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## Tying the Knot with the Dēvi Gender Transgression in Regional and Trans-Regional Discourses

SUMMARY: The *jōgappas* are male-born dedicated devotees of the South Indian goddess Reṇukā-Ellamma who adopt feminine characteristics. Due to their devotional practices and gender-specific expression, *jōgappas* are confronted with and affected by a range of notions on religious hierarchy and gender. They are opposed by cultural agendas in favour of a Sanskritic form of worship, are drawn into urban debates on sexual minorities and become increasingly interlinked with the *hijra* community. Furthermore, arguments regarding transgenderism in the context of the divine power and aspects of *bhakti* provide a rhetoric of deification which can be identified as specifically regional. Today, *jōgappas* face the challenges of negotiating their individual positions and identities within these global, national, urban, trans-regional and regional discourses.

KEYWORDS: *jōgappa*, *jogappa*, Reṇukā-Ellamma, Ellamma, Yellamma, *dēvi*, *bhakti*, devotion, Sanskritization, gender transgression, transgenderism, transgender, *hijra*, MSM, LGBTQ, CBO.

During the *Bengaluru Pride and Karnataka Queer Habba*<sup>1</sup> 2010 I listened to one of the participants who gave a talk about her community, the so-called *jōgappas*.<sup>2</sup> Some years later I met her again in the rural

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<sup>1</sup> The annual *Bengaluru Pride and Karnataka Queer Habba* (the Kannada term *habba* means “festival”) has taken place since 2008 and is part of the global protest movement of gay and LGBT pride parades.

<sup>2</sup> In the following I apply the Kannada spelling according to Kittel 2006 (1894) for non-English terms and names.

North of Karnataka. I observed her being possessed by Ellamma Dēvi and serving the goddess devotedly in front of an elaborately decorated shrine inside her house. On another day she was dancing and singing on stage to popular music during a local event for sexual minorities. She was born as the first son into a Muslim family. Today one meets her wearing the *muttu* of Ellamma Dēvi and gracefully draped in women's attire. Her Hindu neighbours and followers frequently come to her house to consult her and the *dēvi* inside her. Together with them and a few of her family members, we went on a pilgrimage to one of the large full-moon festivals at the main temple of Reṇukā-Ellamma in Saundatti. There, however, some people proclaimed that being a medium for the *dēvi* is actually an inadequate form of devotion.<sup>3</sup>

This example provides an illustration of a complex situation that is shaped by a challenging multi-contextuality in which *jōgappas* are subjected to diverse influences. Although *jōgappas* belong to a regional tradition in the rural North of Karnataka, today they have become involved in trans-regional, national and global networks and developments. Thus, they find themselves entangled in discourses on religious hierarchy and gender that continuously reshape their identities and socio-cultural belonging. In the following insights into motives, ways and consequences of becoming and being a *jōgappa* lead to diverse and sometimes contradictory

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<sup>3</sup> Due to a lack of sources I largely draw on my own field research conducted between 2010 and 2015 in Bangalore and North Karnataka applying qualitative methods; the research was financially supported by the mobility program within the DAAD-initiative "A New Passage to India" and by the "Karnataka Study Centre" at the University of Würzburg. By conducting semi-structured interviews with open questions, I aimed to follow up the narratives of the dialogue partner. The interviews were voice-recorded and most of the interviews were carried out in the presence of an assistant, often from a sexual minority community, who was already familiar with the *jōgappa* being interviewed. Additionally, I draw on recorded discussions with people from different backgrounds, as well as on field notes from participatory observation and unrecorded spontaneous conversations during stays at the *jōgappas'* houses and visits to the temple site or the temple festivals.

discussions on devotion, gender and the body, which I aim to untangle by localising perceptions and arguments regarding the *jōgappa* community and by considering which aspects may be counted as regional. Furthermore, I present details about the ways in which *jōgappas* negotiate their individual positions.

*Jōgappas* constitute one of the groups of dedicated “special devotees” (Brückner 2011) of the South Indian goddess Reṇukā-Ellamma Dēvi<sup>4</sup>.<sup>5</sup> Her main temple, located on top of a hill near the small town Saundatti in North Karnataka, is one of the largest pilgrimage destinations in South India and the cultural centre of the traditions around the goddess. In accordance with the *dēvi*’s area of influence, the majority of *jōgappas* come from North Karnataka and the bordering regions of Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. Here, Reṇukā-Ellamma is worshipped predominantly among Scheduled Castes and Tribes as a village deity, *grāmadēvaru*, in smallish temples and shrines, or as community or family deity, *kula* or *maneya dēvaru*, in household shrines. However, devotees from higher castes and even from non-Hindu families also visit the temple in Saundatti. This heterogeneous socio-cultural background is particularly characteristic of the *jōgappa* community.

