

Contemporary *Devadāsīs*: Empowered Auspicious Women or Exploited Prostitutes?¹

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Arguably, as we have entered the condition of modernity or even postmodernity, there are no metatheories.² Instead, experience and knowledge about experience are indexical and reflexive, that is, contextual and open-ended. This view implies that knowledge is always constructed through a lens which distinguishes between tacit knowledge of the initial experiencing subject and academic knowledge of those who hear, read or study the representations of the participants' embodied and gendered position in language, culture and religion.³ Does this imply a fragmentation of understanding, analysis and theories? Not necessarily. Context-sensitive academic analysis can reconcile a degree of systematization and classification with a diversity and plurality of perspectives.

The dynamics of coherence or centripetality (as in systematization) and disintegration or centrifugality (as in a tendency for

¹ A version of this paper, entitled 'The Hindu goddess Yellammā, Śiva and the *devadāsīs* (*jōgammā*) of Saundatti: prostitution or a celebration of female sexuality?' was presented at the 'Ambivalent Goddesses Colloquium', King Alfred's College, Winchester, 25–27 March, 1997. I would like to thank the participants at this conference for their feedback on the contemporary *devadāsīs*. Grateful acknowledgements are also made to Professor Anna Dallapiccola (Department of Fine Art, University of Edinburgh) and Dr Shrinivas V. Padigar (Department of Ancient Indian History and Epigraphy, Karnatak University, Dharwad) for translating the Marathi and Kannada captions of the calendar print in Fig. 1. I am grateful to the British Academy for a small personal research grant 1996 to carry out fieldwork in Karnataka.

² Standard sources on modernity and postmodernity are for instance David Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity, an inquiry into the origins of cultural change* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990) and Paul Heelas, Scott Lash, Paul Morris (eds), *Detraditionalization* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

³ Ursula King (ed.), *Religion and gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 8–10. I am using King's concept of 'lenses of gender' in its widest sense to include gendered cultural, social and religious contexts.

fragmentation, indexicality, reflexivity) are particularly relevant in the Hindu context(s) where apparently paradoxical elements or phenomena exist side by side (e.g. Śiva the erotic ascetic).⁴ The contemporary *devadāsīs* are a paradox in a patriarchal society where female sexuality is feared unless domesticated within marriage.⁵ But whereas the Hindu wife worships her husband as god, the *devadāsīs* of the South Indian state of Karnataka — the ‘subjects’ of this paper — regard themselves as consorts or co-wives of the Hindu god Śiva who is Jamadagni. The *devadāsīs* are *nityasumaṅgalī* (‘forever-auspicious married-woman’) since they never become widows on account of their husband’s divinity.⁶ A visitor to the temple complex at Saundatti in Karnataka is confronted by a multitude of women wearing green or white sarees and bearing begging baskets or pots in which they keep the ritual objects. At first such a concentrated presence of matted-haired females clamouring to bless the visitor’s forehead with vermilion powder is an overwhelmingly chaotic experience for an outsider. It was only after some time that I was able to observe any detail. Then, it was the women’s matted hair (*jaṭā*) which persuaded me to see them as devotees and renouncers (*sannyāsin*), whose lives mirror the ritual cycle of goddess Yellammā-Renukā as a ‘chaste wife’ (*garati muttu*), a ‘degraded wife’ (*sūle muttu*) and a ‘pious wife’ (*jōgati muttu*) of Śiva as Jamadagni.

My fieldwork confirms that complex issues surround the cult of Yellammā, the biggest controversy being its perceived association with prostitution in Karnataka. The contemporary custom is seen as a social problem affecting particularly the scheduled caste women. Despite this, goddess Yellammā attracts a large following and villagers continue to dedicate their daughters to the goddess. From the reformers’ perspective the custom is a ‘superstition’; the matted hair of the female devotees a disease — a ‘fungus’. From the devotees’ perspective, the appearance of the matted hair is a sign of the manifestation of goddess Yellammā in a woman’s body. The reformers work towards emancipation of women from enforced *devadāsī*-hood through rehabilitation; the devotees persevere in their devotion to the goddess whom they believe to be a healer of diseases and granter of boons.

⁴ Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Śiva the erotic ascetic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981. First published Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973 under the title *Asceticism and eroticism in the mythology of Śiva*).

⁵ Janaki Nair, ‘The devadasi, dharma and the state’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, xxix, 50 (10 Dec. 1994), 3157–67.

⁶ The ‘pious wife’ (*jōgati muttu*) is sometimes considered to be undergoing the ‘widowed’ stage of Renukā’s life. But her widowed status is both ritual and temporary. See K.C. Tarachand, *Devadasi custom, rural social structure and flesh markets* (New Delhi: Reliance Publishing House, 1992), 94 ff.

