category—prostitute (Parker 1998; Soneji 2012).<sup>33</sup>

The Mysore order of 1909 was the first ban on temple employment of devadasis and became the model for legislation in areas under British rule where British reluctance to interfere in matters of religion slowed the process of removing devadasis from temples. In 1934 the Bombay Devadasi Protection Act was passed. A similar act was passed in Madras in 1947. These acts banned dedications but stopped short of criminalizing any of the ritual or performing arts belonging to devadasis.<sup>34</sup> Once highly sophisticated choreographers, musicians, and ritual performers whose education and wealth was exceeded only by women who were members of royal families, devadasis became illegitimately public women whose exile from the space of the temple was seen to be necessary to the moral uplift of women, religion, and nation. These histories of appropriation and exile exemplify the demands that anticolonial nationalism made on the Indian body.

Histories of anti-caste activism bring other demands into view. Unlike the devadasis who were subject to reform in the colonial era, *jogatis* have never been associated with a highly elaborated dance form or a wealthy urban temple complex.<sup>35</sup> In Bombay Karnataka, *jogatis* emerged as a “blot on the community” in the context of anti-caste radical organizing in the 1920s (Vijaisri 2004, 174). This designation comes from Devaraja Ingle, who was inspired by Phule and Ambedkar. A member of the outcaste Holeyar community, Ingle urged Holeyars to stop eating the carcass meat that they had the right and duty to remove from villages, and to refrain from dedicating their daughters. These practices were understood to establish and reproduce outcaste distinction in the form of untouchability and sexual vulnerability, respectively.

Anti-caste reformers described the rites surrounding Yellamma and performed by outcaste women as invented by caste Hindus and productive of Dalit false consciousness and social abjection. These reformers shared ideals of femininity, purity, and conjugality with nationalist social reformers and situated the resolution of the devadasi problem in marriage and domestication (Epp 1997; A. Rao 2009; Vijaisri 2004, 183).<sup>36</sup> The status of outcaste communities in relation to caste Hindus was at stake for these anti-caste activists. Even as subjects of the British empire, caste Hindus enjoyed forms of social, economic, and political personhood entirely unavailable to Dalits.

Masculinity constitutes the basis of the most significant difference between upper- and middle-caste devadasi reform campaigns and those or-

ganized by anti-caste activists in the early part of the twentieth century. The status of the men in the community was far more at stake in anti-caste reform movements than in nationalist debates over the status of devadasis. Their responsibility to be fathers, brothers, and husbands was repeatedly noted, and their vulnerability as men who could not limit sexual access to or the sexual activity of their women was emphasized. Thus, the sexual respectability of Dalit women became a critical site for the emergence of Dalit political subjectivity.

In the postcolonial period, reform efforts have shifted from Nehruvian development projects of economic rehabilitation in the 1970s and 1980s to neoliberal projects of eradication (Pandey 2007). Postindependence campaigns in Karnataka gathered momentum from three social movements in the 1980s: Dalit political parties, the women's movement, and public health HIV prevention initiatives. The interests of these movements converged in the protection of the sexuality of Dalit women from disease and violation. Anti-caste activists sought to withdraw Dalit women from upper-caste patronage. Feminists organizing against sex work and migration for sexual labor as forms of gender violence began framing devadasis as exemplars of child prostitution and sexual slavery (Joint Women's Programme 1989). Interventions in the spread of HIV at that time conflated devadasis with prostitutes and targeted them as vectors of disease (Gilada 1993). Pressure from these three constituencies was effective in prompting the Karnataka State legislature to action. In 1982 it passed the Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, which criminalized not only the rite of dedication but all the rites belonging to devadasis and specified fines of 5,000 rupees or prison terms of five years for those who continue to perform them.