Although initiation into the *dēvi*’s service is usually undertaken in continuation of a family tradition, *jōgappas* especially dedicate themselves to the *dēvi* out of individual motives and irrespective of their family background. The act of tying the *dēvi*’s chain, *muttu kaṭṭuvudu*, is a central part of the initiation ritual of becoming a *jōgappa* and marks the entry into a life dedicated to Ellamma. The *muttu*, a thread of red and white beads with small silver or sometimes golden plates with

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<sup>4</sup> In the following I use the name Ellamma or the term *dēvi* (goddess); references to the name Reṇukā are made if appropriate to the context.

<sup>5</sup> The main focus in academic research on “special devotees” lies on female-born, dedicated devotees like *jōgatis*, *jōgammās*, *basavis* or *dēvadāsīs*, who constitute the clear majority at the temple site, whereas *jōgappas* remain underrepresented. For details regarding female-born devotees see Assayag 1992 or Ramberg 2009 and 2014, among others.

the goddess' symbols impressed onto it, becomes the identification sign of a *jōgappa*. A *jōgappa* is regarded as a consort of the *dēvi* and as a *sadā muttayde*,<sup>6</sup> an always married woman. This implies a life-long auspicious potential that is reinforced by the ideal of following an ascetic lifestyle and sometimes living as a mendicant. Equally characteristic is the *jōgappas*' gender-specific appearance. Though born male, once initiated, they adopt feminine characteristics and the social role of women. The transgression of gender boundaries is not only a striking queerness, but also a crucial aspect of their devotion to the *dēvi*. *Jōgappas* occupy an intermediary position between the *dēvi* and her wider community of devotees and take on mandatory religious duties, which also serve as small source of livelihood. On Tuesdays and Fridays, the special days of the *dēvi*, *jōgappas* go from door to door to ask for offerings such as grain and coins, carrying the *dēvi*'s mobile shrine with them, praising her, and spreading her blessings. *Jōgappas* also fall into the *dēvi*'s possession and embody her in their service as the *dēvi*'s medium. Due to the auspicious nature of their presence, they are invited to attend and perform rituals on occasions like marriages or the birth of a child. Some maintain shrines or small temples for Reṇukā-Ellamma or one of her multiple forms. Thus, they are ritual specialists in worshiping and caring for the *dēvi*; they convey the devotees' offerings to the *dēvi* and mediate between the two sides. However, *jōgappas* do not undergo any professional training to perform these tasks, but rather are authorized by the *dēvi*'s appointment and their subsequent auspicious qualities.

As reasons for the dedication to the *dēvi jōgappas* describe diverse, often disturbing experiences and suffering prior to the initiation, which

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<sup>6</sup> According to Kittel 2006 (1894), *sadā* means “always, at all times” (p. 1495) and *muttayde* means “respectable woman whose husband is alive” (p. 1266). Ramberg also uses the term *nityasumangali* for dedicated devotees like *jōgammas*: “As wives of the deity, always married, never widowed (*nityasumangali*), they are auspicious women associated with all forms of well-being and thriving” (Ramberg 2009: 505).

can neither be rationally explained nor cured by conventional medicine. Most devotees describe a general loss of fortune and symptoms such as skin diseases and pains, shivering, and loss of body control or unconsciousness. Some are afflicted by growing *jade*, matted hair, and to others the *dēvi* appears in their dreams, requesting—or even urging—them to take up her service. *Jōgappas* often experience and sometimes express a certain self-identification with femininity and the female domain, which is the cause of serious difficulties in dealing with their family and their wider social context. After times of uncertainty, priests or senior *jōgappas* identify the *dēvi* as the reason for these unsettling happenings: she interferes with a person's life, insistently demanding respect and worship. Then the *dēvi* and the chosen one negotiate how the individual ought to live to satisfy the *dēvi*'s needs and appease her heated character. In return for the devotees' vow to dedicate themselves to her service, Ellamma offers relief, guardianship and blessings. Indeed, a positive change following the initiation was central in life narratives of *jōgappas* whom I met.<sup>7</sup>

Becoming a *jōgappa* entails radical and far-reaching consequences. By taking initiation, *jōgappas* agree to strict compliance with religious rules and restrictions, as well as to the transgression of societal norms in the name of the *dēvi*. The new way of life as a *jōgappa* may be the precondition of empowerment and serves personal identities and desires, but at the same time it also risks social exclusion. To narrow the focus on the positive change, however, tends to romanticise the potential of regional traditions. While some people regard *jōgappas* as auspicious or even divine, others declare them to be an insult to the goddess and a sign of superstition. Similarly, their gendered performance clearly confronts the dominant, biologically based gender norm and is criticised as deviant, whereas it also draws the attention of

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<sup>7</sup> These motives, except the calling of the *dēvi* in a dream (Brückner 2011: 97), as well as the changes subsequent to the initiation are characteristic in all interviews I conducted since 2010 with *jōgappas*.

LGBTQ<sup>8</sup> activists working for health education and the rights of sexual minorities. Consequently, perceptions of *jōgappas* are highly diverse.

