



## Contested Bodies

### Negotiating Trans\*femininity and Devotion in Rural South India

This article examines regional notions and practices of trans\*femininity and how cross-regional concepts of trans\*femininity play within these. The *jōgappas*, a male-to-female trans\*community in rural North Karnataka, worship the deity Ellamma in her local manifestation as initiated devotees. As part of their service to Ellamma, they adopt signs of femininity such as female attire, jewelry, or long hair but also maintain asceticism and an intact and thus physically male body, which guarantees the required ritual purity. This enables them to embody Ellamma by providing her an adequate body, which the goddess can inhabit and influence with her femininity and divinity. *Jōgappas* have recently become increasingly influenced by powerful discourses on gender and femininity, particularly those defined by the cross-regionally organized *hijras*. For *hijras*, norms of trans\*femininity are based on surgical emasculation and the physical making of a female body. Material from ethnographic field research documented since 2013 reveals that the core of trans\*femininities in the specific context of the *jōgappas* lies in the close relationship and interaction between the worldly and the divine, and for now continues to be crucial for the distinct identity of the *jōgappas*. The material also shows examples of negotiations and changes within the *jōgappa* community, which are driven by cross-regional hierarchies and individual tensions, and lead to a growing distance between the *jōgappas* and Ellamma, potentially resulting in a loss of specificity of the *jōgappa* identity.

Keywords: Karnataka—*jōgappa*—Ellamma—devotional practices—transgender—*hijra*

My father used to follow only male gods, he always said, “this Ellamma *dēvaru* is not ours, not ours!” And my father’s brother sold everything [that belonged to Ellamma] and wasted the money, right? That’s why that Ellamma *dēvi* stopped and stood near me to trouble me.

*Why did she not trouble others of your family?*

No, Ellamma didn’t trouble others. She said, “I don’t want them,” and see!, [regarding me] she then said, “he is the one who has come in my mind, I want only him!” (Usha 2018)

Ellamma, literally the “mother” (*amma*) of “all” (*ella*), sometimes simply referred to as “mother” (*amma* or *tāyi*), “goddess” (*dēvi*), or “deity” (*dēvaru*), is the core of the lives and identities of the *jōgappas*, who constitute a group of her dedicated devotees and a male-to-female trans\*community<sup>1</sup> in the rural North of Karnataka and South of Maharashtra.<sup>2</sup> Generally, Ellamma functions as a tutelary deity among lower castes, protecting a community, lineage, or family, but is equally worshipped among higher castes and Muslim and Christian communities in the region. Her temple on top of her own hill near the small town of Saundatti is regarded as her main residence and counts as one of the largest pilgrimage centers of South India. Here she receives large numbers of her devotees, who come from northern Karnataka and southern Maharashtra by bullock cart, tractor, or sometimes even by foot, or by bus from far cities like Pune or Bangalore, and who during full moon festivals turn the barren hill into a busy temporary settlement.

In Hindu traditions, deities take on various forms; some are worshipped cross-regionally, whereas the knowledge about others is locally confined. Devotees of Ellamma may identify her with the goddess Rēṇuka, whose character is depicted in narratives based on Sanskritic-Brahmanic notions claiming supra-regional validity. Beliefs and devotional practices characteristic of *jōgappas*, however, are most closely linked with those aspects of the deity that are reflected in oral narratives.<sup>3</sup> In these, Ellamma is incorporated within village pantheons (Bradford 1983, 308) and linked with various local communities. Similarly, central episodes are located in the landscapes surrounding the temple and villages of her followers (Brückner 2011, 95). According to one narration I listened to during my fieldwork, the location of the temple was assigned to her by a local when Ellamma was desperately searching for a safe place to stay. Since then, she established her rule and gained great fame.

Here, devotees like the *jōgappas* ritually re-enact and embody, and in this way realize themselves and for others, the joys and sorrows Ellamma herself has gone through. Hence, Ellamma is embedded within the cultural histories of the region and connected to the experiences and identities of local communities.

The regional characteristics of Ellamma become manifest in the physical and emotional experiences of her devotees. As the statement by the *jōgappa* Usha cited in the epigraph shows, Ellamma acts and engages directly in the worldly sphere and in the life of people. In doing so, she brings her ambivalent power into effect, causing disease and immense suffering but also wellbeing. She is as ready to afflict people as she is open to negotiate about people's concerns and to listen to their hardships; after all, they are "her children," living under her command and through her motherly affection. Both sorrow and blessings, however, do not occur without reason, and require the participation of the devotees. Disrespect for Ellamma or the neglect of her worship provoke her to turn against a person or a family. Her subsequent "wild" and "troubling play" (*kādāta*)<sup>4</sup> with people is understood as punishment for their own or their family's wrongdoing, but it is also read as a sign of the deity's demands and as expression of her affinity for the troubled and chosen one.

Once she has chosen a person as her attendant in this manner, the initiation into living as a *jōgappa*<sup>5</sup> is the only way to control Ellamma and redirect her dangerous power into blessings. By "tying the knot" with Ellamma—getting the *muttu*, a chain of red and white beads and silver or gold coins showing symbols of Ellamma, tied around the neck—*jōgappas* make the vow and the extraordinary sacrifice of giving their entire future life solely into Ellamma's service and worship. They from now onward care for her as ritual specialists at small shrines and temples, spread her blessings by wandering about with mobile shrines, and praise her by dancing and singing songs in her name. Serving her as medium, they convey messages between Ellamma and her regular devotees, and receive offerings on her behalf. This respected role presupposes a high degree of ritual purity that is only guaranteed if the *jōgappa* strictly obeys certain rules, the most important ones being asceticism and physical integrity. A crucial aspect of their devotion to Ellamma is the adoption of signs of femininity, such as female attire, without the physical adjustment of their male bodies. This hints at the *jōgappas*' female selves. At the same time, Ellamma is considered to be the cause of the *jōgappas*' femininity and divinely legitimates their active transgression of gender norms. The context in which Ellamma is worshipped in this very regional form thus creates a narrow but empowering niche for trans\*feminine individuals.

Devotional practices and notions of Ellamma and trans\*femininity are linked to places of her worship. These may be located at her hill in Saundatti but are not confined to this particular site, as Ellamma is simultaneously present in all her temples and shrines in villages and towns of North Karnataka and South Maharashtra. Even temples of female deities considered as Ellamma's sisters or as a form of her, like Huligemma in Munirabad near Hospet, may serve as an appropriate place for Ellamma's rituals. However, for the *jōgappas* the space in front of domestic shrines is central for the day-to-day worship as well as for rituals on special occasions. Important are also mobile shrines, decorated small pots (*koḍa*), or large round baskets (*jaḡa*) with Ellamma's representation and paraphernalia. *Jōgappas* carry them along when they

visit the temple, join ritual gatherings in other *jōgappas'* homes, or accept invitations from noninitiated devotees of Ellamma who invite *jōgappas* as ritual specialists.

