

Difficult Negotiations: *Daiva* Worship within a Matrilineal Feudal Society

Parinitha Shetty | Mangalore University

<https://doi.org/10.71106/ECKO9206>

I stand before the *daiva*¹ (the spirits that are associated with the protection of a feudal agrarian society and are worshipped in certain regions of southern coastal Karnataka, India) and in the *chavadi* (the enclosed sacral space where the ritual of *daiva* worship is held). The space is too small to accommodate the devotees who have gathered there. The women are huddled at one end, carrying babies or holding on to little children. The men are at the other end crowding into each other. It is the day of the *nema* (one of the rituals of *daiva* worship), the annual ritual of the *daiva*, and the extended family has come together. The male members of the family are standing beside the *ujjal* (a wooden swing which is hung in the *chavadi* on which the sacred paraphernalia of *daiva* worship are placed) on which is placed, before the ritual begins, the silver breast plate, the silver sword, and the silver mask bearing the face of the boar with its long golden tongue hanging out. The men of the family stand in a prominent place beside the *ujjal*, for they will have to participate in the ritual conversation with the *daiva* and answer the questions it asks of them. The *chavadi* is filled with the sound of the *vadya* (the synchronized music

¹*Daivaaraadhane* is a faith tradition and a form of ritual worship that exists in the southern districts of coastal Karnataka and the northern tip of the Malabar region in Kerala. The power that is worshipped through the ritual called as *Nema* or *Kola* can be worshipped in the form of an animal like a boar or a bull. It can also be the deified spirit of a brave warrior who met with an untimely death fighting on behalf of the weak against the might of the powerful. Very often the stories of these warriors would describe them as having died fighting against the might of the inhuman landlord. These powers are part of the agrarian feudal world and in them the human and the animal intersect with each other. The sacral space where these powers are worshipped is called as the *chavadi*. It has a *ujjal* or wooden swing in which is placed the silver sword of the *daiva*. A lamp is lighted before the *ujjal* every evening, all through the year, and the *ujjal* is the focal point of the *chavadi*. All landholding households called as *guthus* will have a *chavadi* and a *daiva* attached to it.

For more information on *daivaaraadhane*, see, Gowda, Chinnappa K. *Mask and the Message*. Madipu Prakashana, 2005; Upadhyaya, Padmanabha U. *Coastal Karnataka: Studies in Folkloristic and Linguistic Traditions of Dakshina Kannada Region of the Western Coast of India*. Rashttrakavi Govind Pai Samshodhana Kendra, 1996; Hari, Kumar K. *Daiva: Discovering the Extraordinary World of Spirit Worship*. Harper Collins India, 2024; Padmanabha, P. *Special Study Report on Bhuta Cult in South Kanara District*. Census of India, Series 14, Census of India, 1971; Ishii, Misho. *Modernity and Spirit worship in India: An Anthropology of the Umwelt*. Routledge New Horizons in South Asian Studies, 2020. This list was prepared by my research student, Nandakishore, who is working towards his PhD Degree on the nineteenth century missionary transactions of the Basel Mission with the indigenous cultural world of the region, which is today called as Dakshina Kannada.

from a collection of musical instruments played during the *nema* consisting of the *kombu*, saxophone, and *chende*) and the smell of jasmines. The heat of the fire burning from the torch which is carried by the ritual torch bearer makes the small crowded space hot and cramped.

At the centre of the ritual space is the impersonator of the *daiva*. Wearing the silver mask of the boar, the breast plate which shapes into two rounded breasts with pebbled nipples and a protruding belly, and the heavy silver *gaggara* (a type of anklet made of brass or silver) which chimes with every step that he takes. He is dancing in a frenzy, swirling round and round and the garlands around his neck whirl and break loose into scattered jasmine petals. The sharp tip of the silver sword, held at the end of his outstretched hand, makes a circle around him drawing the boundary between the human and that which transcends the human. Slowly the man has been replaced by a hybrid creature that is female above the waist and male below, bearing the head of a boar. The boundaries between the species and the sexes, between the human and superhuman have melted and spread into each other. The nomenclatures through which I have been taught to know the world have been disarrayed and jumbled. The order of knowledge has been breached and a vast unknown cosmos of powerful presences, that rule through fear and authority, that manifest themselves through the miracle of birth and the presence of the dead among the living, has been reinstated through the ritual of the *daiva*. I am struck by the incompleteness of knowing anything in all its fulness to the point of closure. The human impersonator has been transformed through the transcendence of faith into a powerful force that bears kinship to the fertility of the fields and all that grows in them and around them, that guards over the many offshoots of life that are interlinked through the hierarchies of a feudal agrarian order, and regulates the cycles of the seasons. Resplendent in his ritual garb, he who in the quotidian ordinariness of social living is placed low in the caste order has been made ritually sacrosanct, uttering prophecies and deciphering omens and signs to those who, through the power that is belief, have metamorphosed him into the *daiva*.

