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*Geoffrey Samuel and Jay Johnston*

**9 'Yoginī' in South Asia**

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# 'Yoginī' in South Asia

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# 13 Invoking the erotic Mother

The outcaste priestess and the  
heroic men

*Priyadarshini Vijaisri*

## Introduction

This paper explores the notion of the sacred and dangerous feminine within the Śakti tradition across villages of Andhra Pradesh, Southern India. In this religious domain the outcaste clan goddess Mātamma or Mātāṅgi, the *kuladevatā* of the Mādigas, occurs as the primordial feminine power in her wholesomeness, as the terrifying and nurturing Mother. References to her abound and are manifold: creator, protector, virile, incestuous Mother, a corpse-eating demoness, a sorceress with multiple forms residing on the boundaries and associated with a troupe of minor and deadly spirits. These references suggest the complex religious and cultural notions that underlie both the myths and ritual practices. The *jōgini* (Telugu form of the Sanskrit 'yoginī') and the *mātamma/mātāṅgi* are variations of the priestess in this ritual domain.<sup>1</sup> As discursive categories, these models offer immense scope to broadly delineate the mutations and interconnections between esoteric ritual practices and communal traditions.

First, an attempt is made to locate the priestess within a broader religious context as embodying the notion of transcendent femininity in contrast to the priest and the ascetic. It will focus on specific ritual practices that signify the exceptional being of the priestess. In these practices, her bodily substance, speech and acts are believed to be saturated with the dangerous power of the goddess. Second, a crucial dimension is the relationship between the priestess and the *vīrulu* (heroic men) in the invocation of the mother goddess. This ritual bond between feminine transcendent power and worldly masculine power forms a basic principle for understanding issues of religious power and caste structure. Finally, the absolute religious power of the outcaste indicates the need to rethink the boundaries and nature of marginality in caste societies. This ethno-historical exploration deploys notions of dangerous marginality in rethinking these issues and largely draws from field-data and the sacred lore of the outcastes in the region.

## *Esoteric yoginī, exoteric jōgini*

One of the evocative questions that surfaced during the anti-devadāsī and anti-caste movements during the 1970s was '[w]hy only women belonging to the

untouchable communities and not any other upper caste girls were dedicated to the gods?' (Vijaisri 2004: 280–2). The question emerging within the radical anti-caste discourses was whether the custom symbolized their exploited condition and reinforced subordination.<sup>2</sup> This counter-ideology critically contested the reformist positing of the custom as an aberration, but there was a consensus with respect to the prototypical ideal of the 'devadāsī'. The gradual dissipation of the cultural signification of the *jōginis* and the diminishing value of the ritual ties between the caste and outcastes with the onset of reformist and legislative interventions led to the emergence of the ideal of a 'vestal virgin', women dedicated to gods who were seen as an embodiment of purity and chastity, and who pursued a life of religious service. Indeed, the *yoginī* concept was invoked in these contexts to explain 'the fall' from the original pristine model. References to cultural links have been used to decipher the meanings surrounding the unique being of the *jōgini*. Thus the *jōgini* (like the female yogī) was 'a renouncer, seeking liberation from rebirth through permanent unswerving devotion to the deity'<sup>3</sup> (Patil 1975: 382). This classification also alludes to the positioning of the devadāsīs akin to the renouncer in terms of both their exceptional being and cultural imagination (Apffel Marglin 1985). However, although these representations explain the cultural significations and indicate possible linkages, they do not adequately explain ritual practices, nor do they respond to outcaste discourses. This lurking awareness that excessive sexualization of the outcaste female body symbolizes their powerlessness continues, in the case of the *joginīs*, to mystify their beings pejoratively. An attempt is made to discern the interconnections between the *yoginī* cult and priestesses across regional traditions of Reṇukā-Yellamma and Mātāṅgi to hint at the symbolism between these ritual domains.

The manner in which the term *yoginī* is deployed indicates an intricate semantic dimension hinting at variations and transmutations within a cultural space. The *yoginī* cult has links with the tantric and Śākta tradition. 'Yoginī' in this context broadly evokes two overarching images; one recognizes their positive status as 'aspects of the divine' while the other regards them as of minor significance and attributes negative qualities to them. This is evident from the way in which mortal *yoginīs* were represented in Telugu literary works during the medieval period, a tendency that after the twelfth century became ambiguous and was marked by devaluation (White 2003). Etymologically, the term *jōgini* can be traced to *yoginī* and is closely linked to another category, the *yakṣa*.<sup>4</sup> The induction of Sanskrit and Prakrit words into popular vocabulary can be gauged by the rendering of *yoginī* and *yakṣa* in Telugu.<sup>5</sup> *Yakṣa* figures as *yakṣinī/yakṣuḍu*, retaining the Sanskrit influence, while the folk rendering in Prakrit occurs as *jakka/jakkula*. *Yakṣinī* is described as a 'female fiend attached to the service of Durgā.' The fifteenth-century text *Krīḍābhirāmamu* refers to the 'jakula woman' as a songstress, while the 'yakṣa woman' is associated with fertility rites (Rao and Shulman 2002: 58). However, the term also has connotations of witchcraft and sorcery, and thus also suggests a sorceress or other semi-divine beings that preyed on men to satiate their sexual appetite (Brown 1996: 1058).

