

Chapter One

Introduction

Singing Place and Situating Deities in the Kannada Folksong *Chamundi of the Hill*

Merit comes to all who have told the story of Chamundi and to all who have heard her story. Dharma should be with us.

—“Dharma Should Be With Us,” *Chamundi of the Hill*

The focus of this book is the Kannada ballad *Chamundi of the Hill* (Kannada: *Bettada Chamundi*), a collection of songs that tells the stories of the gods and goddesses of the southern portion of the South Indian state of Karnataka. The ballad narrates the romantic relationship between the goddess Chamundi and her consort, Nanjunda, with Chamundi’s younger sister Uttanahalli acting as their “go-between.” While the story is about gods and goddesses, the lives of the deities reflect everyday life in southern Karnataka. The deities are embedded within the same social worlds in which their devotees live, work, love, and worship. The original date of this group of songs is unknown, and it is sung in its many variants throughout the region, mostly by castes that are classified as agriculturalists. The version that provides the content for this book can be dated to the late 19th or early 20th centuries and is traditionally performed outside of temples and at important village festivals throughout southern Karnataka by Kamsales, traditional performers from the Devaragudda subcaste of the Kuruba caste. The

ballad, therefore, is situated within and preserves their specific local system of knowledge. By delving into the world of *Chamundi of the Hill*, we can begin to better understand how the physical environment is transformed through people's relationship with it and how this relationship helps build meaning for the communities that call it home.

The narratives of the ballad are quite novel within the broader genre of Indian mythology as they focus not only on three deities but the identities of those deities are tied to specific places and their local temples: Chamundi is the city deity of Mysore, her consort Nanjunda is the city deity of nearby Nanjangudu, and Uttanahalli is the goddess of Uttanahalli, whose name literally means the "in-between village." Consequently, through the performance of these songs, the balladeers sing the goddesses and gods into the region, situating the deities within a local religious and social landscape and creating a local sacred history or *sthalapurana* of the region. The ballad *Chamundi of the Hill* is not only a mythology of the place, but it places myth, actively transforming southern Karnataka into a land where gods and goddesses live and remapping the region into a sacred geography where temples, deities, villages, and cities are connected through networks of devotion and pilgrimage.

The Story of Chamundi

In order for us to understand the significance of the narrative, it is first important that we introduce the ballad itself. This section is meant to serve this purpose. It begins with a brief introduction to the style and structure of the ballad before summarizing its central plot. This summary is intentionally laconic since the narrative is discussed in greater detail in the chapters of this book and the full translation of the story is provided in the final chapter.

The Form and Style of *Chamundi of the Hill*

The form and style of the songs in *Chamundi of the Hill* reflects its broad applicability and appeal. The ballad is comprised of ten songs, two frame hymns and eight narrative songs. The two hymns provide the anchors for the narrative, directly addressing the goddess Chamundi. The opening hymn asks the goddess for a boon or wish, and

the concluding hymn restates the wish and describes the merits of singing and listening to the story contained in the ballad. The interior narrative songs tell the story about the goddess's establishment in Mysore and how her romance with Nanjunda unfolded.

Chamundi of the Hill has been described as a "mythic ballad" and a work of "natural poetry" (Kannada: *naisargika kavya*), both of which help us to understand its form and function.¹ These folksongs easily fall into the layperson's definition of "myth" because they are songs about deities or what some have called "casually effective divine personalities."² However, as a mythic ballad, *Chamundi of the Hill* does so much more than just tell a story about gods, goddesses, and demons. It is a story "about something significant;" that is, its effectiveness lies in its ability to make sense of the complex modern physical and social worlds of southern Karnataka through the subjectivity of their divine protagonists.³ The worlds that it creates with its stories about the goddess and her lover reflect the same world in which its performers and audiences live. By singing the goddess into the places that they all live, work, play, and worship, the balladeers ground the region's institutions (and their critique of these institutions) within a worldview of broader significance that is rooted in the divine past but uniquely situated in the local present.⁴

The composition of *Chamundi of the Hill* is a simple narration, "natural poetry," that is primarily prose with the occasional insertion of verse, a style that in Kannada is called *janapada champu*, a folk version of the traditional Indian literary genre of *champu* that consists of mixed prose and verse. The prose portions occupy a space somewhere between prose and poetry, the form of which has been compared by some Kannadiga scholars to the famous *vachanas* or spoken word poems of the Shaiva Sharana saints (c. 12th–13th centuries CE) of medieval Karnataka.⁵ The lines of the songs do not rhyme, nor do they adhere to traditional Indian rules of poetic meter, neither in length (*jati*) nor in sequences (*vritta*) of syllables. Instead, the lyrics of *Chamundi of the Hill* are sung to a tune that mixes several *ragas* (melodies), a style known as *ragamalika* or "garland of melodies" in Carnatic music. Within the melodies, there is a great deal of space for improvisation, and performers do not strictly adhere to traditional melodies, nor can it be said that there is a standard tune for the songs.⁶