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Today, a discourse led by representatives of a so-called reform movement openly opposes dedicated devotees like *jōgappas*. The activists legitimize their activities and ideology by referring to The Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982.<sup>9</sup> Although this act, by its title, outlaws the dedication of *dēvadāsis*, its rhetoric implies the criminalisation of dedicated devotees in general (Brückner 2011: 101), notwithstanding the diversity of traditions. Furthermore, public campaigns referring to this Act declare the initiation as such, but also practices in the service of the *dēvi*, as illegitimate and as false devotion.

A leaflet distributed at the temple site in Saundatti exemplifies notions held by representatives of the reform movement.<sup>10</sup> Serving as a medium is labelled as “[a]cting as being possessed by god”, “mental disorder (»hysteria«) or disease”, or as “cheating people” and an “easy way to get recognition in society and to make a living” (*ibidem*: 112). Similarly, wearing *jade* is reduced to lacking hygiene and termed as “fake practice” (Ramberg 2009: 508); contrary to the *jōgammās*’ and *jōgappas*’ views about *jade* as the sign of the *dēvi* and her power, it is interpreted as the manifestation of dirt and disease. Thus *jade* is made incompatible with the *dēvi*, and cleaning and cutting the hair is propagated as her actual will (Brückner 2011: 111). The leaflet focuses on female-born dedicated devotees, but also comments on *jōgappas*:

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<sup>8</sup> LGBTQ stands for Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and gender Queer.

<sup>9</sup> For details see The Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982.

<sup>10</sup> The leaflet was distributed in 2007 by the Women’s Welfare and Protection Association (MASS), a group of activists and *ex-dēvadāsis* affiliated to the NGO Myrada. For the Kannada text and a detailed analysis of the leaflet see Brückner 2011. For illustrations see Brückner 2011 online.

There are men who act like women wearing a saree and going around carrying a pot [on their head]. This [behavior] may be due either to mental weakness or to physical defects [...]. Or, [...] they may also be pretending in order to make a living the easy way [...]. (As a rule of nature created by god there are only two genders, »female« and »male«. Is it correct that the same god, against this rule, asks men to behave like women? Think for yourselves!). To such people, if necessary, give knowledge to lead a good life with the help of doctors. (Quoted in *ibidem*: 112)

Dedicated devotees are called upon to respect the power of god and practice “true devotion”. “Proper knowledge” and the visit of a doctor are proposed as means to a good and healthy life (quoted in *ibidem*: 111). Furthermore, a divinely justified rhetoric is applied to derive two clear-cut genders from an assumed biologically based unambiguousness.

Under the pretence of overcoming backwardness, declared signs of superstition and disease are erased by using modern means like the cutting of the *jaḍe* from the bodies, or the medicalisation of possession and transgender. In the end the leaflet argues in favour of a Sanskritized form of worship and labels dedicated devotees and their relationship with the *dēvi* as an inappropriate and illegitimate deviation, thus leading to a hierarchical bifurcation of forms of devotion. This logic can be traced back to notions of religion which were shaped during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Brückner 2011: 101), when the colonial state justified its rule and civilising interference with the native body through classifying non-Brahmanic rituals and beliefs as primitive, backward or barbaric. These arguments are carried on in postcolonial forms of government in the name of modernity and are reflected in values of today’s middle class. A tradition’s submission to the norms shaped by Brahmanic-Sanskritic concepts and bi-polar notions of gender ensures its recognition as a valid tradition and an authentic form of religion, whereas non-adaption to the norms results in exclusion.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For details on debates regarding denunciation as well as Sanskritization of folk-traditions see Dirks 1997, Sontheimer 1995 and Ramberg 2009 and 2014, among others.

Such national discourses and cultural agendas deny *jōgappas* the right to create and occupy their own valid space in society. They declare forms of worship, care and services for the *dēvi*, her embodiment, and the transgression of gender norms, which taken together constitute the identity of *jōgappas*, as “blind ritual practices” (quoted in Brückner 2011: 110), as superstitious and pathological, and thus as insulting to the goddess and her purity. The proclaimed “true devotion” (quoted in *ibidem*: 111), on the other hand, is incompatible with motives and practices to which the majority of *jōgappas* refer to for legitimizing their ways of life. In the end, the conviction expressed in the leaflet only allows *jōgappas* to take an unambiguous position as men. It does not consider a causal relation between the person and the divine, but results in a dichotomy: the person, the self, and the body become disconnected from the *dēvi* and are excluded from deification and thus from reinterpretation and transgression. Divinity and religious experience are no longer embodied and corporal.