The term *jōgini* traverses a semantic course and has layers of meanings with complex transmutations. *Yoginī* (Sanskrit) occurs as a woman who practises yoga,

a female mendicant, a nymph, a fairy or an attendant of Durgā. In Telugu, *yōgurālu* refers to a female mendicant and occurs in popular usage as *jōgurālu* or *jōgini*. The goddess Jōgulamba (in Alampur) is rendered as the mother of the *jōgurālu* or *jōginis*. Her iconographic representation with a human skull, a lizard, a scorpion and a bat in her hair is akin to a *yoginī*.<sup>6</sup> Similarly the *yoginīs* are depicted as semi-divine beings associated with cremation grounds, as demonesses who preyed on human beings and drained them of their vital bodily essences. In the Kaula tradition they inhabit the wild, are 'narabhōjinīs' (eaters of humans), are fond of wine and possess magical powers, especially the power to fly and to change their form. They were powerful, petulant beings who, when neglected, became dangerous and brought disease and death (Dehejia 1986: 14; White 2003). The *yoginīs*, as the tantric consorts, were associated with esoteric sects. Bhavabhūti in *Mālatimādhava* and Jakkana in *Vikramaṅka caritra* mention Sriparvatam (Srisailam) as the tantric centre where the Kāpālikas and *yoginīs*, through severe [self-] mortification, gained supernatural powers and attained the status of demigods. It is with reference to the Siddha Nātha tradition in Andhra that the *yoginīcakra* is mentioned (Dehejia 1986: 14). Similarly, a pervasive tantric notion with regard to the rite of sexual intercourse is the *pañcamakāra*. It is often argued that, generally, a woman from the lowest caste is suited for the ritual of *maithuna*. In the Kaula tradition, the woman most suitable for the tantric rites is the *carmakārī* (leather worker), the *mātamma*, the *caṇḍālī* or a woman from the lowest caste (White 2003: 167; Hatley 2007: 159). Similarly the *cermaniṣṭa* rite alludes to a tantric ritual akin to the *cakrapūjā*, and mainly involved Māḍiga women (Rauschenbusch-Clough 1899).

Thus, while the *yoginī* signifies esoteric elements, the *mātamma* and *jōginis* are unambiguously conceived as possessing favourable but also dangerous powers in the exoteric context. While the latter appear in the tantric tradition as ritual consorts, it is the *mātamma* who resiliently embodies a more or less archetypal model of the dangerous sacred feminine. The Māḍigas regard themselves as belonging to the ancient clan of Mātāṅga (Hatley 2007: 230–3). Similarly, a female tantric practitioner belonging to this clan finds mention as *Mātāṅgavruddha* in early Śaiva texts (Hatley 2007: 100). The *mātamma* as the vigorous variant of the ritual consort perhaps precedes the *yoginī*. The *jōgini* perhaps indicates the envisaging of *yoginī* in the exoteric context with the interface of Śākta and brahmanical traditions. Unlike the *mātamma*, the *yoginī* mutates when cast within the Hindu mould. Yet this transfigured identity is unconditionally validated by her link with the spouse goddess Reṇukā via Mātamma. The *yoginī* as the *jōgini* embodies the transfigured identity of both the virile uncontrollable Mother and the spousified goddess Reṇukā. It would be useful to briefly describe the Mātamma tradition to explore the interconnections between these models of the sacred and dangerous feminine in the ritual domain.

### Mātamma and Yellamma: outcaste clan goddesses

Mātāṅgi or Mātamma appears in different traditions as the Māḍiga clan goddess, the tutelary deity and one of the Mahāvidyā goddesses (Kinsley 1998). As their