While the narrative certainly evokes emotions of devotion (*bhakti*) within Chamundi's devotees, I would not classify *Chamundi of the Hill*

only as a collection of devotional songs or as *bhakti* poetry.⁷ Instead, the ballad also serves as a *mahatmya* (glorification text) of the goddess Chamundi and a *sthalapurana* (local sacred history) of the region with a narrative that functions like any Sanskrit or vernacular Purana (ancient mythic story) upholding a religious and ideological position.⁸ To put it another way, *Chamundi of the Hill*, like all Puranas, operates within what Madeleine Biardeau has called “the universe of *bhakti*.”⁹ The songs and their lyrics assume a theological position, in this case devotion and ritual practice to the goddesses Chamundi and Uttanahalli, and, to a lesser extent in this collection of songs, Nanjunda. That said, within the ballad, there are instances in which the performers and certain characters express themselves in forms that are very closely aligned with *bhakti* devotional songs (e.g., “Mother, Grant Me a Wish” or Uttanahalli’s words to Nanjunda in the song “Have You Lost Interest in Your Wife?”). Therefore, while *Chamundi of the Hill* might not be classified as a devotional ballad, devotion to these deities and the networks that support that devotion is taken for granted within its lyrics.

Summary of *Chamundi of the Hill*’s Narrative

The story begins on top of Chamundi Hill outside of the city of Mysore, as the goddess Chamundi fights the buffalo demon Mahisha. After slaying the mighty demon, Mahisha’s brother, Aisu, appears and challenges the goddess. Chamundi quickly becomes overwhelmed fighting Aisu because of his supernatural power that produces demons from his blood; however, as she wipes the sweat from her brow and slings it to the ground, her sister, Uttanahalli, is born from Chamundi’s perspiration. Together they are able to defeat the demon foe, confirming Chamundi’s place on the hill as the protector of Mysore and establishing the goddess Uttanahalli in the village of Uttanahalli at the base of her hill.

After the battle, Chamundi goes to the confluence of the Kapini and Kaveri Rivers to bathe, and, as luck would have it, Nanjunda, a local form of Shiva, had also come to the rivers to worship. Spotting the lovely young goddess, the deity Nanjunda approaches her. After some negotiation, Nanjunda, despite already having two wives, convinces Chamundi to join him in a love marriage, which they consummate there on the riverbank. For several weeks after their marriage, Nanjunda and Chamundi enjoy their honeymoon in Chamundi’s temple on Chamundi Hill. As the festival season approaches, Nanjunda has

to take leave of Chamundi to attend to the needs of his devotees; he forgets about Chamundi and returns home to Nanjangudu and his two other wives, Deviri and Somaji.

Missing her husband and feeling like he had tricked her into a fleeting romantic tryst, Chamundi calls upon her sister, Uttanahalli, to go to the homeland of Nanjunda and his wives and bring her husband back to Chamundi Hill. In order to convince Uttanahalli to go on this seeming suicide mission, Chamundi describes a horrific dream wherein bloodthirsty goddesses attacked Mysore, the Sharana poet Channabasava married a tribal woman and performed a ritual animal slaughter, and her husband's wives mourned, having become widows. Uttanahalli is convinced and goes to fetch Nanjunda for her sister.

In the middle of the night, Nanjunda hears Uttanahalli's calls to return to Chamundi. He is eager to return but has to manage to free himself from his wives with whom he is sharing a bed. After tricking his wives by using a log in his stead, Nanjunda goes to join his new lover. After borrowing money from his brother-in-law Kalinga, a local serpent deity, and a brief run-in with Nandi, his other brother-in-law, Nanjunda reaches Chamundi, who immediately welcomes him back into her bed. As the couple lies in postcoital bliss, Deviri and Somaji arrive at Chamundi's temple and catch Nanjunda red-handed. As Deviri hurls insults at Chamundi, Nanjunda sneaks back home hoping to avoid a fight; however, when his elder co-wives returned home, Deviri stripped him naked and kicked him out of their home.

Naked and homeless, Nanjunda devises a plan to not only get Deviri and Somaji to accept Chamundi as their younger co-wife but to beg her to join their union. First, Nanjunda goes to the divine abode of Brahma and instructs him to go the Nanjangudu to give Deviri and Somaji a false *shastra* or incantation that is made entirely of gibberish. Next, Nanjunda goes to Chamundi and tells her to take the form of a fortune-teller and to go by his home claiming to have the power to use any *shastra* to raise the dead. Finally, he goes home and pretends to be dead. Brahma comes by shortly thereafter and gives Deviri and Somaji the false incantation. Not long after, the co-wives hear Chamundi in the guise of the fortune-teller on the streets proclaiming her gift of necromancy and run to inquire about her services. The fortune-teller, however, explains that the incantation will not work because they have cursed the goddess Chamundi.