These notions have an impact on the public mind-set and result in a change in attitudes regarding acceptance of traditions such as those of the *jōgappas*, making it increasingly challenging for individuals to live a respected life outside the norm. The occurrence of possession or of the dancing of *jōgappas* during festivals, as well as *jade* in the hair of devotees has decreased (Brückner 2011: 107). The number of dedications at the temple site has declined significantly since the 1990s too, but they also “began to be performed mostly quietly, in out-of-the-way places” (Ramberg 2009: 506–7). Historical developments at the temple in Saundatti show an ongoing struggle for power and continuous processes of adaptation and distinction between various traditions; already the *dēvi*’s name Reṇukā attests the Brahmanic-Sanskritic impact, whereas her Kannada name Ellamma is expressive of a regional tradition. While the representatives of Brahmanic-Sanskritic values have dominated the sacred centre, the followers of Ellamma have tended to move out of the centre, taking their *dēvi* with them and maintaining her worship in the periphery (Gurumurthy 2005). It is likely that *jōgappas* today are adapting a similar strategy of avoidance; however, contemporary



campaigns and policies might have a far more wide-spread impact. Thus it remains uncertain whether this tendency towards decentralisation offers *jōgappas* ways to survive.

At the temple site, some dedicated devotees still seem to resist, at least to a certain degree. When I visited the temple site on Ellamma hill for the occasion of *raṇḍe huṇṇime*,<sup>12</sup> the full moon of the *dēvi*'s widowhood, I found small heaps of broken green glass bangles next to the shrine of Ellamma's husband, Jamadagni, indicating that some must have performed the ritual of following the *dēvi* in becoming a widow. At the same place I read an inscription painted on a rock, calling upon the devotees to stop the "blind belief" of "breaking the bangles in the name of the *dēvi*".<sup>13</sup> A month later, at *muttayde huṇṇime*, the full moon of the *dēvi*'s regaining the auspicious state of married women, I joined a Muslim *jōgappa* to celebrate the end of the widowhood. When she circumambulated the main temple with a troupe of drummers, she danced with her *jōgappa* friends, including one with a heavy *jaḍe*, and repeatedly went into a trance when the *dēvi* came on her.<sup>14</sup> A *jōgamma*, while sitting right next to another signboard of instructions against practices of dedicated devotees, explained to me that it is because of the superior power of the *dēvi* that one can still find *jōgammās* and *jōgappas* performing their services at the temple site.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> At *raṇḍe huṇṇime*, the full moon of the *dēvi*'s widowhood, her dedicated devotees follow the *dēvi* in becoming a widow by removing all signs of a married woman. At *muttayde huṇṇime*, the full moon of the married woman, both the *dēvi* and her devotees regain their auspicious status as *sadā muttayde*. These events refer to sequences described in the *dēvi*'s mythology, when her husband Jamadagni was killed but a month later resurrected.

<sup>13</sup> The inscription says: "Breaking the bangles in the name of the *dēvi* at the day of the *hostile huṇṇime* (equivalent to *raṇḍe huṇṇime*) is blind belief [superstition] and exploitation of women, therefore stop it." (*hostile huṇṇimeyanbu dēvi hesarina mēle baḷe oḍedukoḷḷuvudu mūḍhanam-bike hāgū mahiḷeyara śōṣaṇeyāddarinda adannu nillisi.*)

<sup>14</sup> From observations in 2014 and 2015.

<sup>15</sup> From observations in 2013.

In and around a village which I encountered during my field research, I observed a lively community of devotees of the *dēvi* and a high density of influential *jōgammās* and *jōgappās*, marking a trans-regionally well-known religious centre. People in the village hold their temple (*dēvasthāna*) for Śrī Rēṇukā Dēvi in high esteem, and to demonstrate its elevated status they stressed personal relations to the main temple. Furthermore, they claimed the absolute superiority of the *dēvi* in Saundatti as well as their own *dēvi*, pointing out both *dēvis*' preferences for sweets and vegetarian food, in contrast to the desire of Huligamma Dēvi, the *dēvi*'s form near the city of Hospet, for non-vegetarian offerings. Alongside the argument of vegetarianism and the claim that their *dēvi* is commensurable with Rēṇukā, they mostly spoke about Ellamma *dēvi*, rather than Rēṇukā, and highlighted further religious practices. For instance, the *dēvi* annually demonstrates her "full power" during a huge temple festival by entering into *jōgammās* and *jōgappās* and making them dance. The central position during the festival is taken by a *jōgappa* who serves as a medium for the *dēvi* in the main shrine of the temple.<sup>16</sup> Another influential *jōgappa* also performs wild, *ugra*, forms of worship.<sup>17</sup> These apparently contradictory observations show that bringing traditions into line with dominant forms by stressing closeness to a *dēvi* of an assumed high status does not preclude dedicated devotees and their specific forms of devotion from retaining a powerful, even indispensable, position. Thus, the contrast and hierarchy between Brahmanic-Sanskritic and folk-religious elements, inherent in the demands of the reformers, needs to be questioned, and more complex intersections must be recognized. It is within these more complex intersections that *jōgappās* create and express their multiple positions.

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<sup>16</sup> From observations and conversations with people living in the same village and with relatives of the *jōgappa* affiliated to the Śrī Rēṇukā Dēvi Dēvasthāna (temple name as written on the signboard above the entrance) in 2013; the English expression "full power" was frequently used in English and Kannaḍa sentences.