Contemporary Representations of the Devadāsīs

The contemporary *devadāsīs* have been subject to sociological and anthropological representations.⁷ Conversely, the *devadāsīs*' own accounts (the lens through which the initial subjects make sense of their experiences) are often discrepant with those who study or attempt to reform them.⁸ As with the modern Śītā, the question 'whose experience, whose representation?' is posed.⁹ Even though the representations are generally context-sensitive, studies of the contemporary *devadāsīs* have mainly focused on the gendered dimension of the *devadāsī*-hood, that is, the *devadāsī* as synonymous or reducible to a common prostitute.

It is puzzling why the label 'prostitution' is so persistently attached to the contemporary *devadāsī*. One explanation is that the generic term '*devadāsī*' is applied to any woman associated with theogamy (principally the cult of Yellammā-Reṇukā) in Karnataka, overlooking the diversity of her ritual statuses as the 'chaste', 'degraded' and 'pious' wife of Śiva Jamadagni. A closer examination reveals that only the 'degraded wife' (*sūle muttu*) is associated with commercial prostitution.¹⁰ Another explanation is that such a misappropriation of the term '*devadāsī*' may reflect a secularized sociological perspective which represents the *devadāsīs* as predominantly exploited rather than empowered.¹¹ This perspective is reflected in the newspaper reports in which the Yellammā-Reṇukā temple is portrayed as a 'recruiting centre' for prostitutes.¹² An increasing social and sociological concern for women's issues in contemporary Indian society arguably makes the sociological perspective a valid representation of the contemporary *devadāsī* as an exploited sex worker, especially if she comes from rural scheduled caste communities. Nevertheless, as Trivedi discovered, the issue is more complex, and *devadāsīs* were found to be 'sacred', 'clandestine' or 'commercial' prostitutes, with the first category dominant in Karnataka.¹³

But even though a context-sensitive representation to a point, a secular-cum sociological perspective tends to gloss over the ritual aspect which, when we hear the voices of the *devadāsīs*, appears

⁷ Tarachand (1992); Harshad R. Trivedi, *Scheduled caste women: studies in exploitation* (Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1977).

⁸ See e.g. Nair (1994) and Trivedi (1977).

⁹ Jacqueline Suthren Hirst, 'Educating Sita: whose tradition? Whose experience?', a paper presented at 'Gender Issues and Contemporary Religion Colloquium', Lancaster University, 10–12 February, 1997.

¹⁰ Tarachand (1992).

¹¹ See Trivedi (1977), Tarachand (1992), 14–18, 52–3.

¹² Jackie Assayag, 'Modern devadāsīs: devotees of goddess Yellammā in Karnataka', *Rites and beliefs in modern India*, ed. Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (New Delhi: Manohar, 1990), 53–65; Tim McGirk, 'Saved from prostitution in a Hindu temple; the campaign against aids in India is helping rescue girls from being sold as sex-slaves in a Hindu cult', *The Independent*, 6 Feb. 1991.

¹³ Trivedi (1977), 10.

to be an important aspect of their experience.¹⁴ Despite a diffused focus, Tarachand's analysis exposes brilliantly the struggle for the cultural and ritual identity of the body of the contemporary *devadāsī*. The author's perspective oscillates between reactive and proactive ('westernized-Hindu' vs 'traditional-Hindu') representations of the '*devadāsīs*'. He starts from a reformist perspective by asserting that 'owing to the processes of modernization and westernization the religious importance attached to the *devadāsī* is lost or weakened' and most of the *devadāsī* end up as commercial prostitutes.¹⁵ The perspective shifts gradually towards a more proactive and context-sensitive representation of the '*devadāsīs*' as religious functionaries of the sacred complex at Saundatti. The degeneration of the custom 'can be attributed to a degeneration of the general moral conditions in modern society and the *devadāsī* custom alone cannot be blamed for this'.¹⁶ By chapter three the author suggests that 'only a negligible number go as commercial prostitutes'.¹⁷ Despite their degradation the *devadāsīs* continue to enjoy a respected ritual status. They regard themselves as divine and what they are doing as sacred. Tarachand's study provides a valuable contextual dimension of the *devadāsīs*' situatedness within the context of the political economy of the Yellammā temple.

Assayag, too attempts to recover the ritual status of the *devadāsīs* as *jōgammās*. She argues that the *devadāsīs*'s ritual status as a Śaiva *jōgammā* or a devotee dedicated to Yellammā in a general sense means that the impurity attached to her sexual activity is counter-balanced by her auspicious ritual status as a co-wife or consort of Śiva Jamadagni.¹⁸

The 'Dancing Girls': the History of the Devadāsī Tradition

In the Sanskrit tradition the *devadāsīs* ('female servants of the deity') were 'married' to a deity while serving as the king's concubines. The *devadāsīs* were engaged by the temple and the king to perform daily rituals of singing and dancing during worship, as well as during festival processions when the deity was taken out of the sanctum and paraded through the streets. Other

¹⁴ Tarachand (1992), 94ff.

¹⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁶ Ibid., 24.

¹⁷ Ibid., 98.

