

3.

The Subject of Bettale Seve (Nude Worship) at Chandragutti, South India

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The essay attempts to understand the subject at the centre of *bettale seve* (nude worship), which is a service or form of worship rendered in the nude to Goddess Renukamba at Chandragutti, Shimoga in central Karnataka. *Bettale seve* is one of the forms of *seve* performed during the annual *jathre* (festival) at Chandragutti that draws about a lakh of devotees.¹ Mostly women from the Dalit-Bahujan² castes perform *bettale seve* to fulfil a *harake* (vow) undertaken when a calamity has befallen the family (such as sickness or death), or for a wish to be fulfilled (such as a wish for a husband or a child). Empirically speaking, men and non-Dalits too perform *bettale seve*. However, we need to understand the feminisation and Dalitisation of *bettale seve* as moving beyond the empirical fact and which is embodied in the myth surrounding Renukamba and the participation in the myth by the devotees. (The essay will return to this later.) During *bettale seve*, worshippers bathe in the Varada River close to Renukamba Temple and run up to the temple, covering a distance of five kilometres. *Bettale seve* is part of various other forms of *seve* like *shirasashtanga namaskara seve* (where the devotee lies fully prostrate on the ground), *urulu seve* (where the devotee rolls around the sanctum sanctorum), and *hejje namaskara seve* (where the devotee goes around the sanctum with foot-length steps). Interestingly, *bettale seve* belongs to a set of worship forms that revolve around the motif of ‘clothing’ (*udige*) or foregrounds what you wear as central to it: *Oddheyudige seve* is a service performed wearing wet clothes, *arashinadhudige seve* is that performed applying turmeric paste over the body, *gandhadhudige seve* involves wearing sandalwood paste, neem leaves are worn during *bevinudige seve*, and flowers during *huvinudige seve*.³ *Bettale seve* or nude worship is itself another name for *huttudige seve* which implies a form of worship wearing birth clothes.

There are many myths surrounding Goddess Renukamba at Chandragutti. One revolves around Renukamba and her husband, Saint Jamadagni, who are said to have resided at Chandragutti. Renukamba fetched water every morning from the Varada River in a pot upon which Jamadagni had cast a spell: the pot would break if Renukamba looked at another man. One

¹ This estimate of devotees is taken from ‘Bettale Seve Nillisuvudu Sadhyavillave [Is It Not Possible to Stop Nude Worship?] *Taranga* vol. 4, iss. 13 (30 March, 1986), p. 29 and Linda J. Epp, ‘Dalit Struggle, Nude Worship and the “Chandragutti” Incident’, in Sharmila Rege, ed., *Sociology of Gender: The Challenge of Feminist Sociological Knowledge* (New Delhi: Sage, 2003), p. 406.

² Dalit-Bahujan is a political identity deployed by the lower castes in their articulations of rights and justice. ‘Dalit’ literally means ‘the oppressed’ and ‘Bahujan’, ‘the majority’. The term Dalit-Bahujan draws attention to the common condition of oppression of the vast majority of the lower castes rather than to the divisions of sub-castes within. It includes groups categorised under ‘scheduled castes’ (SCs) and ‘scheduled tribes’ (STs) as well as ‘other backward castes’ (OBCs).

³ ‘Bettale Seve Nillisuvudu Sadhyavillave’, *Taranga*, p. 29.