Distances that *jōgappas* cover from their homes to temples or ritual gatherings range between a walk in their neighborhood and a one-day journey, depending on their respective social networks and individual preferences. Some *jōgappas* prefer to worship Ellamma at home in their domestic shrines and visit her temples deliberately during quiet times, returning back home on the same day. During festivals at the main temple, they conduct specific rituals at home in front of their domestic shrines, still participating in the occasion without necessarily traveling to the temple. Others enjoy traveling and visit her temple frequently, especially during busy festival days. They consider traveling long distances and in large groups as an important part of their devotional service. In such cases the journeys may be prolonged for some days by pausing at temples of other deities and visiting befriended *jōgappas* on the way, or by staying overnight at Ellamma's temple. The mobile shrines enable the *jōgappas* to temporarily establish places of worship while traveling. This may be directly next to a temple or in other *jōgappas'* or devotees' houses, reinforcing the divine power by bringing several representations of the deity together in one place. Also, profane places like a railway station may become a place of worship when a large *jaga* of a traveling *jōgappa* waiting for a train on the route to Saundatti invites passengers to offer some coins and to ask for Ellamma's blessing. Thus, specific locations do matter for devotional practices of the *jōgappas*. They may be public temples, domestic shrines, or the temporary sacred spaces of mobile shrines.

In the following, I am going to examine how the idea of the region matters for notions and practices of trans\*femininity. Specifically, I discuss in which distinct ways trans\*femininity is constituted and articulated in this regional context, and how cross-regional concepts of trans\*femininity intersect with, and are distinct from, regional formations. By "region" I refer to a cultural and social space defined and confined by the validity of specific notions, norms, and practices, primarily linked to the manifestation of Ellamma worshipped in parts of North Karnataka and South Maharashtra. This space determines discourses and possibilities an individual living herein may have access to. The region thus shapes the individual's identity, and the individual's sense of belonging emerges from sharing specific notions of regional belonging. At the same time, interactions with various cross-regional discourses may broaden an individual's possibilities of belonging and continuously redefine and reshape characteristics of the region.

To address these questions, I will first discuss the *jōgappas'* ways of understanding and worshiping Ellamma by focusing on aspects related to trans\*femininity. I argue that in the case of the *jōgappas*, the regional particularities of trans\*femininity, and thus the core of the *jōgappas'* individual and collective identities, lie in the strong relationship and in the identification between Ellamma and the *jōgappas*. Besides social interactions and the impact of societal and cultural norms, it is the direct interaction between the devotee and the divine, as well as the norms of the divine, that constitute gender here. Intrinsically related with her and bound to the region of Ellamma's rule, these regional particularities, however, lose their validity and empowering implications outside of Ellamma's physical and cultural sphere.

Set in contrast to broader contexts, regional particularities are further highlighted in the second part of the article. I argue that notions and practices of trans\*femininity in regional and cross-regional discourses conflict with each other precisely at their respective cores—the meanings and roles of the body. Among *jōgappas*, embodying femininity is equated with embodying the divine and requires a high ritual purity ensured through an intact and thus physically male body. Cross-regionally dominant concepts, however, regard the physical making and expression of femininity as central; this is successfully achieved through a surgically created female body, expressing the individual's self. Interactions between the regional and cross-regional reveal sharp differences and may result in creative renegotiations and cultural formations serving the interests of an individual or a group. I argue that interactions that are structured by powerful hierarchies and the hegemony of the cross-regional may also result in the invisibility or loss of the regionality and particularity of the *jōgappa* identity. And still, even though a *jōgappa* may distance herself from the deity and her region, Ellamma seems to remain a ruling power in the realities of the *jōgappas*.

### Context of the interviews

This article is largely based on material from fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted mainly in North Karnataka between 2013 and 2020. An important location of my research was Ellamma's temple near the town Saundatti, which is located 200 km inland of Goa and 470 km northwest of Bangalore, the capital of Karnataka (see figure 1).

Similar to Ellamma's devotees, I traveled there by local bus. Driving through plain landscapes of dry fields with the typical red soil, some harvested, some with millets,

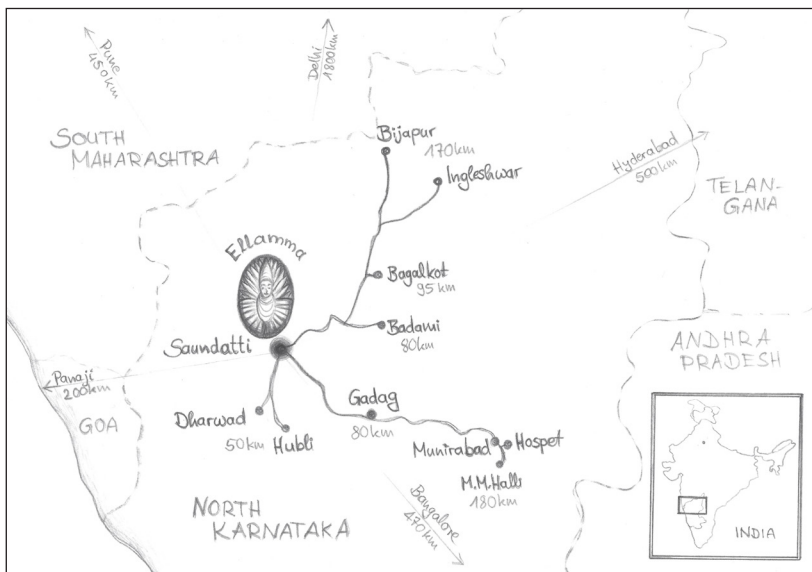


Figure 1. Map of the region: Places of the author's research in North Karnataka and distances from Ellamma's main temple in Saundatti. Map produced by Sarah Merkle-Schneider, 2022.

chilies, or onions, changing busses at dusty bus stands in small towns and villages, it was never sure whether it would take the regular two or rather four hours for the 80 km from Gadag to reach the rocky hill of Ellamma's abode. Gadag is located southeast of Saundatti and is another important center of my research. Here I got to know my assistant Bhagat Y. Bhandage from the registered community-based organization (CBO) Srustisankula Arogya Matthu Samaja Seva Samsthe, Gadag. Bhagat identifies with the term "transgender" and as female. Through her work for the CBO, she is well-connected with the trans\*communities and other CBOs in cities of North Karnataka, as well as with trans\*individuals in Hyderabad, Bangalore, and some places in Tamil Nadu. She introduced me to many of her *jōgappa* friends and to CBOs in other cities. I interviewed *jōgappas* in Gadag; in the rural outskirts of the twin cities Hubli and Dharwad, the urban center in North Karnataka; in the city of Bagalkot; in Bijapur and the nearby village Ingleshwar; from villages around the town Badami; and in Mariyammana Halli, a village near the city Hospet.