¹⁸ Assayag's *devadāsīs* are *jōgammās*, meaning 'devotees dedicated to the goddess in a general sense' (Assayag; 1990, note 2). For Assayag, then, '*jōgammā*', appears to be the generic term, although she refers to Jamadagni's first wives as 'temple *devadāsīs*', to Jamadagni's co-wives as '*devadāsīs*' and to Jamadagni's concubines as *basavī* (ibid. note 2). Tarachand's (1992, 87) *jōgammās* in contrast are 'religious functionaries' or 'mendicants' attached to the Saundatti shrine complex.

activities included dancing at the king's court, attending life-cycle ceremonies, such as marriages and birth celebrations and carrying out sacred prostitution. Inscriptions suggest that the *devadāsīs* enjoyed a generally respected status in the medieval courtly society.¹⁹ All sources agree that there was no shame attached to *devadāsī*-hood; that the *devadāsīs* were relatively more 'educated' than women in general, and especially when compared with married women.²⁰ Their status as 'ever-auspicious-married-women' (*nityasumangalī*) gave them respect and protection from widowhood.²¹

Epigraphical inscriptions of the Cālukya/Hoysaḷa period (eighth to fourteenth centuries) in Karnataka confirm these representations. The terms 'courtesan' or 'harlot' (*sūle*), 'concubine' and '*devadāsī*' all appear in the regional inscriptions.²² Courtesans Matibodhamma and Challabbe, for instance, had pillars decorated in the Saṅgameśvara temple in Pattadakal as offerings to the deity. The inscription relating to Challabbe is significant since she calls herself a 'harlot' (*sūle* Challabbeya) of the temple; *sūle* being one of the terms still in use. Nandagopal's examples not only suggest that the tradition of *devadāsīs* was venerated in Karnataka, but also that the Sanskritic term '*devadāsī*' was but one among several linguistic options. Despite this, many contemporary authors ignore the regional terms in favour of the generic Sanskritic '*devadāsī*' which, as I have argued, overlooks the diversity of her ritual statuses, as well as representing the '*devadāsī*' as synonymous with a common prostitute.

If the medieval period was one of relative empowerment for the *devadāsīs*, protected by the wealth of the kings and huge temple complexes, especially in South India, the colonial and British periods (from the sixteenth century onwards) witnessed a gradual transformation in the representation and experience of the

¹⁹ C.J. Fuller, *Servants of the goddess, the priests of a South Indian temple* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Anne-Marie Gaston, *Śiva in dance, myth and iconography* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990. First published Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Saskia Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali, devadasi tradition in South India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987); Frédérique Apffel Marglin, *Wives of the god king, the rituals of the devadāsīs of Puri* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Coodamani Nandagopal, *Dance and music in the temple architecture* (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1990).

²⁰ I am using the term 'education' context-sensitively. The medieval courtesans were said to be educated in the '64 arts' (Nandagopal, 1990, 48). The term 'education' has acquired different meanings in the post-Independence context and a distinction can be made between secular and 'religious' education.

²¹ Kersenboom-Story (1987); Marglin (1985). See also *Kathāsaritsāgara of Somadeva Bhatta — the ocean of story*, trans. C.H. Tawney and ed. N.M. Penzer, Vols 1–2 (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968. First published London: C.J. Sawyer, 1924).

²² Gaston (1990), 10; Nandagopal (1990), 48, 49. The Late Cālukyas were contemporaries of the Hoysaḷas. As this is also the area where the contemporary custom continues, I feel that examples from this region are relevant.

devadāsīs from respected courtly courtesans to shameful harlots.²³ Although Westerners were prepared to view the *devadāsīs* through the 'exotic lens' of the 'sinful yet sensuous', the nineteenth-century Western-educated Hindus embarked on a reform programme of many of the traditional customs which they had come to regard as shameful. The nineteenth century challenged all aspects of *devadāsī*-hood. Female sexuality and the struggle for control over the body of the *devadāsī* centred on their traditional ritual connection with land, the welfare of the kingdom and *dharma*.²⁴ With the transformations came a gradual disempowerment of the *devadāsīs*. Nair (1994) illustrates the disjunction between representation and experience of the *devadāsīs* in the nineteenth century, and the struggle for the control of the *devadāsīs*' sexuality amidst the emerging issues of nationalism and the struggle for independence, modernization and demands for reform, and how the power relationships between the newly-emerging state and *dharma* were re-written into a more secularized framework centering on the political economy of the land reform. The *devadāsīs* became a casualty of this power struggle. Not only was their status eroded by the censorious attitude of the Western-educated Hindu in whose mind the *devadāsīs* became synonymous with (commercial) prostitutes, but their profession and status became secularized as legislation gradually eroded their ritual and, significantly, land inheritance rights. Their ritual identity became eroded and lost (the Devadasi Act, 1934, 1947).²⁵

Who are the Contemporary Devadāsīs?

