Tulasi Srinivas

THE GODDESS IN THE MIRROR
AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF BEAUTY

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For Popsi

Contents

A Note on Translation

As with my previous work on Bangalore, I attempt to place this work within the context of the multilingual cityscape of Bangalore. In fact, it is so similar that I "borrowed" some sections of this note from my previous work (2018).

In the beauty parlors that I haunted, I heard constant and endless talk in many different languages—Hindi, English, Tamil, and Kannada—combined with a Dhakkar street language that was a potent mix of Hindi-Urdu or Tamil-Kannada combined with English, depending on the linguistic origins of the speaker and audience. This linguistic and cultural diversity is not easy to represent. It needs to be tracked through its moves, imaginations, sites of encounters, and permeabilities and vulnerabilities. I have employed different methods to make the reader aware of this rich linguistic and cultural field, including dense descriptive interludes, reproduced stories, and explanations of narrative constructions, and I have used ethnopoetic notations in an effort to evoke the intensely elaborate linguistic and imaginative poetics of the area.

To denote language, I use italicized lettering at the first use of an Indian-language word, and occasional speech patterns to evoke the dialectical difference from Standard English. Usually, when quoting a client or beauty worker, I give the source language in text, and then for clarity, I translate the non-English words and indicate the source language within parentheses; so, often the Hindi, Urdu, or Sanskrit words appear within the body of the text followed by the English translation with the source language within parentheses, such as *yaar* (Hindi = friend).

Occasionally, I use a Sanskrit, Hindi, or Kannada word that is well known to specialist scholars, so I merely translate in parentheses without references to language of origin. In yet other cases where the word has filtered into the English language, I do not translate after the first usage, nor do I italicize, as with pajama.

In contrast to standard academic transliteration of Indian-language terms, I have usually elected not to use diacritics on the assumption that this is an ethnographic text and those who do know Indian languages will not need diacritics to correctly pronounce the word. Rather, I render transliterations as close as possible to what will result in correct English pronunciation. Thus, I render both ś and ṣ as sh; for example, *shakti* (spiritual power) rather than śakti. In direct quotations from authors who have used diacritics, the diacritics will be indicated as in the original; in these cases, the reader will notice, for example, spellings of Shiva as "Siva" or Vishnu as "Visnu." I have indicated Indian-language terms (except for proper nouns) with italics. Many terms in this book are shared across Indian languages with slightly different pronunciations and thus transliterations. Throughout this text, I will use the Sanskrit transliteration for proper names (Sita, Savithri), since these are closer to the vernacular pronunciations used by my collaborators in Bangalore.

Last, I retain the name Bangalore for continuity throughout the text, since that was the city's name when I began fieldwork. However, in keeping with many place names in India, it has since reverted to its precolonial name of Bengaluru.

Acknowledgments

As with all creative endeavors, this book owes its life to several people and many places.

First of all, I thank my friends and interlocutors in the parlors of Bangalore. My friends from Sophia High School who have become the elite of the city allowed me to "ride along" with them when they went to the parlor for their beauty treatments and patiently bore my intrusive presence. My other interlocutors, who did not know me initially, were hospitable and offered their time and thoughts as I watched them work. They welcomed me into the parlors, answered my idiotic questions on beauty treatments, and more intimate questions about their lives and work, and they did so with a patience, candor, and good humor that was humbling. None of this work would have been possible without them.

Many institutions also helped along the way. My own institution of Emerson College, where I have inherited and taught a general education course titled "Gender in a Global Perspective," enabled me to collaboratively read and think about beauty parlors all over the world with many smart and dedicated students. I also owe thanks to my colleagues at Emerson in the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality studies core, including Claudia Castaneda, Erika Williams, Nellie Sargsyan, Yasser Munif, and Jennifer McWeeny, and to Dean Amy Ansell, among others.