I, the descendent of a long female line, born into a matrilineal family, stand before the *daiva*. I, who teach in the university, who has held conversations on gender and politics and society with many generations of students, stand there at the intersection of multiple epistemologies. I have read with my students the archives of the imagination from across the world. I have debated with them on the many imaginaries of human communities and the structures of power that traverse these communities and structure them. I have felt with them the terror of the plague stricken Thebans and watched the horrifying self-blinding of Oedipus. Could he not bear to see what the sightless Tiresias had known at the beginning of human time? Or is it that he could not bear the sight of himself, that had been revealed to him retrospectively, in a blinding vision of horror?

If I were to be asked for my address on the map that charts the spectrum between atheism and belief, I would give a pin code of that region that traverses across the many milestones of agnosticism. But in that *chavadi* I am no longer certain. I am too timid to open myself to the boundlessness of belief that disturbs and distorts the lexical order of reason and rationality. I grope my way through the opacity of faith, trying to grasp and understand those leaps into the beyond of history. I try to wrench apart the protocols of understanding into which I have been trained, and attempt to structure new protocols of

knowing that are commensurate with the phenomenon of many transcendences that are generated and reaffirmed in that *chavadi*. I stand there balancing precariously on a liminal threshold. I do not know the beginning or the end of that threshold, and whether I walk in or walk out through it. I stand on that threshold as I slowly melt into both sides of the threshold. Those standing around me have so easily crossed that threshold that only I can see as a threshold. They have crossed it many times without ever experiencing it as an act of border crossing. I have struggled to communicate with those experiences that emanate from the materiality of human existence and yet transcend that existence. I have only been able to appropriate them through the nomenclatures and systems of knowledge that are generated and disseminated from within the institutional structures of academia. How do I dismantle the order of that academic discourse and open it to the nascent unruliness of the irrational? How do I legibilize that which has not yet been languaged into the abstractions of knowledge systems? How do I inhabit worlds that are amenable to epistemologies that are alien to me? And why do I need to enter those worlds on their own terms?

Teaching a paper on gender I take recourse to Nivedita Menon. She writes of how the mystical experience of bhakthi “expressed a kind of desire for God that travels through the body and reconfigures it. Their desire was to attain the loss of maleness as power and the loss of femaleness as sexualized powerlessness” (57). In order to illustrate how the bhakthi saints “demystified the body and sexuality by dismantling the codes and conventions that ‘sex’ the body,” she quotes the tenth century Bhakthi poet, Devara Dasimayya:

If they see breasts and long hair coming,
They call it woman,
If beard and whiskers
They call it man.
But look, the self that hovers in between
is neither man nor woman... (qtd. in Menon 57)

Maybe this is the extreme edge of knowing that we can reach, through the structures through which we have been trained into knowing. We cannot go beyond our knowing without losing the power of legibility. But that beyond of knowing is always there at the edges of lucidity, entering through tiny fissures and breaches, and forcing the renewal of knowing or threatening its disaggregation.

The male members of my family occupy the space adjacent to the *ujjal*. The *chavadi* is mapped into a graded order of sacral spaces with the *ujjal* at the centre of it. It is adjacent to this *ujjal* that communication is established between the *daiva* and the male members of the family. They have the privilege of carrying out the ritual conversation with the *daiva*, making requests of it and answering questions posed by it. Although they belong to a matrilineal family and although they occupy the privileged space in the *chavadi* by virtue of tracing their descent through their mother’s line, they, not their mothers or sisters or daughters, have the privilege of standing before the *daiva* and talking to it. But they can only speak to it in their *mother* tongue.