Quotations in this article are taken from six of a total of forty interviews (see references to conversations with *jōgappas*), which I mostly conducted in the presence of Bhagat, if possible, at the *jōgappas*' homes or other private premises, or in the premises of the CBO. At the time of the interview, the *jōgappa* Usha was around twenty years old and lived in a one-room house near the railway lines on the outskirts of Gadag. Our discussion took place in her home, sitting in front of her domestic shrine for Ellamma. Cannamma was between forty and forty-five years old when we met several times in her home in a traditional neighborhood in Gadag. Whenever we met for an interview, we sat in her kitchen on the floor in front of her always beautifully decorated domestic shrine. Rafik was around twenty years old when we met and lived together with her family in a poor Muslim area in Hubli. The conversation took place at her home, where she proudly showed us a stone representing a form of Ellamma standing next to a decorated shrine with Islamic paraphernalia and pictures of Islamic saints in a separate room in the center of their small house. She and other Muslim *jōgappas* I met visit the temple of Ellamma just like *jōgappas* from Hindu backgrounds. Renamma was around thirty years old and lived with her family in a village between Gadag and Badami. We sat together in the counseling room of the CBO in Gadag, which provided her a safe space to talk. Basappa was around sixty years old and had lived with a priest and his family at the temple site in Saundatti for the last twenty to twenty-five years. We met her when Bhagat and I strolled around the hill and saw her spreading something out to dry in the sun. When she recognized Bhagat, she agreed to spontaneously sit inside the priest's house and talk about her experiences. Bassu was between sixty and seventy years old when we met him waiting for the evening prayer behind the temple in Saundatti. Although he did not know us before, he agreed to answer our questions on the spot. He hails from a village northeast of Saundatti but now lives at the temple site without a permanent home.

In semi-structured interviews with open questions, I aimed to enable open conversations in which the individual *jōgappa*'s narrative and thematic focus regarding devotion and trans\*femininity could be expressed and followed up. The audio recordings have been transcribed and translated into English as close to the Kannada original as possible. Additionally, I draw on recorded discussions with

members from the CBO in Gadag, and on field notes from unrecorded conversations and participatory observations I made, especially when visiting a *jōgappa* or spending time at the temple.

### Experiencing and serving Ellamma

In our conversations, *jōgappas* articulated initial indications of femininity by telling us about various manifestations of Ellamma's *kādāṭa*, the unfolding of her ambivalent power and, specifically, her regional character. They suffered a general loss of fortune that could not be rationally explained but was caused by Ellamma herself or by the assault of evil powers. They had disturbing and unsettling experiences like skin diseases, nonspecific body pains, fever, and loss of consciousness and of body control, which by applying conventional treatments only got worse. Nearly all of them faced additional tensions due to an increasing identification with a feminine gender identity, seen to be in conflict with the male sex assigned at their birth. Referring to such experiences, *jōgappas* commonly use phrases like "Ellamma caught me," "she came upon me," "she fills my body," or "she speaks in my body," which indicate Ellamma's presence and influence on them.

In this way, Ellamma makes her voice heard, indicating whom she desires as her servant in female attire, who is also called her "horse." Identifying and satisfying her wish controls her dangerous power and secures her blessings. As the *jōgappas* Usha and Bassu express in the following statements, one is compelled to obey her order:

When I was still young, she came into my body and said to my family, "I want this horse (*kudure*) at any cost! Since its birth I kept an eye [on it]! Whatever you will say now, I won't listen [to you]." (Usha 2018)<sup>6</sup>

If the thought "I want to make him wear a saree!" comes in *amma's* mind, she will definitely make him wear a saree. And if he says, "I won't wear a saree," she doesn't listen and says, "you must wear it!" (Bassu 2018)

This is the *dēvi's* play (*āṭa*), we cannot do anything about it. (ibid., 2019)

The role of being Ellamma's "horse" does not refer to serving her as vehicle (*vāhana*). It rather mirrors devotional practices found in regional traditions like that of the male deity Khaṇḍobā worshipped in Karnataka and Maharashtra; here, devotees accompany the deity as "faithful dogs" and horses (Sontheimer 1989, 308). Being Ellamma's desired horse thus illustrates metaphorically the way one is controlled by her and subordinates oneself to her, in order to attend and serve her with loyalty and affection.

Those whom she favors and to whom that *tāyi* Ellamma comes are called "horse." Those who do her service (*sēve*), the *jōgappas*, right?, they are called "horse." Does being her horse also mean that she is sitting and riding on that horse? No!, [it means that] she makes us stand [in front of her] as a horse to get her *sēve* done. The reason why she again and again says "I want my horse!" is her *sēve*.



Usha describes becoming Ellamma's horse as being chosen to do her service (*sēve*). According to the dictionary (Kittel 2006, 1593), *sēve* denotes "service," "attendance," "worship," "devotion," or "employment" and is used in parallel with *pūje* (ibid., 1004), which means "honor," "respect," or "worship." *Jōgappas* use both terms to refer to crucial devotional activities like the adornment of Ellamma's shrine and images, as well as the *hēlike* (ibid., 1685), literally "saying" and "ordering." In the context of local forms of worship, *hēlike* refers to occasions when the deity speaks and commands through a human's body. For this, *jōgappas* enter a trance-like state, making their bodies available for Ellamma and allowing her to take possession of them. Consequently, "serving her" means to be Ellamma's carrier, to act as her medium and carry her upon or within oneself. Both the initiation itself and the state of being initiated are thus described by the term "*horu*" (ibid., 1696), which means to "load," "bear," "carry," "take upon one's self," or to "assume." As Bassu explains: "carrying her' means that we are Ellamma."

When Ellamma enters a *jōgappa's* body, she fills it with her own self. By the unfolding of her character—her divine and female power (*śakti*)—Ellamma takes control over a *jōgappa's* body and mind, changing the carrier's gender and causing femininity, as the *jōgappa* Cannamma (2017) indicates here:

Once when I wanted to do her *pūje* [in male attire], *amma* came into my body and said, "I don't favor my horse to do my *sēve* nakedly, she has to wear saree." That time, when *amma* came in my body, I asked for a saree. I took it and wore it all by myself. After she left my body, I saw myself and wondered, "what is all this?" I tore it off and said, "I don't want a saree!" . . . But everybody said, "No!, *amma* had come, *amma* herself told that she wants her horse to wear a saree."

According to her regional character experienced by the *jōgappas*, Ellamma acts directly in the worldly sphere. She wishes and orders her horses to do her service in female attire, as well as causes and creates their femininity. She does this by entering their bodies, whereupon the femininity of a *jōgappa* is read as evidence of Ellamma's interference and presence in the human body and in the realms of the profane. Falling under her influence, and being driven to perform the initiation to become a *jōgappa* and to put on female attire, is central for the *jōgappas'* identity, whereas taking up the role of a *jōgappa* in female attire of one's own accord, without Ellamma's possessive influence, is regarded as invalid (Aneka 2014a, 29).