<sup>17</sup> From a conversation with the *jōgappa* living near the temple in 2014.

The transgenderism of *jōgappas* will later open up a new perspective on devotion, but for now leads us towards discourses on gender identities and sexual minorities. These discourses are primarily carried out in the context of multi-national and cosmopolitan cities such as Bangalore, where individual groups of gay activists have evolved into a vivid and increasingly visible LGBTQ movement. Here *jōgappas* are conceived as a local male to female transgender community, who stand apart from other transgender communities due to their religious entanglements. But nevertheless, their specific concerns and challenges and their cultural significance remain widely under-represented in the urban communities.<sup>18</sup>

In the smaller cities and towns of the more conservative North of Karnataka the local NGOs and CBOs,<sup>19</sup> which are closely connected to the Bangalore based movement, figure far more prominently among *jōgappas*. Here, terms like MSM (men who have sex with men), which had been established in the 1990s in the context of international health education and funding schemes to name those who were seen as the main group at risk in the prevalence and transmission of HIV (Fish, Karban 2015: xiii), continue to have an effect. Today MSM refers to male bodied persons who are attracted to men while not necessarily identifying themselves as men or as gay (Ranade 2015), as for example the *kotis*, who are “male-bodied”, but who are “not men” and “identify as female” (Suleiman 2011). By focusing primarily on the male body and assumed same-sex desire, *jōgappas* are supposed to fit into the category of MSM (Aneka 2014a: 91) and thus are subsumed into the high-risk groups for HIV.

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<sup>18</sup> A recent research project carried out by the NGO Aneka, Bangalore, attempts to close this gap. Results are published in two books (Aneka 2014a, 2014b) and a documentary movie (Aneka 2014c), which provide noteworthy individual insights into the diversity within the community of *jōgappas*.

<sup>19</sup> In the following I refer only to the term CBO (Community Based Organisation), as CBO offices were one of the main meeting points for discussions with members of the CBOs and interviews with *jōgappas* and provided opportunities for my observations.

Although the focus on sexuality runs against the religious norm of asceticism, *jōgappas* value the work of CBOs and their office space for providing an atmosphere of acceptance, freedom and friendship, allowing them to be themselves and share “in a sisterly manner” (Mallika, quoted in Aneka 2014a: 91). This social space strengthens their self-awareness as a distinct group and helps in building loyalties with other local sexual minorities and a “sense of community” among *jōgappas*. It offers opportunities to meet outside religious and cultural events and to discuss problematic issues which they face as a marginalised local sexual minority (Aneka 2014a: 93). *Jōgappas* also remarked that, due to the work of CBOs, discrimination by institutions, the public at large, and their families has lessened.

In villages and in families of *jōgappas* terms like transgender, gay or MSM seemed to be unknown or avoided. More often I encountered expressions like “feminine man”,<sup>20</sup> which, unlike other terms, does not imply active sexuality or an assumed illegitimate homoerotic desire. During a visit to a village together with a friend of mine who in another context would clearly be identified as gay, quite a few villagers were eager to know whether my “*jōgappa*-friend” had already tied the *muttu*. Here the *jōgappa* community was rather well represented and esteemed. A male-bodied person demonstrating a certain femininity and thus not keeping with the stereotype of masculinity was perceived as a prospective *jōgappa*. My friend remarked that, if he would have grown up in this village, he too would live as a *jōgappa* today, as in a village environment living as a *jōgappa* and representing the ideal of asceticism of a mendicant is the only possible way to avoid marriage to a woman and to still maintain a respectful relationship with the family.<sup>21</sup> Clearly, identities outside the norm need an alternative

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<sup>20</sup> From observations and discussions in 2013 and 2014; the statement “he is a feminine man” was put in English by men who observed the interview with a *jōgappa*.

<sup>21</sup> From observations and conversations in 2014, and from a recorded discussion with my friend after returning from this village; the question about

legitimation like that of the *jōgappas*, which is neither directly gendered nor sexualised.

Nevertheless, *jōgappas* too give accounts of emotional and physical torture from their close social environment, and face tensions among their individual desires, societal norms and expectations, obligations towards their family, and the need of social and cultural belonging. One *jōgappa*, for instance, was classified as MSM by a CBO in a nearby town a few years prior to our meeting, but then got married to a woman in his village. When we sat together for a conversation he was newly initiated as *jōgappa*; he did not wear female attire, but white ritual garments, and excitedly announced that when I returned he would look like a girl and would have his, currently very humble, shrine for the *dēvi* enlarged. A year later he had migrated to Bangalore and now belonged to a *hijra* house, but his family was not allowed to find this out, as they would have regarded him as a prostitute.<sup>22</sup>

My discussion does not seek to answer the question whether *jōgappas* can be termed transgenders, MSM or gay. Rather the arguments reveal that lines of distinction between these categories cannot be clearly defined. Individual belongings of *jōgappas* are highly complex and contextual and thus difficult to categorise unequivocally. Furthermore, it has to be taken into consideration that *jōgappas* do not identify with any of these terms, especially as they occupy a “traditional space that permits cross-gender expressions” (Suleiman 2011). Only recently have they become increasingly interlinked with the growing urban movement of sexual minorities and therefore exposed to and influenced by these terms. The terms themselves are modern imports and describe global categories, defined and dominated by western academics and activists, and thus by a fundamentally different cultural context.