Contemporary projects of reform are both continuous with and critically different from colonial-era projects. The debates in the Karnataka legislature repeated many of the themes that had emerged in the colonial period: the threat of contagion, the respectability of women, the distinction between Hindu custom and Hindu religion, and the honor of the nation (Jordan 1993). The legitimacy of governance continues to be at stake in reform projects, but in the context of independent India, the civilizing influence is located in India itself and tied to its ancient past. Thus the aestheticized performer of Indian classical dance represents the sophisticated artistic history and chaste womanhood of India for the new nation, and the devadasi who continues to embody an active mix of religiosity and sexuality stands in need of rescue and reform. Modernist projects of social purification and uplift have combined with a neoliberal logic of eradica-



tion in contemporary projects of devadasi reform. According to this logic, productive citizens are distinguished from unworthy populations, which are rendered as “fundamentally without rights” and subjected to discipline (Pandey 2007, 171). In the contemporary period, devadasis have become subjects of state discipline whose protection justifies their abrogation of rights.

At the same time, the logic of purification continues. It helps make sense of why contemporary reform efforts focus intensely on devadasi embodiment, but not on prostitutes generally or female sadhus (mendicant ascetics) at large. Under the national Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, prostitution per se is not illegal, but solicitation is. In the context of an international panic about sex trafficking, some activists have begun to push for the criminalization of prostitution in India (Shah 2008), but for now the secular prostitute is not criminalized or pursued by the state as the devadasi is. Moreover, sex workers in India have been among the most successful in the world in securing human rights and dignity in their communities, whereas devadasis have found no possible ground for collective self-organizing that does not rest on the eradication of the defining rite of their mode of being in the world: their dedication to Yellamma.<sup>37</sup> Recent ethnographies of female renunciates attest to their position in Indian society as marginal but respected figures of religious virtuosity (Denton 2004; Khandelwal 2004). Unconstrained sexuality or female ecstatic embodiment and ritual authority are separately regarded as marginal and circumscribed practices, but they are not subject to erasure in the way that *jogatis*, who incorporate both, are.<sup>38</sup> Religious virtuosity can be made to speak to the spiritual distinction of the modern nation of India, and sexual minority rights to the democratic commitments of the state, but devadasi dedication finds no such translation into modern conceptions of religious and sexual rights. In contemporary national and transnational discourses of reform, the vulnerabilities of caste and gender combine to produce the devadasi as a body of contagion that puts India at risk and to “shame.”<sup>39</sup>

Critical histories of devadasi reform in the colonial period have focused on questions of the normalization of conjugal sexuality, the law, and the nationalist movement and have drawn on the legal archives and literatures of reform (Jordan 1993; K. Kannabiran 1995; Nair 1994, 2011; Parker 1998; Vijaisri 2005). That is, they have most closely analyzed the refashioning of devadasis into fit subjects of gender and sex for the new nation and the replacement of a range of family forms recognized in precolonial Hindu law with a single patriarchal model of chaste womanhood informed by Brah-

manical and Victorian ideals (Nair 1994; Sreenivas 2008). The reconfiguration of Hinduism through the reform of devadasis has been treated as an aspect of the nationalist dilemma in the face of European appraisals of the presence of active sexuality in temples.<sup>40</sup> In these histories, the problem of religion is subsumed under the question of the woman in the nation—that is, the question of the East and “the colonial rule of difference” (Chatterjee 1993, 33). The religiosity of dedicated women is left to stand as aesthetic performance, an object of secularization or Brahmanization.<sup>41</sup> It is not treated, as I consider it here, as a field of cultural production both shaping and shaped by the woman question and the question of the religion.

Ethnographic work on devadasis has tended to reproduce the representational terms common among missionary and nationalist accounts—those of degraded womanhood and degenerate religiosity (Shankar 1994; Tarachand 1992). Where critical approaches have been taken they have been circumscribed by structuralist and symbolic interpretations of religion (Apffel-Marglin 1985; Assayag 1992; Kersenboom-Story 1987). The vulnerability of devadasis, whose social position and economic viability have been undermined by more than a century of reform, is emphasized by those scholars who see this reform as necessary to progress for women, Dalits, the nation, and Hinduism (Rozario 2000; Shankar 1994; Tarachand 1992). In such accounts, the practice of dedicating daughters to Yellamma is represented as a social evil and a perverted custom exemplifying the exploited status of outcaste women.<sup>42</sup> The structural conditions of the devadasi’s existence—hierarchies of caste and gender, exploitive land relations and poverty—are emphasized, and the nonconjugal character of her sexuality is presumed to be coerced. Reformist sociologies frame devadasis as victims and elide the possibility of any sexual or religious agency.