So if the Devadasi Act (1934, 1947) made it illegal for the *devadāsīs* to perform dance in the temple precincts; who then are the contemporary '*devadāsīs*' of Karnataka? The post-Independence period is characterized by a struggle for a cultural identity over the body of the 'post-*devadāsī*'. This struggle takes place on several levels of representation. On the level of discourse the term '*devadāsī*' is used by the authors (e.g. Trivedi, 1977, Tarachand, 1992) generically as synonymous with 'prostitute' in support of a secularization, modernization and de-traditionalization thesis.

Secondly, the iconographic representation of Yellammā-Reṇukā conveys in pictorial form the struggle over the identity and control

²³ Even though the *devadāsīs* are represented as relatively empowered during the medieval period, I agree with Nair that we must not exaggerate the power they enjoyed. The *devadāsīs*, despite their relative autonomy, remained dependent on a triad of men within the political economy of the temple: the priest, the guru and the patron (Nair, 1994, 3161). Similarly, the contemporary *devadāsīs* are dependent on and managed by the male triad of the *sthānika*, priest and sponsor (Tarachand, 1992). See also Abbe J.A. Dubois, *Hindu manners, customs and ceremonies*, trans. and ed. Henry K. Beauchamp (New Delhi: Asian Educational services, 1992. First published Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906).

²⁴ Marglin (1985), 5.

²⁵ See Gaston (1990), 7, citing *Madras Census Report* (1901), 151; Nair (1994), 3158.

over the body of the *devadāsī*. Griffin suggests that the image is a representation of an ‘abused goddess’: her body — the site of the sexual activity — has been removed; she retreats into her head’.²⁶ Gurumurthy suggests that the cult and worship of goddess Yellammā-Reṇukā who for centuries has been worshipped by the people of Karnataka as a healer of diseases and granter of boons is now represented as a threat to the health and wealth of her devotees: ‘the goddess, like the ritual tradition is abused and misused’.²⁷

Girls who continue to be dedicated in theogamy to goddess Yellammā-Reṇukā at Saundatti cannot be *devadāsīs* in the pre-1947 sense since they can no longer perform the ritual dance in the temple precincts, despite attempts of a re-vitalization of the dance-centered ritual tradition.²⁸ The central locus of the contemporary tradition is the Yellammā-Reṇukā shrine complex at Saundatti, and it is therefore appropriate that the contemporary *devadāsīs* should be studied in this context. The current worship is a combination of local and Śaivite/Vaiṣṇavite traditions, and the temple and the sixty or so surrounding minor shrines are managed by Śaiva Liṅgāyats. The girls who are largely recruited from the Vīraṣaiva non-Liṅgāyat and scheduled castes (formerly called untouchables) are dedicated to Yellammā-Reṇukā and, although they continue to have sexual relations with a sponsor, become Yellammā-Reṇukā ritually.²⁹

It is regarded as auspicious to dedicate a girl to Yellammā-Reṇukā, and she is usually dedicated as a result of a family vow.³⁰ The devotees believe that the family starts to receive the grace of the deity from the day of the dedication, even if this takes place before birth. As a vowed gift to the deity, the girl becomes the

²⁶ This interpretation was suggested by Professor Wendy Griffin (Women’s Studies, California State University, Long Beach, California) at the ‘Ambivalent Goddesses Colloquium’, King Alfred’s College, Winchester, 25–27 March 1997. She points out that this ‘retreat into the head’ is exactly what incest survivors typically report experiencing while the act is occurring. Other participants suggested that the contemporary *devadāsī* tradition is ‘institutionalized child abuse’ and that the *devadāsīs* are ‘raped’ since it can be argued that their sexual relations are not consensual, especially if involving minors or women not dedicated voluntarily.

²⁷ Cited in Tarachand (1992), xv. Tim McGirk’s article (1991) connects her worship and the attendant temple prostitution with the spread of Aids in Karnataka.

²⁸ See Nandita Chaudhuri, ‘Svapnasundari: my story’, *FEMINA Magazine*, 8 Sept. 1995; Anne-Marie Gaston, ‘Dance and the Hindu woman: bharatanāṭyam re-ritualized’, *Roles and rituals for Hindu women*, ed. I.J. Leslie (London: Pinter Publishers, 1991), 149–72; Naseem Khan, ‘Dance: not a dirty word’, *The Independent*, 13 Oct. 1995; Saskia Kersenboom-Story, ‘The traditional repertoire of the Tiruttani temple dancers’, *Roles and rituals for Hindu women*, ed. I.J. Leslie (London: Pinter Publishers, 1991), 129–48; Frédérique Appfel Marglin, ‘Refining the body: transformative emotion in ritual dance’, *Divine passions: the social construction of emotion in India*, ed. Owen M. Lynch (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 212–36.