### Embodying Ellamma and femininity

But still, why does Ellamma want her service to be done with female appearance? When my assistant Bhagat (2017) remarked that Ellamma is only satisfied once she sees her horse "in *śṛṅgāra* [decoration]," I wondered if attributes like "female attire" mark a *jōgappa's* body not only to be female but also to be and to be recognized as the appropriate vessel, or *mūrti*, to embody a female deity. *Jōgappas* do not use the term "*mūrti*" for their bodies or for themselves. Comparing general concepts of the *mūrti* with those of divine embodiment and taking into consideration terms frequently



used by the *jōgappas*, however, reveals meanings of a *jōgappa*'s body that parallel those of a *mūrti*.

The term "*rūpa*" (Kittel 2006, 1344) for example, refers to "any outward appearance," "shape," "image," or "idol" and resembles meanings of "*mūrti*" (ibid., 1285), given as "any material form," "visible shape," "body," "embodiment," "manifestation," "image," or "statue." A *mūrti* is a physical form that represents or embodies a specific deity and in which a deity manifests her- or himself; the deity is considered to be present in the physical form of the *mūrti*, and in the context of local tradition, the *mūrti* is considered to be the deity her- or himself and treated like a living personality. Thus, a *mūrti* provides immediate access to a deity and enables the devotee to grasp the deity and enter into a relationship with her or him (Sontheimer 2004, 410; Flueckiger 2015, 77–80).

The term "*śṛṅgāra*" (Kittel 2006, 1464) denotes "decoration," "dress," "beauty," or "the erotic sentiment" and is generally used for attributes that adorn a woman and make her desirable. Usha used the term when she described how she made a *mūrti* for the local deity Kareyamma, the "black *amma*," who called on her to be worshipped alongside Ellamma: "I eventually brought it here, the stone of Kareyamma. Initially it was only a stone, so I then kept the whole *śṛṅgāra* on it. I brought clay to make the nose and ears, I put a nose pin in the nose and earrings in the ears." The stone as such is a mere material object. Only when marked with specific attributes does it obtain the form and identity of Kareyamma and becomes recognizable as such. The *śṛṅgāra* may consist of flowers, vermilion and turmeric powders, jewelry, and clothes being put on a *mūrti* as an important act of worship. It does not only dress and beautify a physical form, but it also enables the devotee to see the character it embodies by making its inherent qualities visible; thus, the *śṛṅgāra* is "integral to whatever it adorns" (Flueckiger 2015, 88).

Until today, Cannamma only wears a saree on the days when the deity speaks through her body, which renders wearing a saree an act of devotion. Once, a follower of Cannamma showed me two photos on his mobile phone, pointing to one in which Cannamma was in male attire and then to another one of her in a saree. He revealingly explained: "This is Cannamma, and this is Ellamma." Cannamma herself stressed several times that the sarees and bangles she wears, and even her own hair, were all the deity's belongings and not hers. In the following explanations by the *jōgappa* Renamma (2015), it becomes evident that Ellamma equates the adoption of a female form to the taking of her, the deity's, form: "Ellamma gives instructions like 'these boys and men shall look like me! I will give them the form (*rūpa*) of a woman, . . . I will cause them to shave, make them wear saree, cause them to dance, and give them my *rūpa*.'"

For creating a body recognized as female and thus as divine, however, one does not necessarily need to wear a saree. As Usha remarks, some *jōgappas*—like Cannamma—most of the time wear *luṅgi*, a piece of cloth tied around the waist of a man, and still embody femininity: "See! Some *jōgappas* do her *sēve* in *luṅgi*, a *luṅgi* with pleats in the front!, like Canni wears hers, right? She wears the *luṅgi* folding pleats in the front, she is totally in a female form (*rūpa*)!, she wears bangles on her arms, she wears toe rings and a necklace (*tāli*) on her neck [indicating that she is a married woman]." Usha

points out single, externally visible attributes of femininity. A saree is not necessarily required, and instead pleats in the front of a male attire (*luṅgi*) imitating the front pleats of a saree are adequate and sufficient to mark and recognize a physically male body as a “female *rūpa*,” and thus as the deity’s body.

The notion that a material form is able to contain, embody, and even become a deity, and through the corresponding *śṛṅgāra* to express the deity’s identity, is crucial to conceptual meanings of a *mūrti*, as well as to the role of a *jōgappa*’s body. Once draped and marked with femininity through the *śṛṅgāra* of the deity, the male body of a *jōgappa*, especially in a ritual context, temporarily loses its meaning of being human and male and becomes the vessel of a female deity. Just as the *śṛṅgāra* transforms a stone into a *mūrti*, embodying and being a deity, single attributes of femininity allow a *jōgappa* to be recognized and worshipped not only as Ellamma’s medium, but as Ellamma herself. In the same way that the adornment of a *mūrti* is a mode of worship, the placement of attributes of femininity on a human body is a devotional act crucial to the service Ellamma calls for in order to make her identity and power visible and accessible to the world.

### Considering the female self

Discussing trans\*femininity as embodiment of the divine inevitably raises questions regarding the relation between the deity and the individual. The statements by *jōgappas* do not lead to unambiguous answers but rather point out intersections between the profane and the divine that are characteristic of devotional traditions of deities in their regional manifestations.

When I asked Cannamma if people would notice her female self despite her physical body “which is not that of a woman,” she replied in a low voice, “they don’t see [my] mind, they don’t see [my] body, they see *amma*, [and they identify her] when they see this [*points to her muttu and bangles*].” Sometimes, she would comment on the beauty of a flower put in her hair, or of a saree wrapped around her body and express her personal affinity toward such attributes associated with femininity. But when I once remarked that her hair had grown long and that she wore more bangles than the year before, she stressed, “it’s all *amma*’s! I feel like *amma*, [that is why] it is all *amma*’s, not Cannu’s.” The feeling of being like the mother Ellamma emerges from being recognized as her: “Everyone who visits me calls me ‘*amma*,’ right?, that’s why I am their mother (*tāyi*) and have the heart and mind of the *tāyi* [Ellamma]. Everyone considers me as *tāyi*, right?, that’s why I have her feelings.”

In comparison, Rafik (2014), a young *jōgappa* from Muslim background, who was yet to get the *muttu* tied, clearly addressed her strong personal identification with femininity:

People believe that when a person wears the *muttu*, the *dēvaru* is in the body. But I understand wearing the *muttu* in a different way. I wear it because of my orientation. I live like a woman, dress like a woman, and do whatever women do. All this comes from my heart, it is my strong desire, it is my habit. . . . Initially my family said to me, “no!, [don’t wear saree]!” but I said, “she is coming to me, she troubles me in my dreams, whatever I do, I do it in her name and in her service.” . . . She

indeed came into my dream!, and said to me, “wear saree, get started and come to my temple, tie the *muttu* and become a *jōgappa!*” So, what I had as a strong wish in my heart finally appeared in my dream, right?

Later in our conversation, Rafik stressed that the desire for femininity “happens in our heart,” and added, “after we fall into her name, she makes our heart and mind shiver and causes us to be female.”