day when Renukamba is at the river, she is charmed by a *gandharva* (a male nature spirit) passing by and the pot breaks. Seeing this, Jamadagni becomes furious and asks their son Parashurama to cut off Renukamba's head. In accordance with his father's wishes, Parashurama chases his mother. As Renukamba runs, her clothes fall away and she becomes completely nude. She then takes shelter in a cave nearby where she finds a Shiva *linga* (an image through which Lord Shiva is worshipped). She embraces the *linga* and becomes one with it. Since Renukamba crouches while praying for protection, the image that is worshipped at Chandragutti is one resembling a crouching Renukamba, or Renukamba's backside and not her face. Another myth revolves around the relationship between Renukamba and her woman servant Mathangi. Renukamba's son Parashurama asks Mathangi's son, the valiant Beerappa, to protect his mother before he goes to do battle with the *Kshatriyas* (the ruling warrior caste). However, Beerappa turns lustful and tries to molest Renukamba. Mathangi then rescues Renukamba and offers her clothes in protection. The myth of Mathangi as protector is integral to the *bettale seve* at Chandragutti. After the devotees bathe in the Varada River, they go to Mathangi's temple, which is close to Renukamba's, where they are given new clothes. This symbolises the giving of new life to the worshippers.⁴ There are several variations of the above myths that the devotees narrate.

The *bettale seve* at Chandragutti became subject to huge debate and controversy in 1986 when Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (Organisation for Dalit Struggle, hereafter DSS), some women's groups (Manini and Mahila Samskrutika Sanghatane) and non-governmental organisations protested against this *seve*. DSS claimed that Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a right-wing Hindu organisation, had provided transport for people to come from different villages to watch and perform the *seve*.⁵ Social activists tried to stop the *seve* at the Varada River by preventing women from walking nude and asking them to put on clothes. The worshippers became violent and beat up some of the social workers; cameras were broken and policewomen were stripped. This incident was extensively covered by both the English and Kannada media, and subsequently by scholars.⁶ The paper examines this discourse and the subject produced in it and proposes another reading of the *bettale seve* subject. I compare the *bettale seve* discourse with the discourse on *sati*⁷ (widow burning/widow sacrifice) in the colonial period. Though these are two different events with almost a century spanning between them, there seem to be uncanny similarities between the discourses surrounding them.

⁴ Ibid., p. 32; U. R. Ananthamurthy, *Bettale Puje Yake Kudadhu?* [Why Not Nude Worship?] (Heggodu: Akshara Prakashana, 1996), pp. 30-31.

⁵ DSS had been trying to stop *bettale seve* since 1984 but failed. In 1986, they mobilised support against the practice among other social organisations and the media.

⁶ I look at the Kannada magazines *Varapatrike*, *Taranga*, *Suddi Sangati*, and *Sudra*, the last two specially addressing concerns of Dalits and women.

⁷ I draw on Lata Mani's analysis of the *sati* debate in her remarkable essay 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on *Sati* in Colonial India', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993).

Anti-Bettale Seve Discourse

The Modernising State: Creating the Citizen-Subject

Renukamba Temple is said to have been built by the Chalukya and Vijayanagara kings who ruled the region around Chandragutti in the fourteenth century. There is mention of *bettale seve* as a form of worship being around for centuries before the colonial state removed it from the list of services in 1928.⁸ However, the practice continued till 1986 when the DSS and other social activists called for a ban on it. The protests by the activists, and the subsequent attack on the activists and police, combined with widespread media focus brought pressure on the state to pass a prohibitory order under section 35 of the Karnataka Police Act. Under the section, which grants the state the ‘power to prohibit certain acts for prevention of disorder’, the state disallowed any public congregation within a five-kilometre radius of the temple.⁹

A police van present at the site continually called out over a microphone, ‘*Bettale seve* is a crime in the eyes of the law’¹⁰ thus sexualising, moralising, and criminalising the practice at a single stroke. Police were deployed to prevent women from carrying out *bettale seve*. In 1989, for every thousand devotees, one and a half thousand police and home guards were stationed at Chandragutti. In Kirtana Kumar’s film *Guhya*, policewomen are shown threatening a young girl into wearing clothes failing which they will file a case against her and put her in jail. The woman’s group Mahila Samskrutika Sanghatane demanded that the state bring about ‘strict measures to check nude worship and raise secular and democratic values in the country’.¹¹ The demand on the state was to complete the project of modernising the population through direct state intervention, especially in the context of a population and culture that were deterrents to modernisation.¹² Part of the modernising project was the post-colonial state’s mandate to make the subject a ‘citizen’ that included, if required, making recalcitrant subjects like the *bettale seve* worshippers *fit* to occupy the space of the citizen by making them secular-rational subjects. The constant refrain of the state was to reform the devotees who were blinded by superstition and that they be made to see reason.