The woman question is always already a question of caste, to be sure. Anti-caste feminist critiques rightly draw attention to the structural vulnerability of Dalit women as a consequence of the poverty and systemic social and political marginalization produced and reproduced through casteism (Kannabiran and Kannabiran 1991; Omvedt 1980; A. Rao 2009, 2003; Rege 1998). They also raise critical questions about caste and gender as entangled forms of embodied personhood, as well as terrains of struggle that can be understood only in relationship to each other. This is true both in the sense that the upper-caste woman was installed as the normative subject of Indian feminism and in terms of the masculine character of the subject of Dalit politics (M. Sinha 2006; A. Rao 2009). These twinned trajectories of politics and representation help make sense of why, in femi-

nist histories, devadasis have most often appeared as exemplary figures of the possibilities of a powerful female and feminine sexuality uncontained by conjugality (Apfell-Marglin 1995; Kersenboom-Story 1987; Nair 1994),<sup>43</sup> whereas in anti-caste and Dalit depictions, they routinely figure as exemplary figures of caste exploitation. Narratives of celebratory recuperation and tragic abjection have overdetermined representations of devadasis.

Here I am working to go beyond the terms of such representations. I am guided in this effort by those scholars who have insisted that caste and gender are materially and conceptually entangled (Kannabiran and Kannabiran 1991; A. Rao 2009; Vijaisri 2004). At the same time, I am departing from the framework of sexuality supplied by most scholarship focusing on the intersection of caste and gender or on the lives of Dalit women. As diagnosed by Foucault (1978), modern forms of power and discourse have installed sexuality as the defining secret of the self, that interior truth that founds identity. In modernity, personhood roots itself in sexual identity and sexual condition. But, as I will show below, modern forms of power and possibility are not the only ones at work on Yellamma's hill (*guddha*). If I were to assume, as many feminist scholars have, that *jogatis* are wholly defined by their illicit sexual identity, I would foreclose these forms of power and possibility. Moreover, a person's structural position in hierarchies of gender and caste constitutes an insufficient measure of the presence or absence of that person's sexual agency or capacity, as close ethnographic considerations of transactional sex have demonstrated (Faier 2009; Kotiswaran 2011; Kulick 1998; Wardlow 2006).

Devadasis are auspicious women. Auspiciousness does not distribute according to social hierarchies; instead, it marks the presence and possibility of life and its renewal. According to Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, "auspiciousness [is] a state which unlike purity does not speak of status or moral uprightness but of well being [*sic*] and health or more generally of all that creates, promotes, and maintains life" (1985, 19). On the basis of her reconstruction of the rituals conducted when devadasis were active at the Jagannath temple at Puri, she demonstrates the salience of the structural opposition between auspiciousness and inauspiciousness in the context of the formal ritual life of a Hindu temple and establishes that devadasis are both auspicious (as wives) and impure (as sexually active but uncontained by conjugality). According to Saskia Kersenboom-Story, devadasis have been situated transhistorically as *nityasumangali* which translates from Sanskrit as always married thus always auspicious. Linking the high ritual and performance arts of temple devadasis with the village rites of the de-

vadasis of Yellamma and Matangi, Kersenboom-Story writes: “At a closer look we see that all *nityasumangalis* and even the devadasi-*nityasumangali* are ‘married’ first to the goddess or to those objects that can be regarded as her synonyms: the royal staff . . . trident, pot, spear. . . . All these objects can be interpreted as synonyms of the goddess or as the *sakti* of the god. The actual ‘marriage’ ceremony becomes, due to this symbolism, rather a ‘merger’ with the goddess” (1987, 78).