clan goddess, the left-hand caste of the Mādiga claims absolute authority in her worship. Claims to exclusive rights are based on the belief that the Śākta gnosis flows through them and can be solely mediated by those belonging to the clan. The interconnection between traditions has generated a vigorous regional cultural formation, symbolized by the 'compound' divinity Reṇukā-Yellamma, a fusion of caste and outcaste goddesses.<sup>7</sup> In the Reṇukā-Yellamma tradition, the Mātāṅgi is either synonymous with or subordinate to Reṇukā. According to the myths, Reṇukā's mental infidelity causes her loss of power. She is reinstated within the sacred space in her sexless form, i.e. the decapitated head.<sup>8</sup> The severed head epitomizes the castration of the virile Mother and the loss of her dangerous power. In the brahmanical myths that delegitimize the motif of the virile Mother by idealizing her procreative sexuality, the erotic Mother, the unchaste wife, becomes the victim of her own sexually aroused state. Her desire is interiorized as the dangerous malevolent energy erupts as boils on her body, a very polluting condition. In a parallel tradition, sustained by the Mādiga priests and priestesses, the virility of the Mother renders her extremely dangerous. Similarly, the legends indicate the intriguing dimension of the tradition, as it responds to the denigration of the goddess as a corpse-eating, evil whore, a sorceress, an esoteric magical Mādiga goddess. In the *Gamatapurāna* she is associated with the wilderness wherein she reveals her various forms. Within the Śākta cosmology, Mātamma's unbridled sexuality is intrinsic to her procreative powers. Creation of the universe by the Mother is itself a product of sexual enjoyment. The *Ādipurāna* narrates the emergence of the Mother from the cosmic void following a state of sexual desire, the search for a mate, sexual play while assuming the form of a peacock, the consumption of fluids from the eyes of the mate when erotically-ecstatically aroused, and the impregnation ensuing in a reproductive period leading to the birth of the cosmos. In the next phase, the virile Mother is in search of a male partner to fulfil her desire. This part is subject to various interpolations as the motif of the incestuous and devouring Mother recurs.<sup>9</sup> In this mythic time she is tricked by the Trimūrtulu (Trimūrti) to offer her third eye in seeking their consent for pleasure resulting in the loss of her absolute power. However, this uncontrollable danger is externalized. When uncontained, this flow of the lethal heat from her body to the exterior results in devastation and indeed the instability of the ordered space. The erotic Mother signifies a structural deviation from the oedipal complex wherein the son, the potential victim, slays the Mother to reclaim his being. The Mātamma tradition conserves a space for positive recognition of feminine virility.<sup>10</sup>

Similar cultural meanings inhere in the priestesses as well, defining their exceptional being. According to a widely shared belief, the outcaste priestess is the chosen female, capable of containing the power of Śakti. This power is believed to flow naturally in their bodies as within their clan in general. While it is present in all female beings in a latent form by virtue of their belonging to the specific clan, this innate power erupts in women in whom excessive Śakti inheres. Moreover, if not duly channelled, it is an imminent danger to the family and can result in the demise of the woman. The intimate bond between the community

and the goddess is inscribed in the myths as also in the sacred syllables of invocation. Mātamma promises the Mādiga *siddhulu* that she would be reborn in the Mātāṅga village and bestows on them the right to perform the first worship.<sup>11</sup> The rites of initiation indicate the transformation of the outcaste woman from an ordinary mortal into a conductor of the dangerous powers of Śakti.<sup>12</sup> However, a dualistic cultural conception prevails in legitimizing such power. While in the case of the *mātāṅgi* it is predicated on the recognition of the brimming power of the clan goddess within the body of the woman, that of the *jōgini* is conceived as a *kuladharmā*, a caste duty, based on explicit signs of being the 'chosen' one, culminating in theogamy. Earlier accounts of the *mātāṅgi* tradition do not hint at theogamy. Instead, they emphasize her transformation into an unfettered being with absolute power, unrestrained sexuality and freedom from mortal ties (Rauschenbusch-Clough 1899; Madhavia 1906). In the Reṇukā-Yellamma tradition, the yoginī is transfigured into a divine spouse, identifying herself with the spouse goddess Reṇukā-Yellamma and bound to a cyclic notion of mythic time. Thus, like the goddess, she periodically enacts the dualistic being of the goddess, the travails of her widowhood and the auspiciousness of the chaste wife.<sup>13</sup> These distinctions in the envisaging of the outcaste sacred femininity in different cultural contexts and the trajectories they opened up in the ritual domain could, to a certain extent, explain the cultural transmutation of the yoginī.

The connection between the *jōgini* and the goddess Mātamma is evident in the myths. Their relation to Reṇukā is inscribed through a Mādiga woman named the *mātāṅgi/mātamma*. When the priestess is incorporated into the Hindu ritual domain, theogamy becomes the defining point of transition. The initiation of the *mātāṅgi* is predicated on her ability to contain, in her body, the uncontrollable and dangerous power of the goddess. It resembles a state of transformation, whereby the priestess herself is recognized as the representative of the goddess. While the Mātāṅgi is the high priestess whose role is tied to communal spaces and whose uncontrollability is recognized, that of the *jōginis* assumes a more conformist model. Thus, the *jōginis'* ritual identity and classification is shaped by caste norms and interpersonal relationships among different caste communities. Despite the relegation of the Mātāṅgi to the margins of the Reṇukā-Yellamma tradition, the initiated woman becomes a member of the select group only after undergoing a ceremony of purification with the clan fluids of the Mātāṅgi. The ceremony of initiation culminates during a rite performed with water drawn from the tanning pit of the Mādiga, the 'lustration at the hands of a matangi' and the purification of the ritual paraphernalia (Bradford 1983: 320).