⁸ Linda J. Epp, ‘Dalit Struggle, Nude Worship and the “Chandragutti” Incident’, p. 395; ‘Himse, Novu Akrandanagala Naduve Chandragutti Gheelittaga’ [When Chandragutti Screamed amidst Violence, Pain, and Tears], *Varapatrike* vol. 3, iss. 12 (1986), p. 24.

⁹ ‘Nude Worship banned’, *The Hindu*, 5 March, 2003, [<http://hindu.com/2003/03/05/stories/2003030501410400.htm>].

¹⁰ Manini, ‘Gutyavvana Meerisida Jogathiyaru’, *Suddi Sangati* (6 April, 1986), p. 14; ‘Himse, Novu Akrandanagala Naduve Chandragutti Gheelittaga’, *Varapatrike*, p. 21.

¹¹ *Deccan Herald*, 17 March, 1992.

¹² The state’s lament of a population that is not modern and of having to intervene to bring about modernisation is not new. Take the instance of the statement made by Dewan Kantharaj Urs in his concluding speech at the Mysore (now a part of Karnataka, South India) Representative Assembly session in 1921 when the bill for the extension of franchise for women was voted against: ‘This is perhaps to be expected in view of the inherent conservatism of the representatives of the rural population’. The Dewan hoped that public opinion would one day coincide with the will of the state to bring about a modern Mysore (Proceedings of the Mysore Representative Assembly, ‘Local Self-Government’, Dasara Session (October 1921), p. 214).

Social Reform

The reformist discourse that characterised positions against *bettale seve* was carried out within the tradition-versus-modernity frame. The state, the media, and social activists came together on this reformist agenda of eradicating a practice that was seen as ‘a shame and a black spot on civilisation’. The state unit of the women’s group Mahila Samskrutika Sanghatane demanded that ‘the leaders of the community’ put an end to ‘this most primitive practice’.¹³ The reformist discourse problematically uses a single measure of the modern and civilised to calibrate all practices and works within a linear, evolutionary model that sees all history as moving towards a hegemonic modern ideal. In this discourse, *bettale seve* was an inhuman and backward practice from which the women needed to be uplifted.

The anti-*bettale seve* discourse shares similarities with the anti-*sati* discourse of the colonial period. In both cases, the practices were decried as superstitious and backward using words like ‘pre-modern’, ‘blind’, and ‘shameful’. If in the *sati* debate abolition of *sati* by the colonial state and the indigenous reformers was a desire to modernise, here, *bettale seve* was seen as an aberration in a civilised and modern world. Analyses of both phenomena follow similar paths, especially in the textualisation of the practice, in proposing explanatory theories, and in foregrounding the question of agency.

Textualisation of the Practice

Like in the case of *sati*, state interventions in *bettale seve* sought either scriptural sanction or scriptural prohibition of the practice. In addition, there were attempts to historicise the practice in scholarly journals. For instance, Pa. Vem. Acharya records the prohibition of *bettale seve* during Nizam’s rule (mid-eighteenth century) in Hyderabad and the resumption of the practice after Hyderabad became a part of the Indian Union.¹⁴ Commentators tried to establish the sanctioning of prohibition within Indian traditions in response to critics calling for prohibition as derived from ‘Western rationalist thought’. For example, articles in the Kannada quarterlies *Sudra* and *Varapatrike* argued that critiques of superstition can be found in the *vachanas* and that critiques of *bettale seve* can be found in compositions by Purandaradasa (1484-1564) and Kanakadasa (1509-1609).¹⁵

Explanatory Theories

The media, psychologists, and sociologists put forward explanatory theories of *bettale seve*

¹³ *Deccan Herald*, 17 March, 1992.