In the ethnography that follows, I am building on this recognition of the auspiciousness of the devadasi, but by attending to how and where auspiciousness emerges in concrete and material practices I move beyond the limitations of a symbolic anthropology in which persons appear as signs rather than as actors. For instance, rather than taking the rite of dedication to be a “marriage”—a symbolic version of what is elsewhere real, in my analysis I take it to be a marriage, the thing itself—and ask what the effects of such kin making between humans and deities might be. That is, I am interested not only in what dedication as a rite of marriage might mean, but also, and especially, in what it does as an embodied and material practice undertaken in a field of power. This consideration of devadasi religiosity and sexuality through the lens of practice allows me to situate dedicated women as actors negotiating a variety of constraints and incitements to become more modern, rather than as overdetermined victims of their material conditions or as aestheticized figures of feminine symbolic power.

## Worlding the World

The conditions of my admission to the everyday practices of the women who perform rites in the name of Yellamma indicate something about the relations of power structuring the field encounter and the limits of secular social science in the face of a form of sociality that articulates itself in relation to gods and spirits (Chakrabarty 2000; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Many, even most, of the *jogatis* I encountered in the course of my research for this book were unwilling to talk with me or say much beyond: “The government has stopped all this.” *Jogatis* are all too aware that their rites have been set outside the law. Hand-painted murals detailing the banned rites line the walls of bus stations across the region. My efforts to talk with *jogatis* took place between September 2001 and April 2003 and on subsequent trips in December 2005, December 2007, July 2009, and December 2011 in four contexts: (1) at Yellamma temples in Karnataka and southern Maharashtra; (2) in a village I call Nandipur (population 5000) in the Bel-

gaum District of Karnataka; (3) among sex worker HIV peer educator communities in Sangli, southern Maharashtra, and Gokak, Karnataka, whose members included devadasis and others; and (4) in formal interviews and informal conversations with feminist, sexuality rights, and public health activists in Belgaum, Bangalore; Sangli, Pune; and Bombay. In this book I focus especially on the everyday lives of the four Nandipur *jogatis* who took me to the festival of the river devi in 2002, whom I call Yamuna (then forty-five), Mahadevi (thirty-five), Kamlabai (fifty-three), and Durgabai (thirty-nine). Like most dedicated women in the Belgaum District of Karnataka, they have spent most of their lives in their natal village performing ritual labor, have never contracted a conventional marriage, and have had one or two patrons over the course of their lives.

Nandipur is a medium-size village in the sugar belt, a region in Karnataka just south of Maharashtra where Kannada and Marathi are both spoken and frequently mixed. Because of the linguistic complexity of this region and in deference to the conventions of my neighbors, for whom a single unmarried woman constitutes a moral liability, I traveled and worked with research assistants. They were trained anthropologists (Ambuja Kowlgi has a doctorate and Jyoti M. Hiremath a master's degree) and native speakers of both the northern dialect of Kannada and Hindi, a close cognate to Marathi. Kowlgi accompanied me in the temple-based research. Hiremath lived with me in Nandipur, where we were able to create our own household—a space that proved essential for many of the conversations I had with the *jogatis* and others in Nandipur.

As a non-Indian foreigner I was doubly an outsider, and in the rural contexts where I conducted most of my fieldwork, I was widely presumed to take Jesus as my god and to be an agent of the state or central government. In short, I was not to be trusted. These assumptions were well grounded in the history of the presence of white foreigners in rural India as Christian missionaries and agents of the colonial government or, more recently, development workers. My insistence that I was none of these combined with my persistent presence in rural northern Karnataka made me a curiosity. “Why have you come here?” residents of Nandipur frequently asked me. They would have long conversations about the various possibilities: “Is she getting money?” “Maybe from the government?” “How much?” “Did she come to take our names?” “Why is she only talking to *jogatis*?” “Oh, she came to learn about Yellamma, is that it?” There were many theories, some of which found their way back to me. “She came to take you away,” some said to the *jogatis*, warning them not to talk to me or at least not

to tell me very much. I must have been sent by the government, the denizens of Nandipur decided. The obviousness of this was undermined only by the slow accumulation of evidence to the contrary. I traveled as everyone else did in overflowing jeeps and buses. I lived in the Dalit community. I did not fraternize with officials or socialize with upper-caste householders. Over time, many residents came to believe what I said, that I had come on my own from a university to learn from them and write a book.