The initiate offers worship to the Mātāṅgi on five consecutive days, collects offerings initiating her into a distinct mode of life, and makes an offering to the goddess (Patil 1977: 35). However, in this space the ritual identity of the *jōgini* is modelled on the religio-cultural notions of auspiciousness encapsulated in the ideal of the *nityasumanṅalī*. As a woman married to the god, she is in a high state of ritual auspiciousness, unlike an ordinary woman. Her presence during auspicious ceremonies is regarded as vital for the well-being of the family (Tarachand 1992; Kamble 1988; Assayag 1990: 55). Marriage ceremonies, house warming

and the installation of the goddess within the house are occasions that necessitate the presence of *jōginis*. They are believed to possess healing powers, especially for smallpox, which is regarded as a sign of the eruption of the 'hot state' of the goddess and is a condition of extreme impurity.<sup>14</sup> The ritual roles of the *jōginis* indicate the deep interconnections with the Mātāṅgi, especially in rituals relating to oracular prophecies that concern the whole village, such as rain, harvest, lurking danger, individual crises or collective well-being and prosperity.<sup>15</sup>

Their distinct positioning in the actual temporal space is conceived in an infinite context as contiguous to the world beyond ordered space and to the different layers of the cosmos. The religious authority of the *jōgini* is diffused within the caste space. The latter assumes different forms crafted within specific sectarian cosmologies, sometimes being expressed as caste norms.<sup>16</sup> For example, Basavi exemplifies the specific casting of the *jōgati* in the Vīraśaiva tradition which was also patterned. This process of classification was in accordance with the normative religio-cultural concepts of sacred femininity, i.e. auspiciousness, fertility and devotion that evoked the religious notion of liberation (*mokṣa*) (Patil 1975: 380–2; Tarachand 1992: 14–15). The orientation of rituals indicates their association with the *siddhimārga*, while their religio-cultural concerns remain strongly tied to this-worldly goals and not exclusively to liberation or spiritual merit.

The Mātamma tradition is an autonomous domain with a communal ethos and a different locus of religious power.<sup>17</sup> The mode of worship has a distinct conception of pollution and the sacred that defines its ritual structure. The worship, known as *śaktipūjā*, has a communal orientation and illustrates the possibilities that esoteric practices open up in normative ordered spaces. It must be noted that discourses on the *jōginis* or the *mātamma* have not addressed the basic principle of ritual organization symbolized by the 'ritual pair' constituted by the priestess and the village lord. This central feature indicates the persisting continuity with a core religious principle in caste societies (Hocart 1950). This conception of the ritual pair assumes a crucial value in the Śākta exoteric tradition and reveals the underlying ritual bond between castes and outcastes, and village as a ritual unit. The village head has a crucial role in the Mātamma tradition and the distinct relation between the lord and the priestess is evident at different levels, from the ritual of initiation to that of invocation of the goddess.

A significant feature of the worship is the coding of rites and ritual substances around the term *mailu*, i.e. pollution. The consecrated water, *mailu nīllu* (literally meaning 'polluted water'), is believed to be powerful when mixed, together with intoxicants and the sacrificial blood, into the regular, vermilion, turmeric water. Toddy is regarded as a cooling agent that is crucial for engaging with the goddess's fluctuating state of being. Considered as possessing apotropaic value, it is used in rites of invocation and purification. A basic mode of invocation unfolds during *kolupu*, a week-long worship of the Mātāṅgi/Mātamma, in the centrality of the priestess and the village head.<sup>18</sup> The ritual pattern is embedded in the parallel social ordering of castes in the region, the dualistic order.<sup>19</sup> The *mātāṅgi* and the Golla village head, who constitute the ritual pair, belong to the left-hand castes. The head is personified as the ritual representative, also known

as the king (*rāju*) during the celebration. It is the religious obligation of the head to organize the event and ensure that the invocation ceremonies are conducted with due honour as the destiny of the village is bonded to the goddess.

It must be noted that the Gollas are categorized along with the Mādigas within the left-hand division. They share a strong communal bond evoked by mutual ties. The Gollas are a predominantly pastoral and land-owning caste with an entrenched heroic legacy.<sup>20</sup> The Gollas were in royal service during the Vijayanagara period as warriors. During the later period they struggled to become independent through their chieftainship and gained authority in some regions. Their ties with the Kākātīya rulers of Warangal further reinforced their authority. They consolidated their power by establishing small kingdoms and claiming *ḷṣatriya* status.<sup>21</sup> Despite the great value they accord to heroic values like courage, righteousness and virtuosity, it is their deeply innate inclination to spiritual power that distinguishes their authority in the ritual domain. An important rite of passage for the Gollas is *teluvu pattam*, which facilitates the channelling of the dormant clan attributes within males, initiating them into active communal roles. These select men enjoy special status as *vīrulu* (*vīra*, hero), and are absolutely necessary to sustain the community in their role as mediators with ancestors, spirits and the clan divinities. Several of their cultural practices celebrate their exceptional powers by demonstrating it through severe bodily mortification and possession.<sup>22</sup> The *mātāṅgi* and the *vīrulu* co-jointly perform rituals during the celebrations. Specific examples illustrate this dimension. When the goddess is taken into the main village, the presence of the pair is mandatory. As the head/lord stops at each household and offers the goddess (not the householder) worship, the *mātāṅgi* briefly dances a *cindu*. Later she enters the inner precincts and performs a ritual of sprinkling the consecrated water in all its corners. She also receives worship by women of the house who prostrate themselves at her feet and also make their offerings. At the temple during rites of propitiation the ritual pair offer *cindu hārati*, a fumigation rite accompanied by ritual dance. During the fire walk, while the *mātāṅgi* is first among the mortals to tread the fire pit, the *vīrulu* follows her, followed in turn by a trail of men, women and children.