¹⁴ Pa. Vem. Acharya, ‘Bettale: Mantradalli, Maatadalli, Bhaktiyalli’ [Nudity: In Chant, Magic, and Devotion], *Rujuvatu*, January-March, 1987, p. 59.

¹⁵ G. Rajashekar ‘Bettale Seve mathu Dalita Sangharsha Samiti’ [Nude Worship and Organisation for Dalit Struggle], *Sudra*, May 1987, p. 59-61; ‘Himse, Novu Akrandanagala Naduve Chandragutti Gheelittaga’, *Varapatrike*, p. 22.

around ‘hidden meanings’ and ‘mental states’ of the devotees, much like in the colonial and anthropological writings around *sati*. The practice was seen as resulting from a psychological disorder that affected individuals with a weak mind or body.¹⁶ A well-known psychologist saw it as ‘mass hysteria’ that resulted from the sexual repression of the women devotees.¹⁷ Another argument focused on women gaining pleasure through exhibitionism in conditions otherwise of sexual repression.¹⁸ Reports emphasised the need for psychologists and sociologists to prepare questionnaires that would ‘reveal the real reason hidden behind the practice’.¹⁹ Questions pertained to the communities that practiced *bettale seve*, their socio-economic conditions, and literacy levels.

The Question of Agency

Both the *sati* and *bettale seve* subject were seen as inebriated, literally through liquor and metaphorically in superstition. Lata Mani argues that the colonial authorities demarcated practices into ‘religious’ and ‘material’ and perceived ‘religious’ practices as being performed in passive obedience and never consciously. Within this framework, the *sati* subject is given no agency.²⁰ In a similar fashion, reports described the *bettale seve* worshipper as either ‘coerced’ or ‘inebriated’. An article brought out by the woman’s group Manini, which spoke about tradition as oppressive to women, pointed to how some women who were coerced into performing *bettale seve* were grateful to the activists when the latter gave them clothes.²¹ The essay will return to the question of coercion later, but what is troubling is that within the framing of the *bettale seve* performer-as-victim, there is an unwillingness to acknowledge that *bettale seve* can be practiced without coercion.

If the absence of agency was emphasised in arguments about coercion and inebriation, we find the foregrounding of the woman’s agency in the reverse argument where *bettale seve* is seen as questioning patriarchy. Here, the woman devotee is seen as one who is unable to directly rebel against her husband or his parents who abuse her; however, when she performs *bettale seve*, she is temporarily sacralised and is seen as being able to act out her wishes. One of the preparatory customs referred to is that of the woman having *jadés* (knotted hair). In this state, the woman (her hair/body) is seen as being possessed by the Devi and is treated with reverence.²² The difficulty with the agency question, as exemplified in the contradictory arguments around *bettale seve*, is that it cannot be resolved one way or the other. More importantly, in itself, it does not exhaust the theorising of a phenomenon.

¹⁶ ‘Bettale Seve Nillisivudu Sadhyavillave’, *Taranga*, p. 32.

¹⁷ See also a letter to the editor, ‘A Society without Sexual Freedom’, *Suddi Sangati*, 27 April, 1986, p. 4.

¹⁸ ‘Bettale Seve Nillisivudu Sadhyavillave’, *Taranga*, p. 32.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32 and p. 34.

²⁰ Lata Mani, ‘Contentious Traditions’, p. 92.

²¹ Manini, ‘Gutyavvana Meerisida Jogathiyaru’, p. 14.