²⁹ Tarachand (1992).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

property of the temple.³¹ In due course a sponsor pays for the dedication and de-flowering ceremonies. At dedication a sacred necklace (*muttu*) is tied round her neck to signify her ever-auspicious married status as *nityasumaṅgalī*. Her presence is sought at life-cycle ceremonies. The personal narratives of the sixteen *devadāsīs* in Tarachand's study suggest that no shame is attached to their activity and that they or their children are not stigmatized. All were initiated voluntarily between the ages of sixteen and twenty and underwent the de-flowering ceremony within a year.³² A typical life story involved an initiation ceremony in the form of a marriage between Yellammā-Reṇukā and Jamadagni, followed by a period as a concubine or 'chaste wife' (*garati muttu*) of a sponsor from a land-holding family. Few studies have analyzed the caste affiliation of the sponsor, but out of the sixteen men who performed the de-flowering ceremony in Tarachand's study six were 'kin', eight were 'rich and influential' and two 'well-wishers of the family'.³³ The women, her children and sponsor, together with the respective families reap the benefits of her ritual status as *devadāsī*.

Even though she may be a concubine, a 'chaste wife' (*garati muttu*) does not become entirely financially dependent on her sponsor in the way that a wife is dependent on her husband. Instead, she remains in her father's clan, although she becomes ritually linked with the priest's clan at the temple since that is where her divine husband Śiva as Jamadagni is.³⁴ Alternatively, she may become a sexually active 'degraded wife' (*sūle muttu*). The final 'pious wife' (*jōgati muttu*) stage involves retiring from sexual activity and becoming a ritually active renouncer or mendicant. Tarachand discovered that the 'degraded wives' (*sūle muttu*) who undergo the dedication rite voluntarily consider offering themselves to the deity as the highest sacrifice, believing that they serve the deity even through prostitution.³⁵

The Wāda women consider their ritual status as a 'boon'. They do not think that the custom should be banned, but that the government should provide protection to keep the tradition alive. A few said that the government 'should not interfere'.³⁶ Many were critical towards the 'degraded wives' (*sūle muttu*) who are seen bringing the tradition to disrepute. In contrast to this, the reformers regard the tradition as 'superstition', whereas the *devadāsīs* see their activity as 'divine service'. Education, from the reformers' perspective entails emancipating *devadāsīs* from their

³¹ Tarachand (1992), 91.

³² Ibid., 60.

³³ Ibid., 62–4.

³⁴ Ibid., 65.

³⁵ Ibid., 94–104.

³⁶ Ibid., 63.

ritual activity. Conversely, educating their daughters while grooming their brother's daughters for *devadāsī*-hood are considered as compatible activities by the *devadāsīs*. Significantly, fourteen out of the sixteen Wāda *devadāsīs* own land.³⁷ Tarachand's study suggests that being a *devadāsī* offers the women a sense of worth even though their perspective contrasts with that of the reformers who regard them as exploited.

The 'chaste wives', 'degraded wives' and the 'pious wives' are an integral part of the villages surrounding the Saundatti shine, their ritual status identifiable to the devotees by the type of sacred necklace (*muttu*) which they wear, and the ritual objects which they bear. They visit the family and temple shrines on auspicious weekdays and during the festivals of the goddess. Girls directly dedicated to 'pious wife' are virgins and entitled to carry a metal pot (*koda*) on their head which symbolizes their great ascetic power and chastity. Retired concubines carry a *jaga* basket filled with ritual objects, again on their head, but 'degraded wives' are only allowed to carry a basket (*paradī*) for begging in their hand.³⁸ Whatever their ritual status, the women contribute part of their earnings to the temple.

The Iconography and Mythology of Yellammā-Reṇukā

I will now examine the iconography of the goddess Yellammā-Reṇukā whose ritual embodiments the *devadāsīs* regard themselves, the myths associated with the goddess, and the relationship between the iconographic representation, myth and the experience of the *devadāsī*. The marriage ceremony of a girl or woman dedicated to Yellammā takes the form of a ritual enactment of the origin-myth of Yellammā-Reṇukā.³⁹

Significant to the identity of Yellammā-Reṇukā is that according to the Karnataka tradition Reṇukā embraces an untouchable woman (Mātaṅgī) and both are beheaded.⁴⁰ On restoration to life the heads are transposed and the resulting goddess is a woman with a brahmin's body and an untouchable woman's head. Such a transposal represents two ends of social and ritual hierarchy which in ordinary circumstances are kept separated by pollution taboos, but which the cult of Yellammā-Reṇukā transgresses and reverses with a marriage of an untouchable woman-become-goddess Mātaṅgī and brahmin Jamadagni.⁴¹ Sexual relations

³⁷ Tarachand (1992), 63.

³⁸ Assayag (1990), 57–62.

³⁹ Tarachand (1992), 91–2.

⁴⁰ P. Spratt, *Hindu culture and personality, a psycho-analytic study* (Bombay: Manaktala and Sons, 1966), 258; Tarachand, 1992, 76.