A decade ago the Kate Hamburger Kolleg at Ruhr Universität, Bochum, Germany gave me the time and space to look through my field notes and find

these threads of beauty. Still later, at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard, while working on the first book of the trilogy, *The Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder*, the possibility of writing a book on beauty parlors floated into view. Several years later, Anthea Butler told me about the Women's Study in Religion Program at the Harvard Divinity School, which she claimed my project was "perfect for." Many of the gender scholars I admired had held it, including Lindsey Harlan, Paola Bachetta, Tracy Pintchman, Vijaya Nagarajan, Amy Hollywood, and Rosalind Shaw, many of whom are my friends and mentors. In a delightful windfall, Harvard also offered me the senior Colorado Fellowship for 2022–23, though for another work. But it was *this* book that was completed at the Carriage House, as I watched the wild turkeys forage on the Divinity School lawns.

At Harvard, I am grateful to the director of the Women's Studies in Religion Program, Ann Braude, and my fellow fellows Kinitra D. Brooks, Jordan Katz, Rahina Muaza, Xhercis Mendez, and Elyan Jeanine Hill. Professors Frank Clooney, Janet Gyatso, Martha Selby, Arthur Kleinman, and Michael Puett also made me feel at home. Swayam Bagaria, a colleague at Harvard who generously read the whole book in the spring of 2023 despite the pressure to publish his own work, offered many helpful suggestions on storytelling and narrative that I am forever in his debt. My divinity school students Joe Archer, Anna Guterman, and Nathalie Folkerts and my teaching assistant Sunitha Das read iterations of this work and helped me think of the goddess in new and intriguing ways as we worked through our course titled "Goddesses and Ghosts." Additionally, the students in the Department of South Asian Studies at Harvard, particularly Poorna Swami and Seton Ullhorn, all supported me in ways large and small. I owe Poorna, a Bangalorean herself, a debt of gratitude for finding me a photographer in Bangalore, Richa Bhavanam, whom I could trust to act as my eyes and take photographs when I could not. Seton read the manuscript diligently and patiently created the first bibliography for this work.

Additionally, I thank Deepa Govindaraj for sharing her collection of photographs of the Miss Vegetarian Pageant in Bangalore and the Govindaraj and Goverdhan families for their recollections and photographs of pageants and fashions in 1970s Bangalore.

Indeed, to my surprise, I had many willing readers of this strange text. Andrew McDowell read fragmented notes as I began to write and convinced me that I did indeed have the makings of a book. Sarah Pinto urged me on, helping me think through notions of work and care when I fell into a well of despondency in year three of the writing and nearly gave up on the book altogether. Sudipa Topdar read sections of the work and offered ways of seeing beauty

politically that had eluded me. As a historian, she also engaged me in ways of thinking and research on the history of beauty. Nell Hawley read and educated me on Sanskrit poetics and dramaturgy for which I am profoundly grateful. Annirudan Vasudevan talked me through the complications of reading Lévi-Strauss, and Marko Geslani offered me dynamic and fascinating discussions of Hindu thought, which kept me excited about writing this book despite its long gestation period. I am particularly grateful to Lawrence Cohen, who on a broiling hot summer afternoon spent several hours outside Sofra bakery in Watertown, discussing skin and trauma and generously offering me reading lists and creative thoughts on the writing. Finally, Tara Dankel helped me work through the manuscript with a care and candor for which I am ever grateful.

Many years of wrestling with the writing, largely invisible and in silence through the social isolation of the global pandemic, were made bearable by Joyce Flueckiger, Andrew McDowell, and Jack Hawley, all friends who provided me with the much needed inspiration to move forward, painfully slowly at this time, buoying my spirits with their cheery emails, reading lists, and Zoom chats. Vasudha Narayanan with her many wondrous photographs on Facebook enabled me to think of beauty in other, more productive ways, as a cosmological and theological quest. I owe a debt of gratitude to the late Gopal Karanth, who educated me not only on caste in provincial barbershops but also on the hairstyles and soaps of the 1950s. I will miss his educating emails.

In 2022, despite my friends' best efforts, I hit a wall of inaction, where I felt I could not move forward, that I did not have the vocabulary to parse what beauty did and what it was. Soumhya Ventakesan, who was wrestling (far more productively) with her own writing, became my thought partner and gave useful suggestions to move my work and life forward at this crucial time. Purnima Mankekar, who had a similar life trajectory of elder care, offered me invaluable advice over dinner in Madison, Wisconsin, and on the phone on balancing life and work, as did Ann Gold, who generously shared her writings on Sundari Devi, a goddess of beauty in Rajasthan. And at the same time, I managed to get back in touch with one of my childhood babysitters, a pioneer of feminist thinking and gender studies in India, Professor Uma Chakravarti, herself a Bangalorean, who has been called one of the mothers of India's women's movement. Her work on gender, caste, and widowhood in India, which I read as a graduate student, forms the strong scaffolding for this work.