They can enter the *chavadi* all through the year without desecrating it, unless they bear the pollution of the death of a kin related through their mothers’ descent line. But

menstruating women and women who have not yet completed the mandated number of days after child birth cannot enter the *chavadi* as they are considered to be ritually impure. When I menstruated for the first time, the first thing my mother told me was to not enter the temple or the *chavadi* during those days. I was not told the reason why. That all the women before me had obeyed this order was ratification of its authority. Every year, in the month of February, a ritual called *keddasa* is offered to the *daiva* which is a celebration of the menstruating earth. The field on which the ritual is held has to be drenched with blood. The headless bodies of fowls beheaded by the *daiva* are left to bleed into the cracked dry earth of the field. Cockfights take place in the evening of the *nema* and the wounded birds bleed into the field. The blood that makes stains on the dusty surface of the field and trickles into its fissures, ritually symbolises the menstrual blood of the bleeding earth. The devotees gathered there celebrate the earth's fecundity which will sprout in the paddy field, the vegetable patches, the areca nut and coconut gardens and the banana groves. When did my menstruating body and those of my grandmothers become impure? How did the blood of a menstruating body become polluting in an agrarian world that survives on the fertile bounty of the earth? When did the fertility of her body debar a woman from entering those sacral spaces that celebrated fertility as an awe inspiring and life sustaining force that is to be venerated? How can the *daiva*, bearing breasts of silver which suckle those who turn to it as a mother, deny breasted, bleeding, child bearing women entry into her *chavadi*?

I stand before the *daiva*. It is pointing its silver sword towards me and making cradling gestures. I understand it to mean that it will nurture and protect me as a mother. It will protect me as a member of the female line that from mother to daughter has offered it its annual rituals and submitted to its power. When I became a mother I became a stranger to myself. Turned blind with the dazzling intensity of an emotion that made me perpetually vulnerable I had to braille read my body and the relationships through which I had hitherto lived my life. This tiny creature, gouged out of my flesh was so delicate that I did not know how to fold it into my cradling arms and suckle it. I would never again be free of the obligation to protect another human being that held me to it with threads that were stronger than steel cables. Would I be imprisoned by the strength of that entwining with another life, that would last as long as my life? I too could create life but did I have the power of the *daiva* to protect what I had created? Did I have the strength needed to care for another with whom I was welded with such intensity of emotions that it made me perpetually brittle? I look at the *daiva* and bow before it with opened palms placed together. Is it a gesture of supplication? Gratitude? I don't know.

The ritual dance has come to an end. The offering of puffed rice and tender coconut has been made. The mask has been removed and the time for talking to the *daiva* has arrived. The mediator between men and the *daiva* has initiated a conversation. He is the bearer of the ritual status of an interlocutor. A request has to be made. A permission has to be granted by my family to the group of villagers who crowd round the *daiva*. The feudal agrarian hierarchies are reinstated and enacted in that *chavadi* through the supplication of the villagers.

The dialogue between the *daiva* and the devotees begins. I am among the women to whom I am bound through the kinship of grandmothers, mothers, daughters, and sisters. We are on the margins of the dialogue of men with the half female *daiva*. But,

when the *daiva* speaks, s/he speaks the language of men. First the male members of the family are asked for their opinion. Then the *thantri* (member of a subsect of Brahmins in Kerala and Karnataka who are allowed to perform temple rituals) is asked for his opinion. There is a male consensus that the request of the villagers should be granted. They want to renew a ritual to the *daiva* that has been stopped. They want to be allowed to borrow the sacred ornaments of the *daiva* to conduct that ritual. Both the human and superhuman participants of the ritual are in agreement that the request should be granted. But the women cannot be left out of this decision. The land belongs to them and the rituals of the *daiva* are carried out by them. They have to be asked for their opinion too, however unnecessary it may seem and however reluctantly it is conceded to. My mother is called before the *daiva*, as the eldest member of the female line. She is old and fragile. The *daiva* asks for her opinion. She does not agree to give the jewellery of the *daiva* which is in her safe keeping. She cannot grant permission for what is being asked. She foresees trouble if the request is granted. Acceding to this request will split the village into two warring factions. Across the years she has had to be vigilant to keep the quarrels of the different factions in the village and in her *kutumba* (the extended matrilineal family) from entering the *chavadi*. It has been difficult and sometimes these animosities have sneaked into the *chavadi* evading her watch.