Immediately, Deviri and Somaji repent of their maltreatment of Chamundi and resolve that she must be their co-wife and that

Nanjunda can live with her six months out of the year. With that, Chamundi-as-fortune-teller leaves, and Nanjunda opens his eyes. Deviri and Somaji give Nanjunda their jewels and instruct him to give them to Chamundi. Then, all three deities go to Chamundi Hill and convince Chamundi to join their family, splitting time between Chamundi Hill and Nanjangudu.

Place and Locality in *Chamundi of the Hill*

Place-Making and Locality Production

As can be seen even within this short summary of the story of *Chamundi of the Hill*, its events, themes, and deities are intimately tied to specific sites of the region of southern Karnataka, especially Mysore, Uttanahalli, and Nanjangudu. This ballad does the work of both making place and producing locality for the community that performs these songs and the common folk who are its usual and intended audience. It is this commitment to place-making and locality that ties this book together. When I say that the songs make place and produce locality, I am using both terms in a technical and theoretical sense. By “place,” I refer not to physical environments but the result of when these environments have been transformed through people’s “perception, attitude, value, and world view.”¹⁰ Place is space that has been overlaid with meaning. Place, therefore, is not naturally occurring, but it is made by and reflected through those whose identities are linked to that particular environment.¹¹ Locality, on the other hand, is more relational and more agentive.¹² Locality is an expression of a community’s perception of place that can be part of a broader negotiation of multiple and, perhaps, competing perspectives on one particular space.¹³ Therefore, while place is made and perpetuated within local communities and their social systems and rituals, locality is produced and exhibited through “performance, representation, and action.”¹⁴ To put it another way, place builds the community; locality is the demarcation of its boundaries.

The stories of *Chamundi of the Hill* that are discussed in this book are primarily intended for an internal audience as they are typically sung by the Kamsale performers outside of temples (but not as part of any sanctioned ritual and not by another of the brahmin priests) and for functions within the community Devaragudda and Kuruba

communities.¹⁵ They are reflective of the society in which they were created and in which they continue to be performed. They assume shared values and culture, including social organization, attire, food, beliefs, and religious practices. The songs come alive as the deities are placed within this world view. Chamundi, Uttanahalli, and Nanjunda become members of the community. They are part of the same kinship groups. They follow the same customs. They dress the same. They eat the same foods, have the same arguments, and share the same anxieties. The deities are not abstracted but are intimately connected to specific sites throughout the region. The deities live amongst the people. They walk the same roads, go to the same festivals, and visit the same temples. The important devotional and pilgrimage sites aren't portrayed as sites of royalty or brahminical authority. Instead, they are reinterpreted as sites of the folk (see below for further discussion about this term), as they are enlivened by their divine residents who uphold the same values as the community of performers. By situating their deities within the landscape, *Chamundi of the Hill* situates the community there. It makes the spaces and sites of the Mysore region meaningful to the community and the community meaningful to the space. From the very first song, *Chamundi of the Hill* is not only singing the goddess into place, but it is also placing the folk community at the heart of the region, making it their place.

Along with making the space meaningful for its own community, *Chamundi of the Hill* also does the work of negotiating the sacred spaces of the region and promoting their interpretation of its social worlds. This is particularly clear in the case of Chamundi and her temple on Chamundi Hill. The Chamundeshwari temple is now overseen and officiated by a brahmin priest whose lineage originated outside the region in what is now the modern state of Tamil Nadu. The brahminical portrayal of the goddess of the temple aligns with other elite interpretations as Chamundi is equated to the universal Goddess, who manifests throughout India in different temples. As even the title of the ballad indicates, *Chamundi of the Hill* presents the goddess as a singular local deity that resides on Chamundi Hill and who can live at only one place at a time. While at first these positions seem irreconcilable, the ballad acknowledges its own positionality and that of the elite traditions and uses the story as an occasion to carve out space for a folk locality within the site. For the folk raconteurs, this negotiation of the space is not about exclusivity, and they present Chamundi Hill and Chamundi herself as capable of supporting both

the folk tradition and the elite traditions. This theme of plurality and inclusivity in religious and ritual practice is carried throughout the entire ballad as it uses the relationships of the deities as an opportunity to critique normative social hierarchies, particularly associated with caste and ritual practice, narratively demonstrating that they are parallel traditions that ought to coexist without discrimination.

As a negotiation of place and locality, the stories and songs of *Chamundi of the Hill* constructs a network of peoples, gods, goddesses, and sites and binds them all together into a larger place or region made up of smaller connected places.¹⁶ At its heart, the tale told in the songs is about the lives of important regional deities and the negotiation of their identities as members of different elite and nonelite communities. Therefore, it is necessary at this point to briefly introduce the places and their deities about whose tradition many readers will undoubtedly be unfamiliar.