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my alleged “*jōgappa*-friend” was phrased in English by men surrounding us.

<sup>22</sup> From an interview and conversations with the *jōgappa* in his native village in 2013, and from conversations with social workers from nearby towns and with his friend from the same village in 2013 and 2014.

In discussions about transgender in India, the focus today lies on *hijras*, the institutionalised third gender, or the male-to-female transgender community of India.<sup>23</sup> Activists from sexual minority communities, however, criticise the homogenising view of sexual minorities. During the recent debate on the official recognition of a third gender category, the term *hijra* was reinforced in the general public as the synonym for various transgender identities: “Hijra isn’t the only transgender identity. There are others [...], who don’t draw attention to themselves, and struggle to find recognition as anything but a ‘deviant’ community” (Suleiman 2011). Similarly, academics refer to the need to diversify further the notion of gender and to recognize that “[a]ll thirdness is not alike” (Cohen 1995: 277). Furthermore, it is also argued, against the understanding of *hijras* as “an essentialized version of the third sex”, that the *hijra* identity should rather be understood “in terms of a multiplicity of differences, including those of sexuality, religion, gender, kinship, and class” (Reddy 2005: 224).

*Jōgappas* themselves are highly conscious of their position in relation to that of the *hijras* and negotiate their own identity along bi-polar lines. Invoking their own celibacy and physical integrity, *jōgappas* distinctively distance themselves from *hijras*. In our conversations *jōgappas* regularly mentioned “the operation” as the clear indicator of a *hijra* identity, and further characterised them by a stereotypical provocative appearance and the negative image of prostitution. They themselves would follow religious restrictions and would not undergo any sort of sex reassignment surgery, as the *dēvi* accepts only an intact body as her medium.<sup>24</sup> Thus *jōgappas* reinforce the “dichotomy of the ‘holy’ and the ‘sexual’” by stressing the importance of their norms and traditions and ascribing “dirty work” (sex work)

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<sup>23</sup> For details on *hijras* see Nanda 1999, Reddy 2005, and Syed 2015, among others.

<sup>24</sup> From conversations and interviews with *jōgappas* since 2010; *jōgappas* use the English term “operation” in Kannada sentences to refer to the operative emasculation.

to *hijras*; asceticism versus active sexuality structures the individual's status in society and within both communities (Aneka 2014a: 44). Along these simplified lines, the *jōgappa* community appears independent and distinctively separate from that of the *hijras*. However, younger *jōgappas* in particular seem to be attracted to the *hijra* culture for its possibilities of explicit expression of femininity, the *hijras*' strong social network, their freedom to approach men and their opportunities for more lucrative earnings. Also the tendency towards operative emasculation and the adjustment to the female body seems to be inspired by the interaction with *hijras* (Aneka 2014a: 87). However, physical changes and sexual activities entail the risk of loss of reputation, and may result in uncertainty of one's position as a *jōgappa*.

A close look reveals that intersections between *jōgappas* and *hijras* are multi-layered, subtle and creative. Depending on the strength of social relations and opportunities for income, *jōgappas* may shift between the communities or maintain a dual loyalty, of course not without potential for conflicts. Some begin to worship the *hijra* goddess Bahucarā Mātā alongside Reṇukā-Ellamma, while others become part of the *hijra* society, follow a *hijra guru*, and are no longer accepted by the *jōgappa* community and their *dēvi*.<sup>25</sup> Especially while travelling in areas outside of Reṇukā-Ellamma's influence where the public is unaware of *jōgappas*, do some adopt *hijra* behaviour and assume a *hijra* identity in order to improve income and occupy a recognized role (Aneka 2014a: 80). Still, being mistaken for a *hijra*, which is especially likely in urban areas, means to be associated with sex work, and this gives rise to harassment (Aneka 2014a: 45). Accordingly, people I spoke with in a village in the North of Karnataka expressed the opinion that those who move into cities like Bangalore or Mumbai are suspected to be involved in sex work or to be striving to become *hijras*.<sup>26</sup> Simultaneously, a group of influential Muslim *hijras* in a city in North Karnataka regards keeping ties with the *jōgappa* community

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<sup>25</sup> From observations and interviews with *jōgappas* since 2010.