²² ‘Bettale Seve Nillisivudu Sadhyavillave’, *Taranga*, p. 32

Pro-Bettale Seve Discourse

The pro-*bettale seve* discourse, as with the pro-*sati* discourse, lends greater weight to tradition as customary practice. As Lata Mani points out, there is a recognition here of the importance of ‘usage’ as much as ‘precept’.²³ Many of the pro-*bettale seve* arguments were posited within a tradition-versus-modernity frame, which had characterised the anti-*bettale seve* discourse, too, but here, tradition was seen as better than modernity. One of the representatives of this position was writer and intellectual U. R. Ananthamurthy who sees tradition as constituted by ‘experience’, ‘emotion’, and ‘instinct’, and which is a ‘truer’ part of oneself, whereas modernity is constituted by ‘theory’, ‘reason’, and even ‘thought’, and which is Western and hence alien.²⁴ In an interesting section, Ananthamurthy narrates the ‘truth’ about Renukamba: ‘Only in a fit of emotion, when a young poet asks me if Renuka is true, I pick up courage and say “yes”. At that time, I’m alone with him. In his eyes filled with emotion, it is possible for me to emotionally leap into my other mental state.’ Ananthamurthy poses this as an ‘emotional’ truth, acknowledged by his litterateur friends but denied as soon as they rationalise the *bettale seve* issue.²⁵ Instead of posing the ‘truth’ about Renuka as an emotional truth that is opposed to a reasoned truth, the truth perhaps lies in the Renukamba myth being a part of the devotees lived experience and in which they participate.

Another pro-*bettale seve* position is represented in Kirtana Kumar’s film *Guhya* that explores female sexuality in India. Though the *bettale seve* she discusses is the one performed to Goddess Yellamma at Saundatti, North Karnataka, Kumar’s position would hold for the Chandragutti ritual, too. *Guhya*’s intent is to ‘celebrate the alternative traditions’ of female sexuality symbolised in practices like *bettale seve*. It finds the ‘submerged meaning’ of *bettale seve* as embodying ‘the female principle’ that is ‘powerful and life-affirming’. The state’s ban on *bettale seve* is seen as modernity destroying tradition, where ‘modernity has come to mean homogeneity’ and where ‘the complex nature of female sexuality is offered up to the altar of development and nationhood’. Kirtana Kumar’s feminist position celebrates female sexuality in response to a dominant feminist discourse of sexuality that focuses on sexual violence against women. However, the main problem with the film is the framing of cultural practices like *bettale seve* as an expression of female sexuality. It seems to fit various practices—rituals like *bhagawati puja* (*puja* to the Goddess Parvathi), *yoni puja* (*yoni* and *bhaga* literally meaning ‘vulva’), and conversations with sex workers—into a pre-determined frame of victimisation/celebration of female sexuality, without questioning the frame itself. The question is how much does *bettale seve* have to do with ‘sexuality’?

²³ Lata Mani, ‘Contentious Traditions’, p. 107.

²⁴ U. R. Ananthamurthy, *Bettale Puje Yake Kudadhu?*, pp. 38-39.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

Bettale Seve as Paddhati (Ritual)

If the essay till now has questioned the discourse around *bettale seve*, it now turns to understanding the practice itself. If Lata Mani in her essay is interested in the discourse of *sati* and not in its meaning for the *sati* subject, we need, importantly, to take the latter into account, not to privilege it more but to provide crucial clues to understanding the subject at the centre of the discourse. The essay puts forward some initial thoughts in this direction. News reports suggest that devotees strongly feel that they would perform *bettale seve* at whatever cost:

*Despite efforts, this paddhati (ritual) has not stopped. The numbers have not come down. There will not be a decrease in the number of people performing the seve despite all efforts. . . . It is foolish to believe that words or the law can stop us*²⁶

Those who performed the *seve* narrated stories of how people who tried to prevent them were stung by honeybees or became impotent or spat blood and died.²⁷ After 1985-86 though, there has been a stringent ban on *bettale seve* and police outnumber the devotees to ensure that *bettale seve* is not performed. However, one does not know. One of the devotees said, 'Oh! These people will stop us today; [they] will go tomorrow. People will come on the day of the full moon and will certainly perform [*bettale seve*]. Will the Goddess' *seve* stop?'²⁸