Like the priestess, the *vīra* is regarded as a person possessing extraordinary abilities to contain the power of the goddess. In the tantric traditions, 'vīra' connotes an initiate who has overcome a state of *paśu* (an ordinary mortal) and has been transformed into a heroic man. The *vīra* personifies the traits of courage, resolve, intellect and alertness. He strives for the well-being of others. It is an 'intermediary stage between *paśu* and *divya* where his acquired qualities become part and parcel of himself and cannot be disassociated from his own entity' (Bhattacharya 1982: 317). The *vīra* state of being signifies an active state wherein these traits flow naturally within his self. Thus the *vīra* is the ideal ritual head and the consort of the Mātāṅgi in communal invocation ceremonies. The ritual bond between the *mātāṅgi* and the *vīrulu* assumes a broader significance in a context where the Gollas had strong claims to *ḷṣatriya* status, and wielded authority in the region as the lords in an intensely competitive spirit between the right- and left-hand castes. This religio-cultural model has striking resonance with the

tantric model of the yoginī and the *vīra* and may hint at the largely fluid or transmuted relationship between the *jōgini* and the village head. It must be noted that the village head possesses a prerogative over the dedicated woman as evidenced by the deflowering ceremony. The largely transcendent state of being and pairing assumes the form of theogamy in the parallel tradition across the region. For, unlike in the case of the *mātamma*, the rite of passage that defined the being of the *jōginis* was theogamy.<sup>23</sup>

### Between the priest and the renouncer: transcendent femininity

These feminine models open up possibilities for exploring how parallel spaces radically contest what is uncritically regarded as the normative order. General perceptions relegated these ritual traditions to a largely peripheral position, and their esoteric quality pre-empted the possibility of envisaging alternative exoteric ritual spaces. Although studies indicated royal patronage and the association of dominant castes with these traditions, their radical potential in reconfiguring notions of religious power and social ethos is yet to receive adequate attention (Dehejia 1986: 85). It has been noted that the invocation of powerful and dangerous deities was often evident during moments of personal crisis or 'external threats by rival religions or political forces', threats to one's status, or conditions of powerlessness: 'tantric practices could be a mode of reconciliation to temporary loss and a ritual reaffirmation of the privileged status' (Urban 2003: 287). These spaces opened up liminal opportunities that were unlike caste norms which define the social being and embodied self as destiny, one's inescapable karma. The ritual unleashing of violations, inversions and dynamic action in sects underscored the enormous power in the body. The physical body as the microcosm of the universe could be harnessed not only to transcend the social space, but the practitioner could evolve thereby into a supernormal being (Urban 2003: 287; White 2003: 291). The actual realization of this subversive potential beyond the boundaries of the ordered spaces has been a cause of celebration. It has been argued that the limited realization of this radical alternative is explained by the highly esoteric nature of certain tantric sects, which offered ephemeral escape for 'certain individuals' (Urban 2003). Explaining this is the proposition that tantrism was not a conscious or 'revolutionary' religious theodicy that envisaged a 'new structure of social egalitarianism'. In a sense it was seen as an escape into a spiritual abyss from which individuals could reclaim their powerful self and transcend normative space. In this context Hugh Urban notes the paradoxical nature of engagement with tantric practices in what he describes as the working of a 'double norm', making a distinction in the unresolved self between phases of transgression and the suspension of normative codes of behaviour in the esoteric realm and, in the exoteric context, the reaffirmation of the orthodox (Urban 2003: 279). However, the village traditions continue to conserve the fundamental elements of the Śākta tradition, albeit lacking the grandeur of royal patronage.

What defines this space is the extraordinary unleashing of the rituals that spectacularly recreate the Śākta ethos and privilege a distinct caste ethic.