Cannamma attributes all signs of femininity and even her own female self to the deity. For her, the region offers a language to grasp her own femininity and to put it into adequate words, embracing the high respect she gained in her social context. The deification, however, does not deny her a female self, which she herself experiences and which exists in identification with the deity and due to the recognition by her followers. Rafik expresses femininity as belonging to her own self. It is a desire arising from deep within her—from her heart—where it is caused by Ellamma after all. The divine legitimation resulting from her strong desire empowers her to express her femininity without losing the acceptance of her family. Still, it is not a mere strategy, as she too experiences Ellamma’s power and influence on her heart as reality and her own femininity as the deity’s creation. In both cases, as well as in the statements of other *jōgappas*, identities and the desire for and expression of femininity cannot be clearly assigned to either the individual, or to the deity and her creation.

### Remarks on devotion

The *jōgappas*’ concepts of trans\*femininity are deeply rooted in notions and practices that are culturally and religiously defined and very specific to North Karnataka and South Maharashtra, although not necessarily accepted by everyone who belongs to this region. Reciprocal interactions and complex intersections between the profane and the divine world, and the physical and emotional experience of Ellamma’s regional characteristics, provide a legitimate space for the *jōgappas* and their trans\*identities. The individual as well as the deity are both actively involved, and both spheres—as well as the identities of both spheres—are not unequivocally distinct from each other. Consequently, the femininity of a *jōgappa* is caused and created by Ellamma’s power and her interference and is simultaneously embodied and performed by her devotees by putting on attributes of femininity in a devotional act that expresses the deity’s as well as the individual’s identity.

Interactions between Ellamma and the *jōgappas*, and the shared knowledge of and belief in this regional manifestation of the deity, determine the *jōgappas*’ identity and belonging; these explain their trans\*femininity and divinely legitimate and enable its expression. The empowering aspect of the divinization of trans\*femininity, however, risks romanticizing the lives of *jōgappas*. They suffer from a persistently high degree of stigmatization and marginalization by society in general, within the region they are located (Dutta, Khan, and Lorway 2019) as well as in cross-regional discourses on devotion and trans\*gender, where the regional particularity of the geographical and social sphere of Ellamma loses its hold.

*Jōgappas* who live at Ellamma's main temple remember vividly when, in the early 2000s, representatives of a social reform movement on behalf of the government of Karnataka had been active at the hill, in order "to stop everything here"; "everything" is referring to those devotional practices characteristic of *jōgappas* that were identified as regionally specific in this article. In pamphlets distributed by these activists, they contrasted mediumship and trans\*femininity with "true devotion," declaring the former as "superstition" but not defining the latter. Devotees involved in mediumship and trans\*femininity were supposed to either suffer from mental disorder or physical defects, or to pretend and cheat people to get recognition and make some money (Brückner 2011, 99–103, 111–12). The *jōgappas*' particular identity was in this way disregarded and stigmatized as backward or pathological and pushed to the margins, whereas "true devotion" was propagated by using terminologies typical for cross-regional if not pan-Indian discourses arguing in favor of Sanskritic-Brahmanic concepts.

Asked about the impacts of such activities, Basappa (2020), an elderly *jōgappa* living at the temple for many years, described how they had revolted against the reform. Basappa further stressed that Ellamma in the end had "closed their mouth and taught them a lesson," indicating that she punished those who had worked against her being worshipped in her locally specific form. This exemplifies that Ellamma and her regional characteristics are experienced as a persistently ruling power and unquestionable reality, still shaping the world—or at least her region—with her powerful play.

### Trans\*femininity beyond regional boundaries

In cross-regional discourses on gender nonconformity, *jōgappas* are often described as a "transgender community of North Karnataka" and a "minority within sexual and gender minorities." They are assumed to share their gendered identities and experiences with other trans\*individuals. At the same time, they are understood as being different from them, because their ties with Ellamma do not fully fit into discourses on gender and sexuality. The transnational umbrella term "transgender," adopted into the Indian context, subsumes diverse local gender-variant identities and expressions, bringing them into broader supra-regional discourses, but also threatening to make their respective regional particularities invisible. Applying this term, which originates from Western contexts and discourses focusing on gender, ultimately does not do justice to an identity characterized precisely by the interconnectedness of gender and devotion. Furthermore, *jōgappas* themselves do not relate the term "transgender" to their specific identities, nor does the term seem to be of importance in their everyday lives.

Still, *jōgappas* interact in cross-regional networks of various trans\*feminine people and groups who embody trans\*femininity in different ways, like *hijras* or *kothis*,<sup>7</sup> or people who identify rather with the global term "transgender." In Gadag and Bijapur, I observed that local CBOs working in the fields of sexual health and awareness of gender issues create spaces where trans\*individuals can come together and get connected to CBOs and their trans\*members in other cities of the region of North

Karnataka, and with organizations in the cosmopolitan city of Bangalore. Since recently, they also seek to strengthen the ties with trans\*individuals who, like many *jōgappas*, are from surrounding villages and so far have had only little exposure to like-minded people.

It may be in such social interactions that *jōgappas* articulate for the first time questions concerning their female identities, their bodies, sexuality, or sexual health and share experiences of gender-based discrimination and violence. This strengthens a sense of togetherness outside of the realms of devotion and based on gender (Aneka 2014a, 95–97). Here a *jōgappa* may be enabled to express femininity as a matter of her individual self and to get access to various ways of embodying trans\*femininity. Some *jōgappas* are highly attracted to such possibilities, which are rare in their own regional contexts. Others pointedly oppose any interaction with CBOs and their members and stress that cross-regional concepts—of, for example, the surgical making of a female body—conflict fundamentally with their ideal of physical integrity and notions of embodying femininity through the relationship with the deity. Consequently, their regional particularity may also act as a barrier keeping them from participating in cross-regional spaces more frequently.

Explicit differentiations from and simultaneously close interactions with the *hijras* mark current discourses among *jōgappas*. *Hijras* constitute cross-regionally interconnected trans\*feminine communities with strong centers and networks all over India. Following the official recognition of a third gender category in 2014 (Semmalar 2014), their generally strong position and high visibility have been further reinforced. Focusing on the *hijras* as the institutionalized “third gender,” the category “*hijra*” became the synonym for the Indian “transgender” community. This occludes the diversity of trans\*femininities among the *hijras*, as well as the existence and distinctness of various further gender-variant groups and individuals. Moreover, *hijras* have developed a clear impact on regional groups, especially regarding defining norms, practices, and hierarchies of trans\*femininity.