Others, I expect, never believed that I was there for any good reason. The self-evident fact of my richness (signified by my American nationality, white skin, store-bought kurtas made of high-quality cotton, camera, and computer) meant I could not possibly be up to anything good. Many of the children, clever, as children are, to discern the best means of disarming adult self-containment, refused to call me by my given name when I passed by, shouting instead, “America, America.” At a time when the United States was bombing Afghanistan, I found this substitution of the country of my citizenship for my personal name deeply discomfiting. Whatever it meant for the children, this taunt held a lesson for me in the possibilities of recognition in a geopolitical field of national difference and economic disparity.

In contrast, some people seemed to feel that the privilege I embodied indicated that I could do only good works. One day as I was walking along the road to the next village, a farmer driving an oxcart stopped to say with a broad smile: “Whatever you have come to do here, it is good.” For a foolish second I was flattered by this, but then I realized that his praise fit into an overall logic of patron-client exchange relations, in which advance praise of good and generous deeds seeks to secure future patronage. The fraught question of my presence and motivations for information gathering offered some instruction in what anxieties and expectations accompanied the reception of outsiders. One lesson was that among these villagers, little to no distinction was made between government and nongovernmental officials. Both were generally referred to as *sahukar*, a term that can also mean landlord. That a careful calculus of disclosure informed interactions with powerful others—whether landlords, government officials, or Americans with notebooks—seemed an obvious strategy of self-preservation, but sometimes other possibilities of recognition came into play.

One afternoon, I sat and talked with the Yellamma *pujari* in Mandovi, the largest village close to Nandipur, only five kilometers away by a black-top road that cut through fields of green cane. I was a bit drowsy from the heat and a belly full of lunch. She was putting me through the usual queries about my reason for being there, and I said that I had come to learn about

Yellamma. This was my way of dodging the understandable skepticism and defensiveness that saying I had come to learn about devadasis always prompted. She responded with amazement: “But don’t they have her in your country?” I explained that some (Hindu) gods had come to America together with many Indians, some of who have built temples to Vishnu, Saraswati, and various other members of the pantheon of Vedic gods, but not Yellamma. “I have only seen her here,” I said. The woman sat quietly for a while and then pronounced: “That is why you are here, she has brought you here so you can write this book about her and people in your place can come to know about her.”

This *pujari* rendered the seemingly inexplicable presence of an American anthropologist sensible through a theological assertion of the power of the devi in the world. She made a claim not only about Yellamma’s power but also about her own knowledge of such power, her ability to speak for it, and, therefore, in some sense to manifest it in the world. This power, I was told, had brought me there to produce knowledge in its name. I was both hailed and positioned, an instrument of the devi’s desire to be known.

Such encounters call for something other than ethnography as a signifying practice, an interpretive exercise in “making into an object to be understood” (Spivak 1990, 1). They call on us to be open to the possibility that the world is not as we thought we knew it. My exchange with the Mandovi *pujari* brought to mind Jeanne Favret-Saada’s writing about her research on witchcraft in the French Bocage (1980, 1989, 1990). The Bocage peasants refused to “play the game of the great divide” that would have placed her on the side of knowledge, science, and truth and made them exemplars of the backwardness and stupidity of the peasant condition: “They started talking to me only when they thought I was ‘caught up in it’” (1990, 191). Being “caught” is to be “affected, malleable, or modified by the experience of fieldwork” (195). It was for me, as for Favret-Saada, the condition of admission to the everyday conduct of a set of highly stigmatized practices. Yellamma, it is said, catches hold (*hididuko*) of those she wants, and the possibility that she had caught me became the ground for my inclusion as a sometimes somewhat insider to the everyday practice of Yellamma *seve* (service, worship) and devadasi rites.

The claim that Yellamma had caught a hold of me was also the way *jogatis* worlded me into their world, a world in which otherwise inexplicable good fortune, hardship, and curiosity are seen as bestowed by the devi, attributable to her play and her power. I use the phrase “worlding the world” to describe the cultural and phenomenal work *jogatis* do in the tel-

ing of devotional stories, the singing of devotional songs, the performance of rites, and the conduct of transactions between Yellamma and her devotees. They work on themselves, others, the village, and the world through these practices and enactments. This work, I want to suggest, goes beyond inhabiting a distinct perspective. It is more than simply a view from within a particular symbolic and political order, one not fully encompassed by other, more powerful, orders of knowing and being. *Jogatis* articulate and enact a space, time, and being that centers around Yellamma; they manifest a world. This work is not only about the production and transmission of alternative knowledge; it is also about the manifestation of a cosmological, anthropological, and moral space of being.