She has seen too many struggles for power played out on the battlefield of the *chavadi*. She has been too often pulled into the politics of a feudal patriarchal system, where the interests of caste and gender, of tenants and landowners and landowning families are pitted against each other. She is cynical. Like Tiresias she has seen it all and can foretell the rest. She refuses permission. The *daiva* tries to persuade her, her nephews try to cajole and coax her, the *thantri* tries to use the authority of his position and caste, but she is stubborn in her refusal. She has lived too many years to be in awe of the systems by which she was framed into a matriarch. She cannot be persuaded. She tires of the persistence of the demand made on her and leaves the *chavadi* abruptly, a stubborn old woman who can stand up to the *daiva* and the male members of her family.

At a time when women were rarely educated, she and her sister had been educated beyond the limits laid for women. But when her sister had said that she wanted to become a doctor, her father who was a doctor had refused. Instead, both sisters had been allowed to pursue a post graduate course in psychology. They completed the course from Benares Hindu University through the distance education mode. And every year, for two years, they had travelled to Benares with a group of fellow students and friends to take the examinations. She did not speak much about it to us. Both sisters had been married after completing the course and they did not pursue a career. What we knew of her youth was given in bits and pieces tagged to conversations in the present. But the friends of those days had remained with her. Her release from the domesticity of marriage was through annual trips across India with these friends. She kicked off her domesticity for those days and returned recuperated. When her mother died, my mother had been reluctantly pushed to take over the charge of the old crumbling ancestral house, built by her great grandmother. Her mother had bought the house and taken the responsibility of looking after the *daivas* that dwelt in it and ruled it when the house had been auctioned during the division of the property. My grandmother had refused the advice of her husband not to buy the house and bought her ancestral home with his earnings. My grandfather had died before I was born. But when my mother spoke of him I could hear the yearning for

a man who had gone askance of the masculinity required of a feudal landlord. Returning to her ancestral house my mother was forced to take a position that she had never wanted. But she had internalized the obligation of responsibility to her mother, the *daiva*, and the family, and she had learnt the difficult art of anticipating trouble and disarming it.

Now, I am called before the *daiva* and asked for my opinion. I agree with my mother's decision. I have had to keep watch over another intruder. I have had to keep the *chavadi* out of limits to right wing political forces that have spread across the country staining its spectrum of many hued sacral spaces, that flow from one delicate shade to another, with the uniformity of orange. Under the onslaught of these forces, the many spiritual traditions of conversing with God, in my country, have been uniformized into a monolithic political instrument of hate and anger called Hindutva. Through its divisive nomenclatures of insiders and outsiders it has normalized violence and murder. I have had to stand guard against the entry of this violence into the *chavadi*.

The more I have been pushed into the *chavadi* the more I have been dismantled by its belief systems, its ritual practices, and its community of worshippers. I have entered the ritual through a somatic experience. I have experienced it as the assembling of a community of believers, manifesting that most powerful of human needs, the need to believe in a power that transcends the human which will reinstate justice and order in the world. I have tried hard to experience it as an alternative cosmology and epistemology. I have experienced it as the coming together of a village community in all its vulnerabilities and fears.

This world has opened to me a new aesthetics of quotidian life in which that which grows from the land is crafted by hand and through skills that have been handed from generation to generation, to create the most beautiful offerings for the *daiva*. It is an aesthetics that rejects that most ubiquitous, synthetically produced material in our modern world, Plastic. My responsibility has been to maintain this fragile vulnerable complex onto-epistemic world, guarding it against the onslaught of regressive political interests and economic profiteering.