Thankfully, as we emerged from the cocoon of isolation of the pandemic, an invitation from the South Asia Colloquium at Harvard University enabled me to share some of the beauty and storytelling practices I found in Bangalorean parlors, which at that time I saw as separate endeavors. But the thoughtful questions

that the expert audience asked me gently pivoted me to the idea that these practices were twinned, and I turned back to the manuscript reinvigorated.

Finally, as *The Goddess in the Mirror* began to emerge, Ken Wissoker and his team at Duke University Press treated my procrastination and foot-dragging with patience. They always have treated me and my work with dignity, efficiency, and care. I am forever grateful for their support and for their finding of three perfect anonymous reviewers who made the manuscript far more readable and thoughtful through their invaluable suggestions.

Of course, none of this writing and storytelling, beautiful or otherwise, would be possible without my family. My mother, Rukmini Srinivas, is woven through the warp and weft of this book, as my memories of her begin the book and our life together today ends it. Her powerful natural beauty and strength, tall and graceful in her striking "temple" saris of vividly colored checked cotton and her cat's-eye sunglasses, is what I remember from my childhood. She was, and is, forever beautiful.

My sister and colleague Lakshmi Srinivas, who has always supported my writing and thinking, shared in the care of my mother and our pet parrot, Monster, when I wanted to work, often sacrificing her own desires for mine. And to Monster, who has, with his voice and presence, always lifted my mood and prevented me from allowing work to take over my life. He is the true natural beauty in my world. And last, to my spouse and partner, Popsi Narasimhan, to whom this work is dedicated, who has always given me the freedom of thinking and being. And I am more than grateful that Popsi has always found me beautiful and said so regardless of how I actually look!

Prelude

REVERIE

ONE BEAUTIFUL DAY . . .

I was daydreaming at my desk in Cambridge when a memory popped into my head of the first time I heard the term "beauty parlor."

Our family had decamped to the southern port city of Madras (now Chennai), where my maternal grandmother lived, to be guests at my maternal aunt's wedding. My aunt was the youngest at the tail end of eight siblings, and my mother, her elder by over two decades, was a guest of honor at the wedding, having missed her other six sisters' wedding celebrations.

My mother was and is a tall, distinctive-looking woman, with a flair for dressing. Educated, independent, and upper caste, she typically exempted herself from many bourgeoise preoccupations of dress and comportment. She never went to the beauty parlor or wore any makeup. Nonetheless, she always looked striking.

But that sunny afternoon, my aunts persuaded my mother to join the bride and her other sisters at a famous salon in the city, Eve's Beauty Parlor of Madras, to get their hair styled for the wedding. I remember my aunts excitedly talking about the "parlor," as salons were called in India. I wondered what a beauty parlor was and what it would be like. I remember too that my mother was not excited about the outing but had been persuaded by her sisters to go along. They left us cousins under the distracted care of uncles and fathers at the old colonial hotel where we were staying.

FIG. P.1. The author as a child, with her mother and the family dog, in Bangalore

Thus, I spent a glorious, hot afternoon with my sister and cousins, playing in the fountain at the hotel, catching tadpoles in a bottle, and getting thoroughly soaked. I remember looking up through the palm tree fronds at a lyrically blue sky. I remember the smell of my wet clothing, the fishy stench of the slimy green algae that covered the pond. I remember my sheer delight in contemplating my new and now ruined patent leather shoes and how they squeaked, oozing water with every step.

Later that evening, as I sat on the edge of the fountain in my wet dress and shoes, a tall woman walked up to me. She looked distinctly familiar but different, strange, glamorous (though I did not yet know that word). Her hair was pulled up tight and smooth in a French roll chignon with one yellow rose pinned at the side of the bun. Only when she called my name did I recognize this stranger as my mother and then only by the sound of her voice.

Stunned by her uncanny transformation, I burst into tears.