Reducing this worlding work to an object to be understood elides the possibility that it is also working on us. In her work on regenerative rituals in Orissa, Apffel-Marglin has written about the epistemic violence such rendering can entail: “Statements [about ritual efficacy] are not meant to be metaphorical, but are literal statements referring to enactments that perform reality” (2008, 17). This critique of anthropological endeavors that conceptually encompass other lifeworlds is consonant with Gayatri Spivak’s reminder that modern epistemologies perform the world they pretend to merely describe: “The worlding of a world on a supposedly un-inscribed territory [is] the imperialist project which had to assume that the earth that it territorialized was in fact previously un-inscribed. . . . Now this worlding is also . . . a making into an object to be understood” (1990, 1).

As a conceptual term, “worlding” refers both to the ritual conjuring that *jogatis* enact and to the refashioning efforts that reformers attempt. Both devadasi rites and reform are world-making projects with epistemological and ontological effects. Multiple ontologies are at play for, and pulling on, *jogatis*. *Jogatis* keep the devi and her rites in order to ward off affliction and regenerate life. They accompany her everywhere she goes in her *jaga*, marking out the paths of her travel across the village, in and around its households, beyond its boundaries for pilgrimages to the main temple, and back again. The forms of power and possibility these paths map out are not legible in anti-caste or secular feminist appraisals of *jogatis*’ lives. In order to become recognizably modern, *jogatis* must learn to inhabit the world that reform invites them into and participate in the erasure of the world surrounding their devi. Through ethnography, I invoke the impossible subject position *jogatis* are called into and offer a window onto the violence reform enacts.



## The Structure of This Book

Families give their children to the goddess to resolve the *kaadaata* (trouble) she can send. These three terms frame the organization of this book in three parts: gods, gifts, and trouble. The first part takes up the provocation that we do not have to believe in gods and spirits to see that they are alive and well in South Asia (Das 2007; Nandy 2001). Here I am departing from the view that an idolatrous, irrational religiosity is at the root of the practice of dedication. If we no longer wish to map the lifeworld of the peasant on an evolutionary scale as a sign of the past, we cannot continue to relegate the gods and spirits who animate that lifeworld to a time before and space apart (Chakrabarty 2000; Seth 2004, 87).<sup>44</sup> The first two chapters of the book take this postsecular approach to consider what *jogatis* say about the presence of the devi in the world, with them, in them, and through them.

This approach has implications for the organization of the material of the book. Rather than using theory to explain ethnographic description, a method that would place me on the side of knowledge and *jogatis* as objects to be understood, I layer different registers of story and analysis. There are the stories the *jogatis* tell, which incorporate analyses of caste and gender hierarchies; the stories I tell about the *jogatis*—that is, the ethnography; and the stories various other commentators and scholars have told about kinship, religion, and other relevant categories, or the theory. This method makes a point about the politics of knowledge that is germane to the effort of the book as a whole: *jogatis* are not only objects of reform and analysis (knowledge), they are also producers of knowledge. The kind of knowledge they produce is different not in kind, but in register—a point the text makes by tacking back and forth between folkloristic (ethnohistorical), ethnographic, and theoretical modes of writing.

Chapter 1 begins with a devotional story about how Yellamma became sisters with an outcaste devi, Matangi. I put questions of caste politics, land relations, village guardian deities, and sisterhood among goddesses and feminists into play as a means of orienting the reader to a set of overlapping sites of inquiry germane to the book as a whole: material relations, kin relations, and the embodiment of affliction and well-being. The politics of knowledge, authority, gender, and the divine are considered in this account of Dalit female *pujaris* and the Shakta rites they perform.