⁴¹ A.K. Ramanujan, 'Two realms of Kannada folklore', *Another harmony, new essays on the folklore of India*, eds Stuart H. Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 41–75; Tarachand (1992), 76.

between castes become ritually acceptable as they are between the *devadāsīs* and their caste sponsors.⁴²

The Mātaṅgī complex could be the link which explains the relationship between the iconographic representation of the goddess, myth and the experience of the contemporary *devadāsī*.⁴³ Mātaṅgī is an untouchable dedicated 'prostitute' (i.e. *devadāsī*) who overcomes pollution taboos relating to the sexual relations between caste males and untouchable females by allowing her saliva to touch caste males on ritual occasions.⁴⁴ The ritual linking of Mātaṅgī's saliva reverses the pollution effect of intercourse between a *devadāsī* and a caste male, making it instead ritually auspicious. Both a goddess and a sacred prostitute, Mātaṅgī articulates well the ambivalent gendered representations of the Karnataka *devadāsīs* whose life-cycles mirror the myth of Yellammā-Reṇukā as Jamadagni's 'chaste', 'degraded' and 'pious' wife.

Yellammā-Reṇukā is iconographically portrayed as a female head without a body in modern Indian calendar prints. Visually the image is striking, even shocking; the disembodied head, endowed with a smiling countenance rests on a pedestal from which cascades a red pleated saree-like garment. A halo of spike-like rays emanate from the goddess's head. Surrounding the image is a pictorial re-telling of the origin-myth of Yellammā-Reṇukā. The myth narrates the story of the chaste wife of a brahmin sage Jamadagni, Yellammā-Reṇukā, who incurs her husband's wrath due to a lapse in concentration while performing her wifely duty of fetching water from the river, and is beheaded by one of her sons, Paraśurāma. She is eventually restored to life, but with the head of a lower caste woman. Published studies pay scant attention to Yellammā-Reṇukā's evocative iconography, and from the point of view of representation it appears opportune to look at her imagery within the context of the gendered portrayal and experience of the Karnataka *devadāsīs*. It seems to me that even though their status has been eroded, the *devadāsīs* nevertheless lead extraordinary lives, and I started looking for parallel narratives among the *gandharvas* and *apsarāses* in Hindu mythology. Born out of the vapours of the waters (*apsu-rasa*) during the mythical churning of the ocean the *apsarāses* became the first 'public woman' who, because they were not wooed by the Titans and the gods, dedicated themselves to all celestial beings in common.⁴⁵ Significantly, the *devadāsīs* of Puri regarded themselves as earthly

⁴² Spratt (1966), 250-1.

⁴³ Tarachand (1992), 101.

⁴⁴ Spratt (1966), 148, 250, 272-3.

⁴⁵ *The Rāmāyana Vālmīki, an epic of ancient India* (Introduction and trans. by Robert P. Goldman), Vol. I: *Bālakāṇḍa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), *sarga*, 44.

apsarāses.⁴⁶ The iconography of the origin-myth of Yellammā-Reṇukā evokes much of the *apsarās*-centred imagery; for instance, the central role of Reṇukā's water pot, the 'water love-play' (*jala kridā*) of the *gandharva* king and an *apsarās* in the river, and the opposition between asceticism and water.⁴⁷

The Story (Fig. 1).

The central image of the goddess in the calendar print is surrounded by the origin-myth of the divine couple Śiva as Jamadagni and Yellammā-Reṇukā in the form of a series of cameos which read in a clockwise direction from the lower left hand corner. The cameos are accompanied by captions identifying the scene. Figure 1 is fairly representative in its general portrayal of the goddess and the myth surrounding her, although stylistic variations occur. The cameos begin with an invocation of Śiva's aniconic aspect, the *liṅga* and Śiva manifests to Reṇukā in cameo (7). The Brahmins (in white garments) and ascetics or holy men (in orange robes) have the Śaiva markings of three horizontal lines on their foreheads. I will now analyse each cameo in detail.⁴⁸

(1) The infant form of the goddess.

(2) The worship of the *liṅga* (*Bhakti yoga*). The couple worshipping the *liṅga* are Reṇukā's parents, king Prasenajit and his queen.

(3) and (4) Jamadagni meets Reṇukā, followed by the marriage.

(5) and (6) Reṇukā's chastity is symbolized by her ability to fashion a water pot out of sand using a cobra as a cushion for bringing water from the Malabrābha river. She is here depicted as the 'chaste wife' (*garati muttu*).

(7) Reṇukā witnesses 'water love-play' (*jala kridā*) between a king and his wives or courtesans in the river. This is a key scene since it contains elements which are central to my analysis of the gendered portrayal of the *devadāsīs*. Reṇukā loses her chastity as a result of seeing the *gandharva* king Citraratha and his courtesans (*devadāsīs*) 'sporting' in the river.⁴⁹ This detail is significant since Citraratha is the king of *gandharvas*, celestial male beings whose task, among others, is to *de-flower* brides, a task which the sponsor performs.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Marglin (1985), 10, 91.

⁴⁷ See Marglin (1985), Index: *apsaras* and analysis, 99–101.

⁴⁸ My indentifications of the story are from Assayag (1990), Tarachand (1992), and *The Mahābhārata*, Vol. 2, trans. and ed. J.A.B. van Buitenen (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), *Vanaparvan*, 116–17.