News articles that criticise the practice however admit that people turn up in large numbers despite any support or encouragement by the temple or anyone else.²⁹ Devotees themselves are said to experience no 'shame' in being naked. The devotees say, 'Those who see, let them see; the Goddess will punish them.' The article goes on to say:

*There is an understanding, a knowledge that you shouldn't look at the devotees with a 'bad eye'. And it is true that the thousands who come from nearby places do not look at them in such a manner; they move aside and pay obeisance to the worshippers. These do not number a hundred but thousands.*³⁰

In *Guhya* when the policewomen prevent Basamma from doing *bettale seve* because it is shameful and cut off her *jadés*, she says, 'I don't understand these ways! You brought me here, made me sign a paper, and you did this to me'.³¹ There were complaints by 'Harijans' from neighbouring villages and towns that the government was unjust in banning this 'ancient practice without showing them an alternative'.³² How do we understand *bettale seve*? How do we make

²⁶ 'Bettale Seve Nillisuvudu Sadhyavillave', *Taranga*, p. 29.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

²⁸ Himse, Novu Akrandanagala Naduve Chandragutti Gheelittaga', *Varapatrike*, p. 22.

²⁹ 'Bettale Seve Nillisuvudu Sadhyavillave', *Taranga*, p. 29.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32

³¹ Kirtana Kumar, director, *Guhya*, 1999.

³² *Deccan Herald*, 17 March, 1992.

sense of the stories that the devotees narrate? If we understand *bettale seve* as a practice-knowledge which is a response to a crisis or calamity, the knowledge given by the state and other organisations can be seen as merely restraining and not showing an alternative. Then again, the Renukamba *jathre* itself along with other forms of worship continue.

More important, *bettale seve* has to be understood as *paddathi* (ritual) that does not have an underlying explanation, as the media, psychologists, and sociologists sought. Further, 'nudity' is central to this ritual, as with other ritual contexts, not in terms of 'sexuality' but in terms of the form of the ritual. In rituals like the *yoni puja* and *bhagawati puja* that the film *Guhya* talks about and that involves the *yoni* (vulva), the *yoni* more than 'sexuality' or possessing any intrinsic meaning seems to be structured within a ritual which is accompanied by elaborate procedures of dos and don'ts. In the case of *bettale seve*, *bettale*, or nudity, refers to a particular code of conduct, a form of obeisance to the Goddess. As the essay states at the beginning, *bettale seve* or *huttudige seve* is a service performed in your birth clothes and is part of a repertoire of *seves* that revolve around the motif of 'clothing' or what the devotees wear. It has no link to 'shame' or 'sexuality' and hence has no 'moral' value attached to it.

However, some of the troubling questions that remain are those not related to moral issues of shame or reformist concerns of the practice as superstitious and uncivilised but those involving the history within which the practice and the *bettale seve* subject is caught. Dalit writer Devanuru Mahadeva acknowledges that the practice itself might not be wrong or oppressive, unlike *sati* where women burn or even the *bettale seve* at Saudatti, where *devadasis*,³³ who constitute the majority of the worshippers, are said to be taken to Mumbai for prostitution. However, today it is degrading to lower-caste women because of onlookers who merely attend the *jathre* to watch them nude or photograph them and subsequently sell the photographs.³⁴ Mahadeva is pointing to a voyeuristic gaze that is different from that of the people who conventionally surrounded the worshippers. Though the devotees themselves, as stated above, see people who watch with a 'bad eye' as being punished, does a question arise in the context of a social code that has historically allowed upper-caste men legitimate access to the Dalit woman's body, covering the upper-caste woman in respectable clothing while exposing the Dalit woman³⁵ and stereotyping her as sexually available? On the one hand, pro-*bettale seve* positions have asked why 'nudity' within mainstream sects like Digambara is accepted but not that within marginal practices like *bettale seve*. On the other hand, the question also concerns the histories within which 'nudity' has been implicated for different communities.