Chapter 2 counterposes the world that the *jogatis* conjure with the world that projects of reform impose upon *jogatis* and beckon them into. In the

first half of the chapter, I describe what it means to keep the devi, to conduct her rites and cultivate oneself in relation to her and to her devotees. I then detail the criminalization of these rites and relations, and the state's injunction to leave the devi. I focus in particular on the medicalization of the matted locks of hair (*jade*) worn by those Yellamma women who enter ecstatic states, act as oracles, and cure afflictions. In a recent government-sponsored campaign, reformers have cut these locks of hair and handed out packets of shampoo as a means of reforming the illicit sexuality of *jogatis*. Associations between sexuality and hair practices have long preoccupied anthropologists interested in the relationship between the body and culture. I draw on this literature to consider the encounter between secular biomedical and Shakta epistemologies of the body that hair reform dramatizes, as well as to situate that reform as a project that seeks to remake not only devadasis but also the goddess herself.

Girls are said to be given to the goddess Yellamma. Both marriage and what is due to the gods take the form of the gift, the focus of the second part of the book. A major theme in social theory, the gift relation has been invoked as a means of critiquing the commodity form (Mauss 1990) as well as of disclosing the social relations undergirding gender as a complementary and unequal relation (Rubin 1975). In this part I consider questions of sacrifice and value in relation to dedication, and dedication as a variation on the form of offerings to deities as well as on the form of marriage.

Are girls sacrificed to Yellamma? Chapter 3 considers the question of the status of devadasi dedication in relation to sacrificial Indian religious practices and its reform more broadly. I describe a practice of naked worship (*bettale seve*) and consider it in relation to Dalit projects of reform as well as scholarly accounts of Tantra in its broadest sense as sacrificial religion. I then consider the configurations of sexuality, gender, and power that relate to sacrificial exchanges, as well as the conception of the human body as an ecstatic medium. This chapter argues that one of the effects of the reform of sacrificial religion is that the mode of bodily commitment (Cohen 2005) that such giving entails has been constrained to secular and familiar ends: kinship.

In chapter 4 I work through theories of the gift and the question of value to challenge the idea that devadasis are sold by their families to the brothels of Bombay. I argue here that we can make sense of the cultural logic of giving daughters only in the context of exchange. Daughters are given, whether to husbands or the devi. When they are given to husbands, they and the wealth they may produce goes with them out of the natal family; in

contrast, when they are given to the devi, this wealth remains in the natal family. I suggest, after Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) and Gayle Rubin (1975), that the devadasi system constitutes a sexual economy that is distinct from the marriage economy and in which the circulation of gifts, women, and gendered obligations implies a different form of value.

The third part of the book considers trouble. Trouble is a discourse about affliction, relatedness, and the devi. Devadasi dedication takes one kind of trouble—*kaadaata*, the affliction Yellamma can send, and converts it into another—kinship trouble. Two kinds of kinship trouble are at stake here: a disturbance in the taken-for-granted form of the family that a marriage between a girl and a goddess implies, and the disruption of the anthropological category of kinship. The third part uses this trouble as an opportunity to consider what kinds of possibilities are opened up when social forms, such as gender and the family, and social scientific categories, such as kinship and religion, are brought into crisis.

In chapter 5, I consider what I call the effects of kinship with Yellamma. In and around the family of Yellamma and in those families said to have Yellamma in them are many forms of kinship trouble. Often dedicated by families that have no male children, devadasis have the economic and social obligations, and some of the privileges, of sons. Like men, they inherit land, pass their name to their children, and roam the village. *Jogappas*, as the male women who are given to Yellamma as boys are called, wrap themselves in saris and sing and dance in her name. Dedication resolves the trouble of Yellamma and produces female-bodied and feminine-appearing sons and fathers and male-bodied daughters, and thus it may be seen to disrupt naturalized gendered divisions of labor and disturb norms of patriarchal arrangement of sexuality—in other words, to trouble kinship.

Chapter 6 considers the implications of this story about the secularization of the marital form and of transactional relationships with deities for anthropological reckonings of kin making and scholarly appraisals of religiosity. Sexuality saturates all religions, I argue, not only those whose illicit nature scandalizes modern sensibilities.