⁴⁹ See Tarachand (1992), 75; *The Mahābhārata, Vanaparvan*, 116.5 (J.A.B. van Buitenen, 1975; Elisabeth Anne Benard, *Chinnamastā, the awful Buddhist and Hindu tantric goddess* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), 6. Assayag (1990), 54 identifies the king as Kārtavīrya with courtesans.

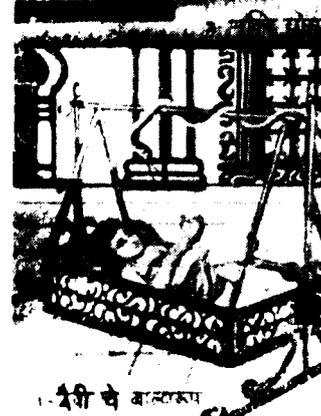
⁵⁰ Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, 'The role of myth in the Indian life-cycle', *ADITI, the living arts of India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 185–99, italics mine.

Figure 1
A modern calendar print of Śrī Reṇukā-Devī

Shree Renuka Devi 616

(Marathi/Kannada) (Jain Picture Publishers, Bombay):

1. The infant form of Devi
2. *Bhakti yoga*
3. Seeing Munishvara
4. The wedding of Renuka
5. Fashioning a pot out of sand
6. Bringing water for *puja*
7. Seeing the play of passion (*rasa-krida*)
8. The curse of Jamadagni
9. Liberation from the curse (Ekanatha Yogeshvara che ashirvad)
10. Renuka is decapitated
11. (Parashurama) Requesting for the life of his mother
12. The family of Renuka



(8) The curse. As a result of a lapse in chastity the pot starts to leak, the cobra forsakes her and Reṇukā returns to the hermitage late. She is cursed by her husband Jamadagni with a skin disease (possibly leprosy or smallpox) and banished into the forest. Mythologically Reṇukā enters the sexually active life-stage of a 'degraded wife' (*sūle muttu*). Her association with the 'healing' goddess Yellammā begins when she incurs a skin disease as a result of the curse.⁵¹

(9) Liberation from the curse. During her forest exile Reṇukā meets two Śaiva ascetics and becomes a devotee of Śiva, who is shown bestowing his grace upon the scene. She regains her health and returns to Jamadagni. The forest exile is also spiritually transformative for Reṇukā. A meeting with the two Śaiva holy men initiates her to healing powers, asceticism and *yoga*.⁵² Perhaps the scene articulates what Ramanujan calls 'integrating village goddesses into the Hindu system'. The village goddess here is Yellammā who becomes deified as a result of healing and ascetic powers. According to Tarachand, 'Yallara-amma' means 'Mother-of-All', even though as Ramanujan points out, she not a 'mother' at all, but a *māri*. A Kannada '*māri*-goddess' is basically independent; if married, insubordinate to husband; her males tend to be consorts, brothers or guardians.⁵³ This is the 'pious wife' (*jōgati muttu*) stage of Yellammā-Reṇukā's life cycle.

(10) The beheading. Still enraged, Jamadagni has Reṇukā beheaded by one of her sons, Parásurāma.

(11) Parásurāma's boons. Parásurāma requests his father to restore his mother to life. Reṇukā becomes deified as a result of matricide. Female chastity 'lost', then regained in a deified context demonstrates the indexical and reflexive nature of the Yellammā-Reṇukā myth complex which deals with 'taboo' and liminal sexual relations between castes which not only can have a variety of gendered meanings to the participants, but are also represented from a variety of gendered perspectives.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Tarachand (1992), 74 and Assayag (1990), 54 agree on leprosy, although Assayag, referring to the sacred necklace (*muttu*) which the *jōgammās* wear, suggests later (*ibid.* 58), that in Kannada '*muttu*' means smallpox. Ramanujan (1986), 57 suggests that her association is with smallpox, Kannada word *amma*, as a propitiatory euphemism.

⁵² Assayag (1990), 57; Tarachand (1992), 74.

⁵³ Ramanujan (1986), 56–8; Tarachand (1992), 73–4. Yellammā is also known as 'the deity of the seven valleys' or Elu-Kollada-Yellammā in Tarachand (1992), 78–9.

⁵⁴ Spratt (1966), 252, 267–8. See also Sudhir Kakar, *The inner world, a psycho-analytic study of childhood and society in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981. First published 1978), 99; and Henry Whitehead, *The village gods of South India* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1988. First published 1921). Parásurāma's brothers, who refused to behead their mother are cursed to become eunuchs (see Tarachand (1992), 75). See also Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The origins of evil in Hindu mythology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980. First published Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 351. Benard (1994), 6, draws attention to a possible connection between Reṇukā and Chinnamastā.