The entire battalion of patriarchal powers is pitted against us. I am assured of protection by the *daiva* if I agree to be docile to the demanding voices ranged against mine and that of my mother. I would be guarded against the excesses of those powers if I were to concede to their commands sheathed in the intricately wrought protocol of appeals. My male kinsmen are angry. They cannot be forceful in their habituated ways. In the *chavadi* they have to abide by the rules of matrilineality. They ask the *daiva* to give me some time to discuss the matter with them. They hope that prolonged pressure with additional forces on their side will make me malleable. The *daiva* turns to the *thantri*. The representative of Brahmin privilege in a caste hierarchized feudal world. There is a strange irony here. The two men who occupy the extreme ends of the caste order have come together in a patriarchal collusion. The social depth that separates them, which no social ladder can connect, has disappeared in that *chavadi* and they are speaking to each other on that horizontally flattened space of ritual conversation. Like all who have assembled there the *daiva* is sure that the word of the *thantri* will prevail. The *thantri* has been deified for the occasion through the ritual offering of fruits and flowers and the obsequy of low obeisances. The *thantri* is assured in his sense of self worth as a Brahmin, and is sure that his authority will not be defied. Sitting outside the *chavadi*, facing the

daiva through the door of the *chavadi*, he has watched with distaste the ritual of asking women for consent. He is not allowed inside the *chavadi*. Whether it is because he will pollute the *chavadi* or the *chavadi* will pollute him I do not know. He is now angry. How can two women defy the battalion of male power and the authority of the *daiva*. He whose mere presence is believed to sanctify the space it envelops, how can he be defied. He speaks angrily, “Who are these women who will listen neither to the voice of men nor to the voice of the *daiva*? What kind of stubbornness is this? Do they even know what they are saying? Let them give their consent immediately.”

I stand before him, calm and indifferent. I remember Ambedkar, “There cannot be a more degrading system of social organisation than the caste system. It is the system which deadens, paralyses, and cripples the people, from helpful activity” (276). But where is that social space into which caste does not permeate? Is there a fraternity that is not shaped by the asymmetries of multiple intersecting hierarchies? In that *chavadi* and outside it, we are all placed in our particular position along the slopes of social privilege and position. And we keep shifting our position along those slopes. In the space of ritual worship the *thantri* is placed on the top of that graded slope along with the *daiva*. But on the slope of matrilineal kinship and feudal landownership, my mother and I are placed on the same level of privilege. Within academia I enter the asymmetries of knowing and not knowing. It is here that I have struggled to understand and erase, to devise ways by which to negotiate with and rearrange these graded structures of power. I am able to defy the many structures of power that traverse the *chavadi*, only because I too occupy its higher levels and exercise the prerogatives it gives me. Can the disparities of power only be disarrayed, never done away with? Does the disruption of the existing orders of power take place only within and through the exercise of that power, albeit in a subversively deviant manner?

I refuse the command of the *thantri* very politely and walk away. He is perplexed and outraged. Maybe for a moment he too feels the ladder of social hierarchy wobbling beneath him. But as he looks at the faces of the men ranged around him, he is reassured. They too are outraged. They are equals in their common rage. He rises angrily and walks away saying that he will never again attend the ritual in this *chavadi*. People come to me asking me to change my mind. I refuse. I cannot be coerced with anger or authority. The ritual has become a game of thrones. Maybe that is what it always was. An intricately choreographed dance of power. Each dancer trying to shore up his position of authority through a spectacular display of the power of that position. Women, whether in their divine or human manifestation, have been allowed into this theatre of power. They are celebrated for their fertility and they are celebrated as the links in the kinship line. In them the past and the present come together. They manage the *daivas* and they talk back to the men even as they are coerced into a difficult docility. And they struggle to defy the authority of their uncles and nephews.

Do I belong to that *Chavadi*? I who reside in multiple worlds, each skeptical of the other. What powers of decision making do I inherit from these worlds? In that ancestral house I hold the power of a future matriarch, the daughter of the present matriarch. It is a matriarchy that supports and subsists on the hierarchy of caste and landed power. Can I use that power to undermine the foundations on which it stands? I

am confused. Theory and praxis do not seem to meet. How do I make them commensurate with each other?



Works Cited

Ambekar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*. 1936. Navayana Publishing, 2014.

Menon, Nivedita. *Seeing like a Feminist*. Zubaan and Penguin Books, 2012.