Deities of *Chamundi of the Hill* and Their Places

CHAMUNDI AND MYSORE

In many parts of India, Chamundi, or Chamunda as she is more often called, is a fierce hag-like goddess, emaciated and fond of blood rituals. In Mysore, however, Chamundi is a regal goddess who rides solo atop her lion vehicle following the iconographic conventions of the Pan-Indian goddess Durga in popular devotional art (figure 1.1). She is described as “sweet” and “beautiful” and as the “Queen of the Universe.” In popular mythology, she is said to be the slayer of the buffalo demon Mahisha and her hill, Chamundi Hill, the physical site where she defeated the demon king, and her primary stone image depicts a powerful warrior goddess slaying the buffalo demon.¹⁷ As is explored in subsequent chapters, it is this identity of the goddess that binds the various parallel traditions that worship Chamundi, though most of them conceptualize her in related but ultimately very different ways. For the royal tradition, Chamundi is an independent, powerful, and regal warrior goddess who sits on her lion vehicle with her weapons ready to take on her enemies and to grant sovereignty and ruling power to the kings of Mysore. In the Sanskritic/brahminic tradition of Mysore, she is the mother goddess who accepts vegetarian offerings and is the most efficient path to prosperity and to *moksha/mukti* or liberation. In the folk traditions captured in *Chamundi of the*



Figure 1.1. Chamundi.

Hill, Chamundi is a martial goddess and a (sometimes virgin) mother goddess, but she is also invested in the trappings of regular, everyday life. The Chamundi of the folk traditions blends the more divine and supernatural aspects of her royal and Sanskritic/brahminic depictions with one that reflects the more quotidian, mundane concerns of the common folk of the region. For the folk traditions, Chamundi is embedded within the social and cultural worlds of domestic life in southern Karnataka, struggling through many of the this-worldly issues with which her devotees have or will struggle themselves. In *Chamundi of the Hill*, Chamundi becomes a much more immanent goddess, one in whom a devotee can see themselves.

Chamundi's primary temple in the region is the Chamundeshwari temple, located on top of Chamundi Hill a few kilometers from the center of the "Royal City" of Mysore. Mysore is a city of roughly one million inhabitants in the southern portion of the state of Karnataka, about 90 miles southwest of Bangalore, the large cosmopolitan city

commonly called India's Silicon Valley. Mysore is a popular site for tourists within India who come to the city for its moderate climate and to visit its many exquisite palaces, including the world-renowned Amba Vilas or Mysore Palace. The Chamundeshwari temple overlooks the city and is also a popular tourist destination, one of the most important pilgrimage sites in Karnataka, and, as a sign on the road up the hill boasts, "one of the 18 most holy sites in South India." On top of the hill the rather quaint but attractive temple with large seven-tiered tower shares its position as the highest point in the area with the Ram Vilas palace and a series of television and cell phone towers. The village that surrounds the temple is equally charming. It is populated by no more than a few hundred people and has until recently resisted commercial interests and state-funded construction.¹⁸ The relatively simple site completely masks the importance of this temple in local devotional practice and regional pilgrimage networks. The temple is presided over by Dikshita brahmins who were brought to serve in the temple in by Krishnaraja Wodeyar III between 1819–1848 as part of his larger program of incorporating forms of Hindu ritual and devotion that were recognized throughout India as elite forms of belief and practice.¹⁹ These brahmin priests displaced the previous officiants of the temple from the agricultural Tammadi (also Tomadi) caste who are commonly referred to as Shivarchakas (lit. "those who perform rituals to Shiva") and introduced *agamīc* brahminic rituals into the temple.²⁰

Also at the top of the hill are the Satyanarayana (Vishnu) temple and the Mahabaleshwara (Shiva) temple. The oldest temple of the hill is the Mahahaleshwara temple, and until the rise of the Wodeyar king of Mysore in the 17th century, Chamundi Hill was known as Mahabalachala or the "Mountain of Mahabala (Shiva)." I mention this here because the earlier preeminence of the Shiva temple provides clues to the rise of the deity Chamundi in the area. As far back as the 8th century on the northern portion of Shaiva temple complexes of South India, subsidiary shrines were regularly installed to a group of fierce but powerful goddesses called the *saptamatrikas* or "seven little mothers." These shrines were frequented by practitioners who needed the help of the goddess with issues like conceiving children or to alleviate disease. The cult of the seven little mothers was very popular throughout the southern portions of India, including southern Karnataka. The last of the seven, who was the eldest and often considered the most powerful,

was the emaciated goddess Chamunda/Chamundi, whose own cult continued to grow due to its efficacy in helping petitioners overcome their issues and often resulted in standalone shrines to Chamundi.²¹ While there is no concrete historical evidence to confirm this theory, it is very likely that the Chamundi temple on Chamundi Hill, which is located close to the Mahabaleshwara temple on its northern side, was originally connected to the Shiva temple and the cult of the seven little mothers, elements of which continue in folk religious rituals to Chamundi.