Several scholars have critically explored the complex identity of women whose personas invoked both the renouncer and the sacred erotic femininity. Bradford discerns the basic underlying cultural conception of the *jōgatiljōgini* as signifying the transfiguration of their identity to that of the 'aggressive erotic sexuality' of the goddess.<sup>24</sup> Assayag (1990), analysing practices of devotion, notes that the *jōgamma* is a yoginī embodying the erotic woman and the renouncer. She represents the unfolding of the *svadharmā* of Indian femininity as against dharma (the duty distinct from *strīdharmā*, equated with *kāma*/sex). Thus, drawing from Biardeau's interpretation of *strīdharmā*, Assayag argues that her distinct being enables fulfilment of *strīdharmā* 'better than the other woman because she acts in accordance with her feminine nature':

By choosing a sexual profession interpreted as divine service (*seva*) the *jōgamma* realizes *kāma*, the goal of life (*puruṣārtha*) specific to woman. Her marriage to a god severs her worldly ties and thus allows her to do what is normally forbidden to woman. In spite of her many love affairs, this worldly *apsara* remains a virgin in spirit . . .

In a paradoxical logic, in the sexual pursuit of the renunciatory way of life aiming for liberation/moksha, her sexuality signifies 'ascetic sexuality' (Assayag 1990: 61–2). However, Hocart's theoretical frame facilitates two crucial departures from the dominant understanding of ritual and caste. First is his notion of the ritual pair, formed by royalty and priesthood. While the former is representative of the active principle, the latter, as its counterpart, is 'part of the king's self'. This conception is useful to critically rethink religious power and to engage with the concrete manifestation of such authority in the ritual pairing of the king/lord and the priest/priestess as it unfolds in the ritual domain (Hocart 1950). However, the priestess facilitates another model of pairing, which reveals a reconfiguration of cultural meanings. The persona of the *mātāṅgi* or *jōgini* embodies a transcendent femininity whose state of being lies between the priest and the renouncer. It represents the absolute authority of the feminine, as supranormal beings whose enigmatic personas unfold spectacularly and link the divine with the temporal worlds. Also the priestess is in opposition to the priest and the renouncer. Theogamy defines their exceptional being, bringing the priestess to the forefront and transforming her into a transcendental being. Unlike the priest whose purity is acquired, that of the *mātāṅgi* is akin to the goddess, beyond the pure and the impure. The rites of expelling impurity and transfusion of fluids, and the rite of spitting illustrate the unique being of the *mātāṅgi* as one saturated with the clan fluids.<sup>25</sup> It ritually connects to the notion of the dangerous flow of power within the clan, be it the tanning pit of the leather worker or the *mātāṅgi*. Rituals of infusing auspiciousness are coded in terms of impurity, as rites of extinction of impurity, *mailu tuḍupu*. The Telugu term *mailu* signifies impurity or pollution

and strongly connects to the diverse Śākta traditions that conventionally use 'impure' substances. The meaning of impurity and purity gain trans-structural meanings in this context and are associated with cosmic processes of life and death. It is this spectacular unfolding of the Śākta ethos that gains cultural validity across castes.<sup>26</sup> Unlike the renouncer, despite transgression of the normative spaces, her being is entrenched in both this-worldly and otherworldly domains mediating both the ordered space and the unfathomable wilderness and the cosmos. As in the case of the yoginī, this transcendent femininity is entrenched in the dynamic world of hierarchies of power. As representatives of the goddess, receptive to and containing her power, they facilitate the flow of life forces to the select initiate in specific rituals (the *vīras*), and during the initiation of women. It is their affinity to the clan that renders them powerful, allowing them to emerge as semi-divine beings and to be worshipped like the goddess herself.<sup>27</sup> While during initiation the women lose their original identity, becoming embodiments of the goddess and thus generally known as *mātāṅgi* or *mātamma*, the *jōgini* similarly shares the travails of the spouse goddess and adheres to mythic time in enacting the life cycle of the goddess. Her unfettered being in this tradition of the *mātāṅgi* amounts to recognition that, like the clan goddess, she embodies attributes of her wholesome power, and her unfettered being is a necessary condition for the condensation of her exceptional being. The shift from this belief is evident in the *jōginiljōgati* cult, where theogamy becomes immanent and suggests her association with the spouse goddess, unlike the *Mātāṅgi* who is the unfettered primordial feminine force.<sup>28</sup> The tantric notion that the yoginī is dangerous but for the initiate *vīra* may perhaps hint at the symbolism of the ritual pair and the erotic practices within this domain (Hatley 2007: 15). Unlike the ordinary woman, perhaps the sexuality of the consecrated woman was believed to be dangerous, like the goddess herself, the erotic mother whose hot state required her to be cooled lest the condition engender chaos in the ordered space. Thus theogamy becomes imminent. The deflowering ceremony is thus a religio-cultural rite in the ordered space, unlike on the boundaries where her hot state poses no imminent danger. The leader or ritual head of the village space, as the consort, reserves the right to persist in this benevolent state and thereby to retain the divine attributes that are crucial for the well-being and stability of the ordered space.