One of the central markers of conceptual authenticity of the *hijra* identity and their trans\*femininity is the *nirvāṇa* operation, the physical removal of male sexual organs, unless the person is already born with a body neither male nor female. Traditionally, the *nirvāṇa* is performed by an experienced *hijra* in a ritual context as a sacrifice to the deity Bahucharā Mātā. The survival of the *nirvāṇa* is the sign of the deity’s blessing, who in return for the sacrifice of the individual’s fertility provides the person with universal creative power (Reddy 2005, 97). The *nirvāṇa* establishes the *hijra*’s high status by linking her with sexual renunciation and chastity, and the auspicious power to confer fertility. This position is reinforced by demarcating the *hijra* operated on in the traditional way from those *hijras* who have chosen the less prestigious way of surgeries performed by non-*hijras* in a nonritual context and who are openly involved in sex-work. Methods like hormonal treatments and breast implants further add the criteria of creating a body “looking like that of a woman” to the trans\*femininity hierarchies.<sup>8</sup> Surgeries to erase masculinity in a nonritual context, as well as the surgical and hormonal creation of femininity, are common practice among *hijras* and trans\*individuals in India today. However, only very few

have access to official options of gender affirming or sex reassignment surgeries, and consequently the majority employ illegal and unregulated services instead.

According to my observations in towns of North Karnataka, the *nirvāṇa* is propagated in a general sense of “being operated” versus “being not operated” (*akva*)<sup>9</sup> and is understood to be the key to successfully embodying femininity, beauty, and eroticism. This hegemony of the surgical making of a female body is characteristic for discourses of trans\*femininity in other states of India as well, revealing a general mistrust and nonacceptance of allegedly contradictory performances of gender. In such hierarchies, primarily based on body modifications and corporeal femininity, trans\*feminine individuals who live in a male body appear at the lower end, if not outside the spectrum of trans\*femininities.

Although *hijras* and *jōgappas* share aspects of their gender-specific identities like their female selves as embodied in a male- or previously male-sexed body, many *jōgappas* portray themselves in clear opposition to *hijras*. Invoking their own particularity—their physical integrity, asceticism, and divinity—as incompatible with the norms propagated by *hijras*, *jōgappas* set themselves in contrast to the stereotypically negative image of *hijras*, who would mutilate their bodies by performing the *nirvāṇa* and get involved in “dirty work” such as sex-work, disturbing the public by a provocative erotic appearance. *Jōgappas* reinforce the dichotomy of asceticism versus active sexuality in order to structure the individual’s respect in the society (ibid., 45); however, they associate this dichotomy with being *akva* versus *nirvāṇa*, the former referring to the respected non-operated ascetic *jōgappa* living in the name of Ellamma, the latter referring to the operated and sexually active *hijra*. Demarcations along such simplified lines do not necessarily correspond to lived realities and belongings of the *jōgappas*, but rather strengthen the *jōgappas*’ claim to an independent and respectable identity linked to Ellamma. In fact, the emphasis on such differences is likely to be a response to the increasing interaction between both communities and the clear influence of *hijras*.

Intersections between *hijras* and *jōgappas* are highly complex and contextual, depending on constantly changing factors, like the nature of a *jōgappa*’s relationship with her family, the support by devotees or trans\*feminine friends, and individual concerns regarding gender or one’s financial situation. Identifying oneself and being identified with *hijras* promises strong social bonds with like-minded people, comparatively lucrative earnings, and belonging to a cross-regionally known and recognized trans\*community. Further, being part of *hijra* networks allows, if not encourages, a less restrictive life, relationships with men, as well as the public expression of explicit femininity and eroticism; it also facilitates an easy and quick access to hormonal and surgical interventions (Aneka 2014a, 66). Young *jōgappas* in search of a sense of belonging, who follow their current personal needs, often maintain dual or changing affiliations.

A long conversation I had with Usha was one of many examples illustrating how a *jōgappa* may be challenged to negotiate her individual belonging between the regional identity as a *jōgappa* and the cross-regionally organized communities of the *hijras*. Usha devotedly told me about her close relationship with Ellamma, whose local characteristics manifested in her own female identity, and whom Usha had always



liked, although her family worshipped other deities. She also recalled the time when she lived in Bangalore with a group of *hijras* to be with her trans\*feminine friends and earn some money. Eventually, she did not find the loyalty she was looking for, and to her disappointment was even prohibited from attending Ellamma's festival in Saundatti. She then decided that "it is better to be a *jōgappa* and earn less. Then, people [at least] touch your feet and respect you" (2018). Still, she maintains friendships with *hijras*, because, as she said, they all have the female identity in common.

Usha was frequently confronted with the question of *nirvāṇa*, on the one hand as a means to acquire femininity and beauty, and on the other hand as a risk to her respected status as *jōgappa*:

I and [my *hijra* friend] used to quarrel a lot with each other. She used to say, "Hee! I<sup>hn</sup> am *nirvāṇa*, whereas you<sup>sg</sup> are [only] *akva*."<sup>10</sup> But I always replied, "Your<sup>sg</sup> mother didn't give birth to you<sup>sg</sup> like this [as *nirvāṇa*], get lost!" . . . The *hijras* in Bangalore too used to say, "Hee! You<sup>sg</sup> too become *nirvāṇa*! You would look beautiful and [would easily] make some money." They said many such things. . . . My *jōgappa guru* always says, "Don't get the *nirvāṇa* done, there will be nothing anymore if you become *nirvāṇa*. Nowadays, the lives of *hijras* are very bad. . . . You should learn to dance and to sing [in the name of Ellamma], this has value! Go and collect offerings in villages, this has value! Come forward and grow!" . . . I like what she says, every word!

I observed several times how *hijras* as well as *jōgappas* who themselves had become *nirvāṇa* promoted the *nirvāṇa* and further surgeries to acquire femininity, influencing their trans\*feminine friends and teasing them for not being operated but still *akva*. When Usha was offered support to get the *nirvāṇa* done, she initially reacted evasively. But when I came back to Karnataka a year later, she was about to undergo the *nirvāṇa* procedure.

The *hijra* community, through the possibilities it facilitates to realize a less male and more female body, legitimately attracts especially young, marginalized trans\*individuals in search of belonging and of methods to acquire femininity. In this way, cross-regional networks function as an important space for those who do not find their selves fully expressed through possibilities that are dominant in regional discourses on devotion, and who seek a surgical adjustment of their bodies. The implications of the *nirvāṇa* and the dynamics of social pressure and powerful hierarchies leading to its utilization, however, are noteworthy. A *jōgappa* who gets the *nirvāṇa* performed bears the identity marker of a *hijra* and therefore the central characteristic of trans\*femininity in a cross-regional context. This makes her irrevocably less a *jōgappa* and more or merely a *hijra*, and as we will see below, detaches her from Ellamma and thus from regional belonging.

### Ritual purity and the body

To understand what is at stake for a *jōgappa* who considers getting the *nirvāṇa* performed, it is necessary to look back at the particular meaning of a *jōgappa's* body and the importance of its integrity. By inhabiting the body of a *jōgappa* and by urging the individual toward femininity, Ellamma constitutes the core of trans\*femininity



in a particular regional context. As primary condition, however, she requires ritual purity, which is guaranteed by the integrity of the *jōgappa*'s body, and thus by her physically male body.