<sup>26</sup> From conversations with people living in a village with a high density of *jōgappas* in 2013.

as prestigious, and even worships Reṇukā-Ellamma.<sup>27</sup> During temple festivals in Saundatti, one can observe groups of *jōgappas* and *hijras* going on the pilgrimage together to meet their equals and their friends at the temple site.<sup>28</sup>

However, the individual's belonging is not only a matter of negotiating between the *jōgappa* and *hijra* community, but is also shaped by striving for social acceptance and dignity and by considering the *dēvi*'s position. The Muslim *jōgappa*, for instance, frequently changed her mind about whether or not to undergo the operation. On the one hand, she expressed her strong desire to be accepted as a woman. She did not want to be accused, especially by her father, of being a man who just pretends to be a woman and thought that seeking unambiguity and conformity between her body and her gendered expression would fit the social binary gender norm and meet society's and her male family members' expectations. On the other hand, she wanted to continue her devotion and not to deviate from the cultural norm of the *jōgappas*, which would lead to losing her respected position. She was particularly afraid that the *dēvi* would stop accepting her as her medium, that she might even punish her, but at the same time speculated that if the *dēvi* realized her deep devotion, she might still be accepted as her special devotee.<sup>29</sup>

The fact that today lines between the two communities are becoming increasingly blurred raises the question of the specific social and cultural identity and belonging of *jōgappas*. Due to the trend to generalise transgender identities, as well as the general loss of respect for *jōgappas* and the declining belief in the *dēvi*, *jōgappas* are challenged to fight for their survival, and they struggle to maintain their

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<sup>27</sup> From observations since 2010, and from conversations with a CBO member.

<sup>28</sup> From observations, especially during the temple festivals in Saundatti in 2014 and 2015.

<sup>29</sup> From interviews and conversations with the *jōgappa* in 2013, 2014 and 2015.



distinct identity. At the same time, the desire to inhabit a recognized role, if not as a *jōgappa* then at least as a *hijra*, drives them to transcend norms and playfully or permanently acquire an identity which endangers their religious respectability. Nevertheless, considering the dominant culture of *hijras*, some *jōgappas* strongly fear an erosion of their regional traditions (Aneka 2014a: 105). According to my observations, the identity and belonging of *jōgappas* are both rigid and fluid. Along clearly opposing stylised images they distance themselves from the *hijras* and emphasise their own positive position. At the same time, *jōgappas* are challenged and also capable of balancing individual desires, the *dēvi* and societal norms, thus creating and embodying highly contextual multiple identities that allow multiple belongings.

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The following contextualization of the *jōgappas* within the framework of the *dēvi*, divine presence, power and influence,<sup>30</sup> and religious practices and individual devotion, will lead away from realms of transgender and questions of sexuality towards fundamentally different, alternative readings of a non-heteronormative appearance. These allow perceptions of gender transgression, which do not exist in urban, national or global discourses, and which we may regard as particular and local.

*Jōgappas* refer to the divine intervention prior and subsequent to their initiation with expressions like the *dēvi* “comes upon my body”, “comes in my body” and “fills my body”. This language indicates that the *dēvi* chooses her dedicated devotee and that *jōgappas* become possessed by her.<sup>31</sup> They provide the *dēvi* with a material body, a vessel

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<sup>30</sup> In Merkle 2015, I analyse the different levels of interrelations between the divine (Ellamma) and the worldly sphere (*jōgappas*) in more detail.

<sup>31</sup> From interviews since 2010. The Kannada equivalents are *maimēle baru*, *maiḷalli baru* and *mai tumbu*; *mai tumbu* refers to “the body to be filled” as well as to “to be possessed by a spirit or deity”, *maimēle baru* furthermore refers to “to come upon one’s body, to fall upon, to attack” (Kittel 2006 (1894): 1291).

for her to seize, and they enable her to unfold her divine female power, *śakti*, and to interact with the worldly sphere. Thus *jōgappas* carry the *dēvi* in small baskets when collecting alms, but they also themselves become carriers of the *dēvi*. In some contexts, *jōgappas* are regarded as identical with the *dēvi* and as divine themselves. Further discussions with *jōgappas* made it apparent that it is the presence and power of the *dēvi* which causes the feminisation of a male-bodied person, so that “a boy behaves like a girl”, and as a consequence “men in saris are holy”.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the expression of femininity in contrast with the male body is read as a sign of the *dēvi*’s presence and her female divine power. After all, it is Ellamma Dēvi who is well known for her unique and extraordinary ability to change males into females and females into males (Bradford 1983: 310). *Jōgappas* argue that the legitimate claim to the feminine role and the *jōgappa* identity requires the *dēvi*’s contribution: “Only if the goddess herself comes and resides in us, can we become Jogappas” (Radhika, quoted in Aneka 2014a: 27). The identity of those who incorporate femininity of their own accord, without experiencing divine presence, and thus simply choose to be a *jōgappa* or a *hijra*, is questioned and considered as invalid. Only being chosen by the *dēvi* and thus being driven to take the vow to become a *jōgappa* is regarded as authentic (Aneka 2014a: 27).