The ritual interlinks between the transcendent feminine power and worldly masculine power are reflected in the relationship between the *mātāṅgi* and the *vīra*. While in other contexts the kingly power is seen as tending to be feminized in the scheme of power and status, here a sort of cumulative power is embodied by the heroic men. Yet the power of the latter is subordinate to the feminine transcendental power. It is interesting to note that one of the features of diffusion of the yoginī cult is how the conception shifts within the geography of caste societies. The spatial shift from the hills, wilds and cremation grounds (all associated with the esoteric cult of the yoginīs) to the boundaries (the *Mātāṅgi* in the outcaste hamlet) where the yoginī assumes an extremely powerful locus is attenuated as it flows into the ordered space (the *jōgatis* in the temple complex). In the latter, where a woman's identity is defined by sexuality, the unfettered erotic

identity unfolds as the divine spouse. And yet this identity is layered with normative connotations of non-marital sexuality and distinguished from the dichotomous model (wife versus whore) as the divine prostitute. It is this unresolved tension at the heart of the regional tradition that has produced the enigmatic persona of the virgin whore. The rituals of the *mātāṅgi* and the *jōgini* must be perceived within this context. The outcastes have sustained a religious tradition that not only contests the hegemony of the brahmanical tradition but has evolved a resilient non-conformist tradition.<sup>29</sup> The outcaste memories invoke a primordial social order that transformed a conglomeration of discrete cultural groups, a mutuality that is sealed in the covenant to the goddess. Any deviation from the shared roles is seen as fraught with the demise of the social body. However, as ritual specialists, the outcastes emerge during this invocation as spokespersons of the social order.<sup>30</sup> In this alternative ritual structure, the Brahmin is passive and powerless. He recedes to the margins and thus assumes the position of the outcastes in the hegemonic structure.<sup>31</sup>

One of the most evocative signifiers of the status of the outcastes is in their exteriority to the ordered space.<sup>32</sup> The social and religious status of the outcastes can be explained in terms of a dangerous marginality. This exceptional feature of the outcaste specialists has another crucial dimension in addition to the ritual state. Such destabilizing, uncontrollable and unnerving behaviour has a crucial ontological dimension. The cult of the yoginīs has facilitated a spectacular reversal in caste society wherein the most marginalized emerge as lurking threats to the brahmanical order. Intruding as transcendent beings into the most intimate spaces, they press the notion of the sacred, uncontrollable feminine being to its extreme. Although they embody the clan ethos, they move beyond it to signify a state of being that can perhaps best be encapsulated in the notion of dangerous marginality.

## Notes

1. The names of the goddess and the priestess occur as overlapping categories. To mark the distinction, when the name connotes the goddess, it begins with a capital M, and when referring to mortal women with a lower-case m. The Outcaste Goddess is known as *Mātamma* or *Mātāṅgi*. While the former designation is generally used by all (touchable and untouchable) communities, the latter occurs with a specific connotation as the clan goddess of the *Mādigas*. Women dedicated to the goddess lose their identity and are known as *mātamma*, *mātāṅgi* or simply *mātā*; the designation occurs as a fluid, interchangeable category specifying the priestess. I would like to express my thanks to Heidrun Brückner and Jens Knüppel for their help with the Telugu terms, and to István Keul for his input through the many draft versions of this paper.
2. The movements in the southern regions experienced a strong anti-caste upsurge that resulted in legislation criminalizing dedication in Karnataka (1981) and Andhra Pradesh (1988). For a description of the violent reactions in Northern Karnataka, see Epp (1992).
3. Patil (1975: 377–89), Assayag (1990) and Tarachand (1992).
4. Telugu was influenced by Sanskrit and Pali/Prakrit. While Sanskrit was confined to the Brahmins, it was Pali that had a deep impact on the dialect of the rural masses. Csaba Kiss suggests a 'conceptual shift in the yoginī cult wherein the *ḍākinīs*, *yakṣinīs* and *yakṣas* become synonymous with the yoginī' (Kiss 2009: 163).
5. The connection between *yakṣa* and *yoginī* is indicated by White (2003) and Hatley (2007).