Another question is that of the availability of a vocabulary to talk about issues such as the

³³ *Devadasis*, literally meaning 'servants of God', were temple dancers who also served as ritual prostitutes, largely in South India. They were part of social and religious life till the ban on the *devadasi* system in the early twentieth century.

³⁴ U. R. Ananthamurthy, *Bettale Puje Yake Kudadhu?*, p. 38.

³⁵ In the case of the mid-nineteenth-century breast-cloth movement in Travancore, Kerala, led by Christian missionaries, Chanar (low-caste) women protested against the prohibition of covering the upper part of the body with cloth. The movement articulated this custom of non-Brahmin men and women as signifying their lower status in society.

‘coercion’ of women within ritual spaces such as *bettale seve* that is not overlaid with the discourse of reform/modernity and its understandings of violence and agency. What of the larger patriarchal-ideological structure that these women inhabit? It is perhaps not so much the inability of the subaltern to speak³⁶ as much as the limit of the language of theory and politics to articulate her standpoint.

In this context, it might be useful to re-turn to the myth of Renukamba that underpins and is played out during *bettale seve*. The myth is a part of a repertoire of myths that revolve around the sacred-feminine. However, what is unique in the Renukamba myth is an inversion of the high myth that revolves around Jamadagni-Renukamba-Parashurama where Parashurama successfully beheads Renukamba in accordance with his father Jamadagni’s wishes. The Renukamba myth inverts the story with Renukamba escaping from Parashurama and finding refuge within Shiva’s cave. Linda Epp in her essay draws attention to this inversion as a ‘ritual reversal’ that is at stake at Chandragutti and which makes it possible for the Dalit woman to question notions of modesty, shame, and rationality.³⁷ The questioning however should not be seen as a willed protest by the empirical Dalit woman but as structured within the myth in which the women participate. As mentioned at the beginning, the image of the Goddess at Chandragutti is not of her face but of her backside. This can be seen as a lowering of Renukamba’s divinity and a lowly form of worship, as one Dalit activist implied in his remark (though said in jest), ‘How has Renukamba come so low, we do not know... If only they would worship Renuka’s face, and not her buttocks’.³⁸ Instead, this can be read as precisely the reversal of the lowly into the sacred. The two reversals accomplished in the Renukamba myth combinedly make it a Dalit-feminine myth.

It is not without significance that in one version of the Renukamba myth it is the woman servant Mathangi who is the protector and it is in her temple that the devotees are given clothes, that is, the gift of rebirth. Further, it is as though the gift of rebirth is given to the ‘Dalit woman’ as the chosen subject. It is in this sense that we need to understand the feminisation and Dalitisation of *bettale seve* rather than in any empirical sense. The act of entering the temple *bettale* (in the nude, in birth clothing) represents at once the ultimate form of ‘surrender’ or even ‘death’ of the subject³⁹ just as it is her revival and rebirth. This form of submission-revival is a different way in which the subject can be thought of rather than through positing either her agency or its absence. Thus, what needs to be explored is the possibility of articulating a world-view and a politics that takes the myth as its basis. The myth here should not be seen merely as a story or a literary narrative but as a body of knowledge-practice that provides an alternate basis from which we can articulate the Dalit-woman’s standpoint.

³⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1988). In the essay, Spivak questions the privileging of the subaltern’s speech as ‘the truth’. She suggests that the ideological structures within which the subaltern is situated make accessing the truth difficult if not impossible.

³⁷ Linda J. Epp, ‘Dalit Struggle, Nude Worship and the “Chandragutti” Incident’, p. 406.

³⁸ Quoted in ‘Dalit Struggle’, p. 399.

³⁹ See Pa. Vem. Acharya, ‘Bettale: Mantradalli, Maatadalli, Bhaktiyalli’, for a discussion of nudity as ‘surrender’.