NANJUNDA AND NANJANGUDU

Nanjunda is the love interest of Chamundi and the ballad's second protagonist. He is the deity of Nanjangudu, a smaller city with a population of approximately 50,000 located about 15 miles south of

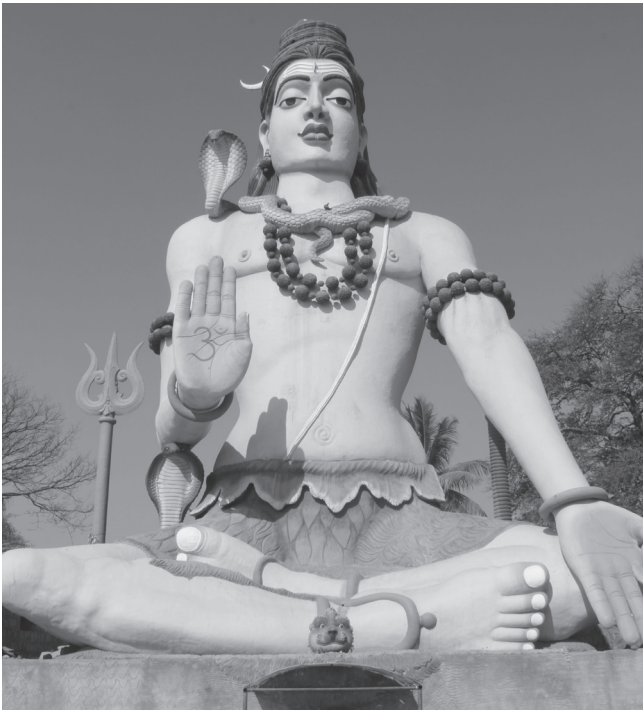


Figure 1.2. Nanjunda.

Mysore. Nanjunda is commonly associated with the Pan-Indian deity Shiva, and Nanjangudu is known in the region as Southern Kailasa, a reference to the Shiva's divine abode in the Himalayan mountains. Nanjunda, whose name is a compound of *nanju* (poison) + *unda* (having consumed), is connected to Shiva specifically through the story of cosmic creation when Shiva saves the gods by consuming the poison that emerges as the gods churn the ocean of milk in pursuit of the nectar of immortality (*amrita*). From this story in the Sanskritic tradition, Shiva receives the nickname Nilakantha or the "one with blue throat." The Nanjunda's temple in Nanjangudu also references both the local and the Sanskritic traditions in its two names, Nanjundeshwaraswamy and Shri Kantheshwara Temple. The temple's dual identity possibly stems from a similar shift as took place in Chamundeshwari, when in the 19th century the local Kannada Tammadi (also Tomadi; Shivarchaka) priests were displaced by Tamil brahmins who inaugurated *agam*ic rituals.

Because of his power over poison, in the local tradition, Nanjunda is considered a deity who is particularly adept at healing petitioners. Devotees who are suffering from sickness, pain, or disease make religious vows and offer small Nanjunda votive charms fabricated out of silver representing the part of the body afflicted with the disease.²² Devotees also perform acts of penance, such as circumambulation around his temple while rolling their bodies on the ground (*uruluseve*), shaving all their hair (*mudikoduvudu*), or prostrating fully every step as they go to the temple (*hejje namaskara*). Another common practice is the offering of *kambis* or iron bars during his annual festivals. Particularly, during his annual chariot or *ratha* festival, nearby villages offer Nanjunda these iron bars from which they hang earthen pots full of juices and jaggery (a type of unrefined cane sugar). Another healing tradition centered around Nanjunda that is rapidly fading is the practice of alternate insemination in which married couples would perform various rituals (*holekere*, *terina pattadi*, *talemele*) during which the women would be impregnated by another man.²³ Historically, he has been an important deity for the kings of Mysore. In 1845 CE, Krishnaraja Wodeyar III commissioned the construction of the temple *gopura* or tower, and nine years later constructed subsidiary shrines for various goddesses in honor of his queens. Before him, the Muslim ruler Tipu Sultan gave the deity, whom the king called "Hakeem Nanjunda," a garland of emeralds and a solid emerald *linga* (an aniconic representation of Shiva) in gratitude for Nanjunda restoring the eyesight of Tipu Sultan's favorite royal elephant.²⁴ Because of his

healing abilities, Nanjunda is also considered a gift-giving deity or *phaladevate* and is known as “Enjoyment” or *bhoga* Nanjunda.

Locally, many people claim that Nanjunda was a historical person who was a contemporary of both Chamundi and Male Madeshwara, another important regional deity/saint. According to folklorist P. K. Rajashekhara, Nanjunda was the brother of Madeshwara, both of whom studied at the Kunturu Matha before becoming leaders at the Virashaiva Suttur Matha, a religious institution that traces its foundations to the tenth century and the Chola empire and bases its teachings on the philosophy of the 12th-century Sharana poet Basava.²⁵ Rajashekhara, therefore, suggests that Nanjunda was probably a historical physician from the Chola period who practiced Persian Unani medicine and became the adjudicator of regional disputes; over time, Nanjunda’s legend grew, and he became known as a manifestation of the deity Shiva.²⁶ While this is an interesting theory, there is no historical data that supports this claim.