(12) The family of Reṇukā and Jamadagni. In the Karnataka tradition Reṇukā is restored to health with the head of an untouchable woman (Mātaṅgī).⁵⁵

Conclusions

In this last section I will attempt to evaluate the Karnataka *devadāsīs*' situatedness within the context of gender, representation and experience. The legends and myths connected with the Karnataka tradition are indexical and reflexive, that is, contextual and open-ended. The stories are full of ambivalent elements, and the key characters lead complex lives. The multiple scenarios of the myths and legends offer equally multiple solutions to the dilemmas.⁵⁶ To me as an outsider, the image of Yellammā-Reṇukā; a brahmin body with an untouchable head, is hugely complex, yet the image helps me understand the engendered ritual position of the matted-haired women in the temple's precincts. Equally, to her devotees she is the healer of diseases and granter of boons, to whom they offer their most beautiful daughters.

Regarding representation, the authors surveyed offer diverging explanations and solutions to the problem. We noted the disjunction between representation and experience insofar as the 'degraded wife' (*sūle muttu*) is represented as the collective body of the contemporary Karnataka *devadāsīs*. This observation leads to the question to what extent can those who hear, read or study representations avoid the 'trap of relativity', reductionism or romanticism? In the case of the contemporary Karnataka *devadāsīs* relativity amounts to arguing that becoming dedicated is a better choice than the 'choice' that a rural low caste girl faces anyway; reductionism amounts to reducing the *devadāsī* to a common prostitute, and romanticism to either a glorification of the sacred sexuality aspect or attempts to revitalize the 'classical' dance-centered pre-1947 *devadāsī* tradition.

Arguably Hinduism offers a multiplicity of solutions to dilemmas on more than one level of 'truth', and that there is a contrast between 'the world' and 'eternal order'.⁵⁷ I agree with Assayag that the contemporary *devadāsīs* — or *jōgammās* — as she calls them, are a paradox whose activity contradicts the moral order of society, yet the two co-exist.⁵⁸ Personal narratives suggest that the women possess an insight into their situation and those who undergo the dedication rite voluntarily regard offering themselves

⁵⁵ Tarachand (1992), 76.

⁵⁶ O'Flaherty (1981), 371, 376; Ramanujan (1986), 73.

⁵⁷ O'Flaherty (1980), 370, 374. I am grateful to the participants of the 'Ambivalent Goddess Colloquium', King Alfred's College, Winchester, 25–27, March, 1997, for comments in response to an earlier draft of this paper regarding problems with a relativist perspective.

⁵⁸ Assayag (1990), 61.

to the deity as the highest sacrifice. The perspective of personal devotion may be a relevant solution for those *devadāsīs* whose unwavering devotion to Śiva and the goddess makes it possible for them to experience their sexual activity as a divine duty.⁵⁹ These women are ‘empowered and auspicious’. Nevertheless, the issue of ‘choice’ vs ‘religious duty’ needs to be debated, if only because in many cases the girl is gifted to the temple in infancy or even before. The notion of ‘sacred sexuality’, when perceived as non-consensual, with one of the participants a ‘minor’, is no longer acceptable in modern society, if only because the societal order (*dharma*) no longer rests with the king, but with the state.⁶⁰

I conclude on the notion of ‘whose representation’. All the current representations of the Karnataka *devadāsīs* deal with the management of female sexuality. Secondly, all the representations employ the gendered dimension for an explanation or a solution. I agree with Tarachand that the contemporary situation is characterized by a struggle over the cultural and ritual identity of the body of the post-*devadāsī* who continue to be managed by the political economy of the male triad of the ‘temple manager’ (*sthānika*), the priest and the sponsor.⁶¹ The discourse of this struggle is informed by patriarchal ideology which continues to abuse the goddess and her tradition.⁶² The current representations do not accord the initial subjects, the Karnataka *devadāsīs*, an equal stance alongside the more traditional androcentric perspectives. My contribution is intended to raise the profile of the Karnataka women, to help them find a voice to represent themselves and to pose the questions ‘why is the “degraded wife” category over-emphasized?; ‘why are the “chaste wives” overlooked’ and ‘why do the “pious wives” not get more recognition?’ Awareness-raising needs to work towards involving the Karnataka women as equal participants in the dialogue between the reformers and devotees, in asking who or what the abusers are and what forms the abuse or exploitation takes (e.g. the dedication of children). Like a feminist perspective which finds a voice through the image of the abused goddess, whose body, the site of sexuality has been removed and who retreats into her head, I hope that the Karnataka women find a voice through the grace of goddess Yellammā-Reṇukā.

⁵⁹ Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, ‘The clash between relative and absolute duty: the *dharma* of demons’, *The concept of duty in South Asia* (U.S.A.: The School of Oriental and African Studies, 1978), 96–106; Tarachand (1992), 93, 95–6.

⁶⁰ Nair (1994), 3158–62. See also note 26. *supra*.

⁶¹ Tarachand (1992), xv, 81–6. Why does ‘sacred prostitution’ continue in the contemporary Indian society? Nair (1994) offers an interesting critique of morality in the context of ‘arranged’ versus ‘love’ marriages, the ideal of ‘marriage partners as companions’ and the need to ‘domesticate female sexuality’ for a traditional marriage to work.

⁶² Nair (1994), 3158.