6. For a similar representation of yoginī see Dehejia (1986: 14).
7. For the meanings and symbolism of compound divinities in a caste context, see Hocart (1950).
8. The myth goes as follows: Reṇukā, the wife of the sage Jamadagni, possesses exceptional powers due to her devout chastity. However, she loses her powers because of mental infidelity, which enrages Jamadagni. He orders his son Paraśurām to behead Reṇukā, who flees towards the outcaste hamlet. In other myths she flees to the forest and is afflicted with skin disease/leprosy. In yet another version, when Paraśurām beheads her, the unspent force of the arrow also kills an outcaste woman. Accidentally, the bodies of the women are transfused when Paraśurām fixes the head to the mutilated body. Later, Paraśurām seeks a wish from his father to restore his mother's life. When reclaimed, she is worshipped only in the form of her decapitated head. For details of this popular mythological episode, see Assayag (1990) and Doniger (1999).
9. She requires the Trimūrtulu (Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva), to whom she gave birth in the first Yuga, to fulfil her sexual desire.
10. The specialists revealed some of the verses sung in exultation of the mother. Though not sung in the village (in Tirupati 2007–9) where the fieldwork was conducted, it was reported that, during the festival organized to propitiate the goddess of smallpox, the sexual revelry takes overt form. In this explicit sexual rendering, one of the verses indicated a cardinal tantric notion: 'That which oozes from the front belongs to the munsif, / that which oozes from behind is the karnam, / that from the sides to ten people; / pour in a pot-full, Mother.' The other verse celebrates sexual pleasure as follows: 'Your vagina is like a small pot / My penis is as big as a sickle / Tie flowers around the vagina / And bells around the penis / While we continue making love to the jingling sounds of the bells / Dawn followed brightly.'
11. The chant of invocation 'kalojaga' is formed by combining the first syllables of the names of three devout Mādiga *siddhulu*.
12. This is evident in the tantric tradition, in which the male practitioners are advised to refrain from any ritual association with uninitiated women, referred to as 'Pāsavi' (Kiss 2009: 65).
13. For details on these festivals see Assayag (1990: 59–60).
14. Interviews with ex-joginīs and *bainolu* outcaste male specialists in Andhra Pradesh in 2008.
15. Interviews with ex-joginīs in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. See also Patil (1975).
16. It is interesting to note that the devadāsīs (women associated with temples in South India) were classified into right- and left-hand groups, while the *jōginīs/jōgatis* along with the *bāsavīs* were further subdivided according to their exclusive ties to specific caste communities and sects. See Iyer (1927: 48).
17. The specialists did not identify these practices with tantric tradition but suggested a more interesting category, *śudra pūjā*, to define the orientation of their ritual practices.
18. This model of invocation is widespread in the region in the week-long festival celebrated in honour of the goddess Mātāṅgi/Mātamma. Field visits were conducted from 2005 to 2009 in villages surrounding Tirupati.
19. For details on the dualistic social organization in the southern region, see Beck (1970, 1973) and Brimnes 1999.
20. The clan goddess of the Gollas is Gaṅgamma, the warrior goddess.
21. The *Kāṭamarāju Katha*, composed during the medieval period, focuses on this conflict between the landed and pastoral castes in their quest for power (Talbot 2001: 66–7).
22. In fact, the insignia and each of these acts that constitute the ritual are prefixed by the term *vīra*. For example, the whip used is the *vīrula jaṭṭi* and the ritual dance on possession or with swords or sticks is known as *virula atta* (play of the heroes).
23. Representations of the Mātāṅgi tradition in earlier missiological and colonial accounts do not indicate that they practised theogamy, as is performed by the joginīs or other women dedicated to the gods. See Rauschenbusch-Clough (1899).

24. However, according to Nicholas Bradford, it is the transvestine *jogappa* who recreates these personas in their heightened form (Bradford 1983: 319).
25. Both spitting and leather are regarded as extremely impure things (Harper 1964: 169–70).
26. The instance of the Brahman who remains powerless and passively consents to this explains the persistent belief that the encounter with the Mātāṅgi is auspicious and non-polluting (Madhaviah 1906: 303). It is noted that the Mātāṅgi breaks into exultant claims that she has humbled the Brahman (Thurston and Rangachari 2001: 298–308). Emma Rauschenbusch-Clough notes that buttermilk instead of toddy is used in this ritual (Rauschenbusch-Clough 1899: 70; Elmore 1984: 142).
27. It needs to be noted that no woman from another caste can become a *mātāṅgi* and that this is the exclusive prerogative of the Mādigas.
28. Though in certain myths the Mātāṅgi is cast as Śiva's consort, this is subject to conflicting interpretations, since in other myths Śiva is said to be her son. However, in the iconography across the region, the goddess is represented without a consort. But even if there is a male presence, it is Poturaju, her brother, rather than Śiva, who is only remotely involved.
29. This continues to be a vibrant tradition in the annual celebrations in honour of the Mātāṅgi by the inter-caste village communities across the villages in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu (see my forthcoming book *In Pursuit of the Virgin Whore*).
30. The theatrical performances and ritual plays are sites of reinforcing the caste ethic and a shared mutuality. The outcaste priests *bainolu* are also bards and have a repertoire of mythic dramas crucial for successfully conducting the ceremonies.
31. The *Kulapurāṇa*, enacted in *kathās* through the festive celebration, offers a critique of the brahmanical notions of purity and impurity. The *Kulapurāṇa* envisages an inclusive structure and is of immense didactic value as it engages with caste obligations within the village (*Jāmbavapurāṇa* 1997). Interestingly, Francis Buchanan writes that Brahmins had a certain unease in openly expressing their devotion to the village goddess: 'in private many of them make offerings to... destroying female spirits' (Buchanan 1807: 155).
32. In the sacred lore of Mātāṅgi she refuses to settle in the ordered space and stays on the boundaries. The outcaste ritual specialists describe her presence as uncontrollable and dangerous. According to them, she could become a threat to the ordered space. (Interviews with the *bainolu*, the outcaste male ritual specialists in Tirupati, conducted between 2005 and 2008.)

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