Chamundi of the Hill, however, gives us another glimpse into Nanjunda’s identity. One of which he is a cunning, conniving character, almost a trickster. This local version is similar to other depictions of Shiva in local and regional songs, including those from the goddess devotional songs of Bengal.²⁷ Along with Nanjunda, his family includes several supporting characters in the *Chamundi of the Hill* narrative. In the ballad, before meeting Chamundi, Nanjunda already has two wives: Deviri, his eldest wife, and Somaji, the younger.²⁸ Additionally, the serpent deity Kalinga, and Nandi (called Basavanna in the ballad), Shiva’s vehicle, are both introduced in the ballad as the brothers of Deviri and Nanjunda’s brothers-in-law.

UTTANAHALLI AND UTTANAHALLI

The last of the three main characters of *Chamundi of the Hill* is Uttanahalli. Uttanahalli is the sister of Chamundi and is, out of the three leads, the deity that is least well known outside of the region of southern Karnataka. Uttanahalli is not only the goddess’s name, but it is also the name of the village wherein she resides. As will be discussed in several chapters, the goddess’s name suggests her function as a village deity or *gramadevate* as she is both the goddess of Uttanahalli and the protector of her eponymous village. Uttanahalli, the village, is very small, with a population of only 1,325 per the 2011 census. The village’s name is a combination of *halli*, the Kannada term for “village,” and *utta*



Figure 1.3. Uttanahalli.

(+na), which would best be translated as “middle” or “in-between.” Its name denotes its location between the popular pilgrimage sites of Chamundi Hill and Nanjangudu. In *Chamundi of the Hill*, Uttanahalli, the goddess, also embodies this “in-between-ness” as she serves as the go-between for the lovers Chamundi and Nanjunda, going back and forth delivering messages from/to the goddess and god.

In addition to (and perhaps because of) her identity as an intermediary, Uttanahalli is one of the most popular and powerful goddesses of the region, with a robust devotional and pilgrimage network. As we see in the first narrative song of *Chamundi of the Hill*, Uttanahalli is a fierce goddess who comes to the aid of Chamundi as she fights the gargantuan demon Aisu, who self-replicates from every drop of blood that hits the ground. While Chamundi is overwhelmed by the deity, Uttanahalli extends her tongue over the battlefield, absorbing all the blood before it can mingle with the earth. Perhaps because

of the similarities between this story and the story of Raktabija (for more, see chapter 2), Uttanahalli is commonly associated with the Sanskrit Pan-Indian deity Kali. As a result of the emphasis on her tongue in this myth, at least since the 19th century, Uttanahalli has also been linked to Jwalamukhi, the important pilgrimage goddess with a tongue of fire whose temple in Himachal Pradesh is considered a seat of the goddess (*shakti pitha*) that manifested after the goddess Sati's tongue fell there after Sati's self-immolation.²⁹ In the local tradition of Jwalamukhi in Himachal Pradesh in northwest India, the goddess is one among a group of seven sister goddesses, as is Chamundi.³⁰

The fierce and powerful nature of Uttanahalli is also reflected in the rituals performed to her at her temple. Regularly, devotees offer the goddess flesh-offerings of chickens and goats, walking them up to the temple entrance to be presented to the goddess before ritually slaughtering the animals and preparing and cooking their meat for distribution as *prasad* or "blessed" leftovers to her devotees at a nearby rest-house. The blood and flesh offerings have clearly been a part of Uttanahalli's ritual complex for a while, as even the temple's ritual image of the feet of the goddess (*shri pada*) are surrounded by carvings of devotees beheading themselves as an offering to the goddess (figure 1.4).³¹

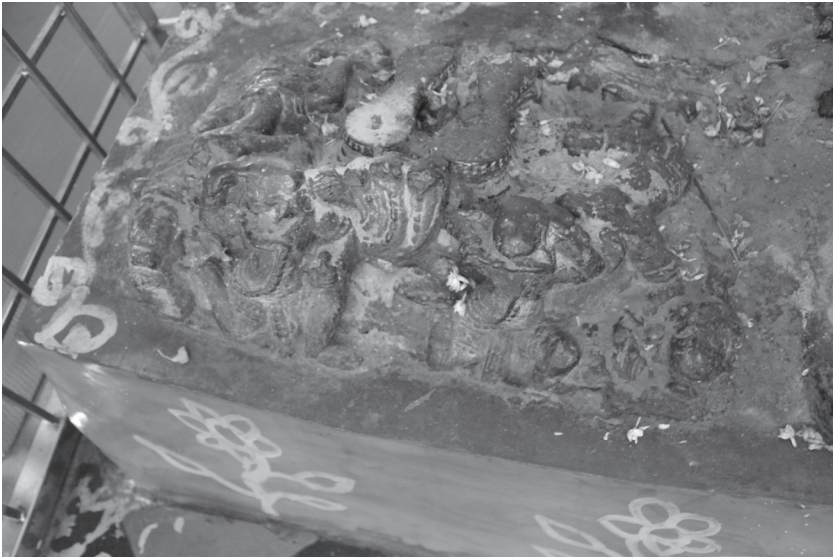


Figure 1.4. Uttanahalli Shri Pada.