Ritual purity is already important at the time of the initiation. After an extensive ritual purification, the type of *muttu* being tied around the neck defines the degree of purity that the *jōgappa* embodies and that she has to maintain. Those who get the highly pure *mīsalu muttu* tied are "to be left untouched," "set apart," and "reserved" (*mīsalu*, Kittel 2006, 1256) for serving Ellamma as a member of the *jōg pan*, the inner circle of her close companions. They strictly follow the rules of purity, avoiding any risk of pollution caused in contact with the food, bodies, or bodily liquids of other people, or with death. Wearing the less pure *eñjalu muttu* instead allows the *jōgappa* to travel and meet people without much restriction, as the *muttu* itself is already less pure, like "leftover" food that has come in contact with another person's "saliva" (*eñjalu*, *ibid.*, 265). Consequently, the degree of the *jōgappa*'s purity also defines her geographical mobility and social contacts within the region of North Karnataka and adjacent areas, the places she visits, the borders she crosses, and whom she frequently meets or rather avoids. This eventually determines which discourses she is exposed to.

If norms of purity are not complied with, Ellamma may start causing troubles again, or may reduce her presence as she then "only quickly passes by and doesn't stay [anymore]," as Rafik said. The most severe and irrevocable threat to a *jōgappa*'s ritual purity and to the presence of Ellamma is the violation of the integrity of their bodies, particularly by performing the *nirvāṇa*. When asked about the consequences of the *nirvāṇa*, *jōgappas* stated that those who had undergone the procedure became impure and were no longer *jōgappas* but *hijras*. More detailed statements reveal nuances of purity linked with belonging and exclusion. If a *jōgappa* undergoes the *nirvāṇa*, she must take off her *muttu* and will not be allowed to worship Ellamma for a certain number of days. Only after a ritual bath may she continue worshiping her and get a new, though less pure *muttu* tied. The implied temporary impurity and the subsequent purification mark the transition to the *hijra* identity, as well as the reintegration into the *jōgappa* community. The latter cannot be completely consummated though, as the *nirvāṇa* is irrevocable to such an extent that the purifying rituals do not enable the *jōgappa* to recover her initial purity, ritual status, and respective belongings.

The highly pure *akva jōgappas* would not allow a *nirvāṇa jōgappa* back into the *jōg pan*, their meetings, and rituals for Ellamma. Although those *jōgappas* who became *nirvāṇa* could still form their own circles to worship Ellamma, the exclusion from the *jōg pan* is equal to the severe punishment of excommunication; as Usha explains, "they exclude us [from the *jōg pan*] just how people are excluded from their caste (*kula*)." Equally, Ellamma does not accept a *nirvāṇa jōgappa* as her medium, as Cannamma stressed:

If I want to be able to do her *pūje*, I must live just how the *dēvaru* has sent me here. [If I follow this] I will reach *mōkṣa*. But if I would get the *nirvāṇa* done, I would become impure. I would be impure, just like a widow is impure. If I would cut that off [pointing downward], the *dēvaru* would not accept me anymore, I would no longer be able to touch her lights and do the *sēve* for the *dēvi*. My life would become zero.

The *nirvāṇa* does not necessarily lead to the complete loss of the *jōgappa* identity but still entails an irrevocably less pure status risking severe implications. Besides the loss of the *jōgappa*'s belonging to the *jōg pan*, it is the close relationship with Ellamma and thus the core of the regionally specific constitution of trans\*femininity that is at stake. The legitimate claim to the *jōgappas*' identity and femininity requires Ellamma's presence and active involvement; she is "instrumental in the realization of their gender identity" (Aneka 2014a, 23) and, as the *jōgappa* Radhika stresses, "[o]nly if the goddess herself comes and resides in us, we can become *jōgappas*" (quoted in *ibid.*, 28). Femininity is not perceived as authentic when achieved by the *nirvāṇa* and alterations of the body, but rather when being imposed and caused by Ellamma and linked to her worship and embodiment. The *nirvāṇa*, however, causes impurity and thus renders the particular regional trans\*femininity impossible. Only a body that is just as perfectly intact as it was at the time of birth, and thus is of immaculate purity, enables Ellamma to enter and contribute to the *jōgappa*'s femininity.

Ellamma demands the *jōgappas* to live in a body marked with female attributes in order to make her own gendered identity visible to the world. So, one may ask, could the *jōgappa* norms be renegotiated to realize the individual's desire for a more female body achieved by hormones or breast implants, as long as the body would remain complete? Cannamma explained the following:

I don't have the wish to become *nirvāṇa*, but I had the wish to grow breasts. . . . When I wear a blouse, my body is like this [*points at her chest*], that doesn't look good. That's why I had this wish.

*How do you relate getting breasts with Ellamma?*

You cannot *cut*<sup>en</sup> off anything from the body, it would be wrong. But the body can be *improved*<sup>en</sup>.<sup>11</sup> . . . Getting breasts is fine [with her], because that *dēvi* too is a woman, isn't she?, that's why! . . . It's possible to increase [our body], but not to reduce it.

Although not explicitly mentioned, physical integrity still matters in the words of Cannamma, with the focus on completeness; reducing the body would still have severe consequences, whereas increasing and "improving" the body by getting breasts, a clearly visible marker of femininity, is considered a possibility compatible with Ellamma and her identity as a woman. Although both aspects imply the violation of the body, the second evokes notions of putting on *śṛṅgāra* and feminine attributes, beautifying a material form and making its inner self visible and recognizable to the outer world. In such renegotiations of Ellamma's norms and ways of expressing and embodying femininity, the arguments are again established on the deity's identity and within regional notions of devotion and embodiment.

## Conclusion

Regions, understood not only as geographical areas but also as cultural and social space, play an important role in determining discourses and in shaping realities the individual lives in or finds access to. Among *jōgappas*, trans\*femininity proceeds from Ellamma and is perceived as authentic and respectable if not embodied of one's own

accord, but when the individual is chosen by Ellamma to fall under her possessive influence and thus is driven toward femininity and Ellamma's worship. It is achieved not by emasculating the body and adjusting it to the individual's female self but by worshipping Ellamma, by identifying one's self with Ellamma's self, by being identified as Ellamma, and eventually by being identical with her. Consequently, the regional particularity of the *jōgappas'* constitution of trans\*femininity is founded within the interaction and identification between the *jōgappas* and the regional manifestation of Ellamma in North Karnataka and South Maharashtra.

This potentially empowering particularity does not adhere to cross-regional discourses. Further, *hijras* consider the *jōgappas'* embodiment of femininity as not being able to compete with their own surgically emasculated and feminized *nirvāṇa* body, which is successfully propagated as superior in the cross-regional hierarchies of trans\*femininity. It is unmistakable that in the regional context, however, the *nirvāṇa* detaches and cuts off the strong ties between the *jōgappa* and Ellamma by causing impurity; Ellamma no longer comes to occupy and inhabit the *jōgappa's* body, and therefore will no longer unfold her *śakti* causing femininity. Just as a broken or incomplete *mūrti* is considered to be impure, inadequate, and incapable to carry and embody a deity and thus is no longer actively worshipped, also the *nirvāṇa jōgappa* no longer embodies Ellamma and loses the respected role as her medium. The *nirvāṇa* creates an irrevocable distance between a *jōgappa* and Ellamma, rendering the creation and embodiment of femininity in relation with Ellamma—and thus the core of the *jōgappas'* regional identity and belonging—impossible.