These aspects of impersonating the divine and the feminine link *jōgappas* to other devotional traditions. Male devotees of Ellamma in the state of Telangana, for instance, also take a vow to become a *jōgappa*, but only for a few years; here, being a *jōgappa* seems rather to be “performative” in its “enactment of the goddess” and its embodiment and becoming the *dēvi*, than “an expression of transgenderism” (Aneka 2014a: 34–5). Furthermore, in Tirupati male devotees of the goddess Gangamma make vows to take *stri vesham* (female guise) annually for a week; due to the immense power of

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<sup>32</sup> From interviews in 2013; the comments were formulated by a man observing an interview with a *jōgappa* in order to explain the situation of *jōgappas* to me in English.

the goddess, the world, including her devotees, becomes female during Gangamma's temple festival (Flueckiger 2013). Although it is common in many Indian performance and ritual contexts for men to impersonate female characters, or become a goddess, the case of *jōgappas* in Karnataka remains extraordinary because of the permanent and irrevocable consequences of their vow to become a *jōgappa*. This point underlines the assumption about *jōgappas* being a local transgender community rather than mere devotees.

However, not all *jōgappas* wear women's attire, and some perform the initiation without a gender-specific reason. One *jōgappa* whom I met, usually wears ordinary male attire, or white ritual garments. When she leaves her house she hides her long hair under a cap and keeps the *muttu* inside her shirt, to avoid being recognized and harassed.<sup>33</sup> Another *jōgappa*, who always wears a sari and appears distinctively feminine in private and public space, did not confirm any experience of clear femininity or female identity prior to her initiation. Rather she stated that she disrespected the *dēvi* when she still lived as a boy. So she had to accept the consequence and appease her by making the vow to live as a *jōgappa*. After some time, she grew into the role of a woman and today enjoys inhabiting feminine space and mingling with her female family members.<sup>34</sup>

Being a *jōgappa* means to fully sacrifice one's entire life for the *dēvi*'s service and worship. This is symbolised by wearing the *muttu*, which can be equated with the *maṅgalasūtra* of married women. The initiation ritual itself shares patterns of a regular marriage ceremony: getting the *muttu* means tying the knot with the *dēvi* and becoming bound to the *dēvi* as a wife is bound to her husband. Deep commitment and affection for the *dēvi* are central in the life of a *jōgappa*. The commitment includes the duty to spread the *dēvi*'s name and praise her power by travelling around and telling her stories in devotional songs. Here *jōgappas* clearly appear as followers of *bhakti*;

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<sup>33</sup> From observations and conversations in 2013 and 2014.

<sup>34</sup> From an interview with the *jōgappa* in 2015.

the individual adopts a subordinate, serving and devotional attitude and thus incorporates the stereotypical and ideal feminine principles, while the *dēvi* in return takes the protecting, guiding and blessing role of a husband or master (Brückner 1996: 440–4). In the context of *bhakti* this relationship and the reversal of gender becomes independent from physical gender and personal identities and desires; it rather expresses the individual's inner devotional attitude.

This discussion highlights a radically different notion of gender expressions, as transgenderism is no longer traced back to a biological or pathological phenomenon, nor to concepts of transgender, homosexual, or MSM, but is established within a framework of the divine which is set in a rural and regionally confined space. In fact, it is precisely the *dēvi*'s participation which demarcates the *jōgappas* from other sexual minority communities. The transgression of gender boundaries appears as a consequence of the *dēvi*'s presence and possession, and the unfolding of her power is followed by embodiment of the divine and the female. By means of transgenderism, *jōgappas* serve and worship the *dēvi*, express their individual devotional mentalities and not only experience her, but become her themselves. This finding challenges modern categories and terms, according to which *jōgappas* may be otherwise classified and associated.

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Discussions concerning the *jōgappas* reflect the multiple and complex contemporary conceptions of devotion and gender in which individuals are entangled. We have found notions of national validity opposing regional practices of worship, attempts to classify *jōgappas* as a sexual minority in global terms, and tendencies to subsume various forms of expression of transgender identities as *hijra*. In these spheres, discourses surrounding Ellamma *dēvi* are denied or non-existent, whereas it is precisely by use of such discourses that *jōgappas* claim their own distinct identities. However, by reading transgenderism as a consequence of the presence and power of the *dēvi* and as an expression of the individual's commitment towards her, aspects are revealed which

we may consider as regional, and also as appropriate and reasonable means of approaching the identities of the *jōgappas*. The correlation between ritual and devotional practices and gender transgression challenges the conventional conception of gender as a socially constructed category and internalized identity.

This paper does not seek to answer the question of what we may consider to be a supposed original and authentic form of the *jōgappas*' traditions free from external influences, or whether or not *jōgappas* may be termed as transgender. It rather focuses on pointing out multiple facets and complex areas of tension which confront, affect and reshape the *jōgappa* community today. As they are excluded from the cultural and social mainstream, *jōgappas* have to negotiate their individual positions in the face of dominant values. While they position themselves in the context of the local logic of the *dēvi*, *jōgappas* at the same time are challenged to find a balance between personal desires and norms of contemporary society. This creates diverse possibilities for the *jōgappas*' ways of life and socio-cultural belonging, resulting in highly contextual and contested identities.

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