Chamundi of the Hill, Folksongs, and Orality

In July of 2012, while I was living in Mysore studying Kannada through the American Institute of Indian Studies Language Program, I attended the opening night of a drama titled *Chama Cheluve*, the performance that introduced me to the folksongs of Chamundi.³² I had been to several dramatic performances during my time in Mysore, and most were usually well attended but usually nothing that would require special notice. *Chama Cheluve*, however, was different. The large open-air theater was packed. As I watched, I could see why people had come out in droves to see the performance. The story had it all: action, suspense, romance, comedy. One time wasn't enough. I had to see it again. I returned the next night. So had everyone else, and more had come with them. *Chama Cheluve* would become a sensation that year, extending beyond the original week-long schedule for months to consistently packed crowds before moving on to Bangalore. I was unaware that the subject of the play was not a novel one, and the story of Chamundi was one that was well known in the region through folksongs, songs of which different iterations could be heard in folk performances in the yards surrounding temples, on the radio, and even on reality television competitions. The songs and the story they tell are a ubiquitous part of life in southern Karnataka, and they have mass appeal. As the director of *Chama Cheluve*, Mandya Ramesh, would say, "People are beginning to pay attention to styles of folk performance: Yakshagana, Veeraghase, and Kamsale."³³

It seems, however, that people had been paying attention all along. The story of the romance between Chamundi and Nanjunda and the songs that tell these stories have been part of oral and folk traditions for at least a century (probably much longer) and are sung by a wide variety of traditional performers, including performance-based castes, like the Kamsale, Nilagara, Helava, Tambure, and Manteswa, and are commonly sung by rural village women.³⁴ In each context and in the different districts of southern Karnataka, the stories are told slightly differently, with additions and deletions and embellishments that suit the specific local context, audience, and religious traditions. The larger tradition of telling and singing about Chamundi is dynamic and ever-evolving, something that can never be captured in a translation of one telling of its story; therefore, in

this section, I discuss my source for the translation of *Chamundi of the Hill* and the community that performs this ballad, the categorization of the songs as folk, and finally the relationship between scholarship and the creative and performing traditions that create and recreate the songs of Chamundi.

Chamundi of the Hill, a Kamsale Ballad

Years before the popular performance of the story of Chamundi in *Chama Cheluve*, renowned Kannada folklorist P. K. Rajashekara published *Bettada Chamundi* (translated as *Chamundi of the Hill*) that recorded the songs of the folksong master and guru Kamsale Mahadevayya, as performed by K. B. Shivamudrappa and Shrimathi Kamma.³⁵ Due to the popularity of the folksongs, Rajashekara subsequently published a prose rendition of the ballad and performed a dramatic rendering on radio and television that was eventually published in 2012, the same year that *Chama Cheluve* opened, leading to a controversy over oral traditions and ownership to which I return below.³⁶ So, when I decided to write this book in 2017, I met with Rajashekara to get his advice on distilling the many variants of this song into one digestible volume. As it turned out, this was the same question with which Rajashekara had struggled for almost 50 years ago.³⁷ In the end, he decided to select the songs of Kamsale Mahadevayya because of his renown and the complexities and poetry captured within his telling of *Chamundi of the Hill*. In addition to consulting notes from live performances by itinerant Kamsale bards outside the Chamundeshwari Temple on Chamundi Hill and Uttanahalli's temple in Uttanahalli, a variety of modern media, such as CD and MP3 recordings, and the dramatic performances of *Chama Cheluve*, with his permission, my translation of these stories is based on the Kamsale Mahadevayya version of the story that was collected and recorded by P. K. Rajashekara. Indeed, his *Bettada Chamundi*, remains the most thorough documentation of the ballad to date.³⁸

The Kamsales, who are discussed in greater length in chapter 4, are traditional performers from the Devaragudda or Siridevaragudda subcaste (*upajati*) of the Kuruba caste (*jati*) who have been initiated into the tradition by a guru. Their name comes from their identity as performers and refers to the small cymbals, called *kamsale*, with which

they perform. Traditionally, the community sings a variety of songs whereby they maintain much of the oral histories of the region. Most of their songs focus on mythological and devotional themes; however, some are historical in nature, including a heroic song about the battle of Piriya-pattana and Tipu Sultan.³⁹ Even though the songs translated here are about Chamundi and Nanjunda, the Kamsales' traditional home is Male Madeshwara Hills, and they are devotees of the local Kannada deity/saint Madeshwara, whose temple is located there.