As discussed with *jōgappas* and CBO members, the interactions between *jōgappas* and *hijras* in the early twenty-first century have led to an increasing influence of dominant *hijra* discourses, blurring the boundaries between these communities and causing a growing number of *jōgappas* to undergo the *nirvāṇa*. This may enable them to explicitly express and embody their female selves and ensures an identity and belonging that are cross-regionally linked and widely known. Implications of the *nirvāṇa*, however, indicate that such interactions lead to a loss of particularities of the regional, while at the same time regional particularities may also become more visible and accentuated once they are at stake. Those *jōgappas* who have become *nirvāṇa* admittedly still worship Ellamma and stress that they consider themselves as *jōgappas*, but at the same time they seem to shift their focus away from the service of Ellamma and maintain greater interactions with the *hijras* in cities. Additionally, the faith in the regional manifestation of Ellamma, according to the *jōgappas*, is generally declining in the society, diminishing the space wherein *jōgappas* can embody trans\*femininity and still inhabit a respected position.

These tendencies can be interpreted as signs of changing norms and practices among the *jōgappas*. Statements regarding implications for *jōgappa* identities and their trans\*femininity at large, and for what defines the *jōgappas* as distinct and regional, however, need further research. For now, *jōgappas* across generations still agree that the *nirvāṇa* renders them impure and no longer acceptable as Ellamma's medium and close attendant within the *jōg pan*. Thus, at least for the moment, Ellamma seems to remain a ruling power in the realities of the *jōgappas*, still unfolding her play in the worldly sphere and changing the gender of her devotees.

## AUTHOR

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## NOTES

1. In the German language the so called “gender star” or asterix is one possible way to mark terms as exceeding the dichotomy of female and male. I use the prefix “trans-” and the asterix to indicate that the *jōgappas*’ gender identity exceeds the terms “transfemininity” or “transgender,” being closely interconnected with notions and practices related to Ellamma and her worship.

2. In the existing work on devotional traditions in the context of Renuka-Ellamma (Assayag 1992; Ramberg 2014) and on gender-variant communities like the *hijras* (Reddy 2005), *jōgappas* are mentioned as comparative or additional references; papers by Bradford (1983) and Brückner (1996, 2011) provide important approaches regarding the *jōgappas*. More recent publications by the NGO Aneka (2014a, 2014b) focus exclusively on *jōgappas* and provide insights into the diversity among the *jōgappas* and their cultural, socioeconomic, and gender-specific characteristics; the paper by Dutta, Khan, and Lorway (2019) focuses on structural violence; and two papers by Merkle (2015, 2016) concentrate on intersections between gender and devotion in the *jōgappas*’ trans\*femininity.

3. The “regional,” “local,” or “folk” is not understood to be contrary, subordinated to, or independent from supra-regional Sanskritic-Brahmanic traditions, but rather as one of at least five components of Hinduism that, according to Sontheimer (2004), constitute Hindu traditions by their interactions.

4. *Kāḍu* (Kittel 2006, 401–2) means “treating someone harshly or disrespectfully,” “to give trouble,” “to plague”; as well as “forest,” “wild,” “black”; *āṭa* (ibid., 149) means “to play,” “amusement,” “acting or performance.”

5. Besides the group of *jōgappas*, there are various other groups of devotees who are similarly initiated to the devotional service of Ellamma, and who, as the *jōgappa* Cannamma (2013) noted, lead a life outside of the social norm just like *jōgappas*. These are born with a female body and may be called “*jōgammas*,” “*jōgatis*,” or “*dēvadāsis*”; for details see Bradford (1983), Assayag (1992), and Ramberg (2014). In our conversations, *jōgappas* regularly used the female terms “*jōgamma*” or “*jōgati*” to refer to themselves, as these do justice to their own gender identity. The term “*dēvadāsi*” was hardly used. Reasons may be that I and my assistant did not explicitly address the *dēvadāsi* complex, and that the *jōgappas* themselves, just like many dedicated devotees with a female-sexed body too, do not identify with this term, or avoid the term because of stigmatizing connotations. As Soneji (2012, 6–8) points out, in the wake of colonial and postcolonial projects, the term “*dēvadāsi*” has become a transregional category that subsumes a vast number of regional communities, and has become associated with moralizing labels like “sacred prostitute” or “temple dancer” and with discourses on reform.

6. Statements made by another person or a deity are given as direct speech in accordance with the grammatical structure of the Kannada language. Additions necessary for the reader are

marked with square brackets. For non-English terms, I apply the Kannada spelling according to the dictionary by Ferdinand Kittel (2006, first published in 1894).

7. For details regarding the *kothis*, see Bandyopadhyay (2010).

8. For details regarding implications of the *nirvāṇa* and the performative production of gender among *hijras*, see Reddy (2005).

9. “*Nirvāṇa*” and “*akva*” as used here are community-specific terms, coined among the *hijras* and adapted by other gender minorities.

10. In the Kannada original, the second person singular “you” (*nī, nīnu*) marked with “*sg*” is used to degrade the person addressed, while the first person plural “we” (*nāvu*) marked with “*ln*” is used as a honorific form for “I.”

11. Terms marked with “*en*” in the Kannada original are spoken in English.

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#### CONVERSATIONS WITH JŌGAPPAS

If not noted otherwise, the conversations took place in the presence of my assistant Bhat Y. Bhandage, who identifies with the term “transgender” as female.

Basappa (2020), around sixty years old, has lived with a priest and his family at the temple in Saundatti for the last twenty to twenty-five years; the conversation took place in their house; duration 48:26; language Kannada.

Bassu (2018, 2019), between sixty and seventy years old, lives at the temple in Saundatti without a permanent home; the conversations took place in public space at the temple; duration 17:46 and 33:16; language Kannada.

Cannamma (2013, 2017), between forty and forty-five years old, lives with her mother, became well-known as Ellamma’s medium; the conversations took place in front of the domestic shrine for Ellamma at her home in Gadag; duration 2:26:41 and 2:39:00; language Kannada.

Rafik (2014), around twenty years old, from Muslim background; the conversation took place in the home of her family in a poor Muslim area in Hubli in the presence of an assistant who identifies as transgender and is affiliated with the *hijra* community; duration 1:33:16; language Hindi/Urdu and Kannada.

Renamma (2015), around thirty years old, lives in a village between Gadag and Badami; the conversation took place in the premises of the CBO office in Gadag; duration 44:14; language Kannada.

Usha (2018), around twenty years old; the conversation took place in front of the domestic shrine for Ellamma at her home in Gadag; duration 4:00:43; language Kannada.

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