Despite their important role as the keepers and performers of the region's religious and oral histories and its remembered pasts, the Kamsales are categorized within the Indian government's list of "Other Backward Castes" or OBC. This designation of OBC was established in the Indian Constitution (Article 340) as a means to safeguard "socially and educationally backward classes" from discrimination based on the hegemonic traditional system of social stratification and hierarchy commonly referred to as "caste." As an OBC, within the normative hierarchy of commensality and ritual purity and pollution according to caste, Kamsales are generally considered a "low caste." As a result of centuries of caste discrimination, many Kamsales (and Devaraguddas more generally) have converted to Lingayatism (for more see chapter 4). Lingayatism, which collectively constitutes approximately 20% of the population of Karnataka, is a tradition of devotion to the deity Shiva that is multivalent in its identities and diverse in its composition, as groups from various caste backgrounds have converted into the religion, and, like the Kamsales, some have maintained the ritual and social practices associated with their caste identity.⁴⁰ Generally speaking, Lingayatism arose from a movement led by a collection of 12th and 13th century Shaiva saints known as Sharanas. The Sharanas are best known for their devotional poetry that took the form of poignant yet folksy aphorisms called *vachanas* that praise the local deities of the Kannada-speaking world. The Shaiva Sharanas' poetry has garnered much attention because of their strong reform message that critiques ritualism and caste hierarchy, leading many in the West to draw comparisons with Christian Protestant movements.⁴¹ In this regard, the Kamsales carry on the tradition of the Sharanas, not only in the style of their songs, but also in their message. As is seen in *Chamundi of the Hill*, the songs of the Kamsales include a strong anti-caste-discrimination message and advocate for social change.⁴²

Chamundi of the Hill, a Folk Ballad

At the onset of this section, I must admit that “folk” is a loaded term. Outside of academic studies of folklore, the term “folk” can be and has often been interpreted as a pejorative classification. When I ask my students the meaning of folk, most respond with references to folk music, by which they often refer to musical genres, like bluegrass, related to the rural southeastern United States. Others associate the term with noneducated and/or working-class groups of people. When pushed to dive deeper, most eventually form some sort of contradistinction (often a hierarchy) between “high”/elite, mainstream, and folk cultures, with a casual assumption that folk represents the lowest forms of culture. On the other end of the spectrum, inspired by romantic sentiments, historically, some, including scholars, have turned to folk culture to excavate and recover purer, more natural forms of art that contrast the banality and artificial (re)productions of industrial and technological life; indeed, the Romantic era was the context in which the academic discipline of folklore studies began.⁴³ While these two perspectives seem inherently at odds, they, in fact, produce the same divisions of culture that are linked to hierarchical systems of valuation, only inverting what is “high” and what is “low.” In this book, I do not intend on reifying either of these positions; that is, my goal is neither to uphold the naïve perspective that folk culture is “lower” nor to validate folk culture as natural or somehow a corrective for society.

Instead, I use the term “folk” in its most generic sense, and, like the German *volk*, in this book, “folk” simply refers to ordinary people, as in the general population. In the case of southern Karnataka, at least, this does have some affinities with the assumptions held by many of my students. Most people in this region live in rural areas and villages and are part of working-class, agricultural demographics, though this is rapidly changing due to increased urbanization and an expansion of the professional middle class. The culture of the folk is also often in contrast to the brahminic and royal culture and its hierarchical hegemony. Hesitatingly, throughout this book, I refer to the brahminic and royal traditions as “elite,” not because of any inherent valuation, but because these traditions, while representing a smaller percentage of the population, promote their communities

as the top of the social hierarchy, a position that is widely accepted across the populace. Though not created in a vacuum, folk narratives are creative expressions that reflect the outlook of a large but overlooked demographic, a demographic that is being increasingly marginalized as people move into cities and large towns and their art forms are occluded through a homogenization of Indian culture through mainstream digital media and mass reproduction. As I hope is demonstrated in the pages to follow, the folk ballad of *Chamundi of the Hill* is a rich piece of literature that records the significance of its local place, the remembered pasts of its people, and attempts to promote its own value system.⁴⁴ While I've tried to ensure that these stories are presented on their own terms, in order to elucidate the positionality of *Chamundi of the Hill*, I provide similar stories from elite royal and Sanskritic traditions. These are meant as helpful comparisons, not as sources from which the folk tales are derived.⁴⁵ In this way, specifically because it comes from the folk tradition, *Chamundi of the Hill* encapsulates a perspective that runs parallel to and, often, in competition with the elite culture that also exists in the region.

Of equal importance for understanding this book's approach to *Chamundi of the Hill* is the underlying assumptions of the inherent value of knowledge systems contained in oral folk traditions and orality as a valid and important means of recording and transmitting this knowledge. Building on the recent work of literary theorists Chamberlin and Chamberlain, throughout this book, the oral folksongs of *Chamundi of the Hill* are treated as meaningful contributions to the literature of Mysore and of India that open our understanding of South Asian literary production to include forms and stories through which a great number of people make sense of their world.⁴⁶ Orality presumes listeners who hear the songs as they are performed. In the performance of the narratives, the audiences are part of the generative process and help to shape and/or perpetuate the stories as the storytellers improvise for the context.⁴⁷ As such, built into oral traditions is a sort-of real time peer review, and, unlike written material, orality assumes some semblance of community consensus around the given narrative and its themes. The dynamic and changeable media of orality and performance provides means whereby local religious and social issues can be worked out in a public forum. Therefore, the songs and stories from oral folk traditions act as reliable archives in which we can see the values and social concerns of the local population reflected.