Beauty is truth's smile when she beholds her own face in a perfect mirror.
—Rabindranath Tagore, "On Beauty," 1955, quoted in George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*

It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it.
—Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 1975

INTRODUCTION

Beauty, Myth, Recognition

TELLING BEAUTY

"Teen Deviyaan"

March 12, 1999. Bangalore, India. A sweltering summer afternoon.

Radhika, my friend from secondary school, a successful fashion entrepreneur, was anticipating a relaxing afternoon at the Lotus, a luxury salon-spa in central Bangalore. Her gleaming chauffeured car rocked gently on the potholed blacktop roads as we drove to the salon. As we entered, her cell phone burst into a Hindi love song, her signature ringtone.[1] *Radhika yelled an invitation into it in a combination of staccato English and Hindi considered uber cool by some Bangaloreans.*

At the entry to the salon, we were greeted by Rina, a young woman from the Northeast of India, who was often misrecognized as "Chinese" in Bangalore, wearing a green jacket, the uniform of the spa. Rina offered us cold bottled water. Radhika noted to me in a sibilant whisper, "Her real name is Lumlang! Her spa name

is Rina. . . . So bad, no?" Before I could respond, Lakshya, a middle-aged beautician with a gentle expression, also from the Northeast, came through the velvet curtain and welcomed Radhika fondly. She was ready, holding a tray with a bowl of mixed hair dye. "Madam's color—Revlon Luminista Brown and Buttercream Ash," she announced.

Lakshya tilted a leather lounger into a reclining position, and Radhika kicked off her sandals, stowed her many cell phones, and flung herself into it with a happy sigh. Lakshya snapped on a pair of gloves and ran her hands through Radhika's hair, appreciating its soft and silky lengths: "Very healthy hair madam has." Radhika knocked on the wood handle of the lounger to dispel the envy of the evil eye, as Lakshya began painting Radhika's long hair with the dye, folding foil carefully around each section of hair.

Soon, the two other women that Radhika had invited on the phone waltzed in, blowing air kisses. Dressed in white, draped with diamonds and pearls, they were clearly the elite of Bangalore. Tara, recently divorced, was a minor celebrity in the city who ran a modeling talent agency, and Aseema, the wife of a Hyderabadi aristocrat, was a successful interior design consultant. They too quickly flopped onto the loungers, greeting the beauticians familiarly, and asked after their families. Lakshya was joined rapidly by two more beauticians, Jimphong, an "eyebrow specialist," and Tanya, a manicurist. Tanya brought in a rolling bin holding a rainbow array of nail polishes. Aseema started rattling through it: "What shade shall I get, girls?" "Get a nice hot pink. Mine is Vagina Blush," Tara said, lying back to get her eyebrows threaded by Jimphong, her excited tone a sharp contrast to her relaxed position. Tanya too offered suggestions: "Madam, do Nude Night or Pussy Galore! Very popular colors."

Tanya stripped Aseema's fingernails of old polish, soaked her hands in a soapy solution that smelled of rose, and began to carefully clip, clean, and file each nail. As she bent double over Aseema's hands, bringing her eyes close to each nail to ensure perfection, she entertained the assembled women with a story, a complex narrative of marriage, blindness, and betrayal. Listening idly, I realized that the story was about the mythic Queen Gandhari,[2] one the heroines of the Hindu epic the Mahabharata. Gandhari was the mother of the evil protagonists, her one hundred sons. A teleserial version of the Mahabharata from the 1980s was being replayed on television in anticipation of an updated version, and Tanya relayed the latest episode. In the story, Gandhari is told that she will be married to the blind but ethically unimpeachable King Dhristharashtra and she binds her eyes to share his darkened view of the world.

Tanya's tale emphasized Gandhari's youth and beauty: her flawless skin, her lustrous hair, her sweet smile. The women in the salon interjected with sighs of

envy. Tanya spoke of the rich silks and jewels Gandhari wore and of the velvet bandage she tied around her eyes once she was engaged to the blind king. Radhika, a fashion expert, noted hotly that the costumes were "all wrong." Then Tanya's voice rose as she described how Queen Gandhari foreswore all visual and aesthetic pleasure to become the ideal wife to the king and the matriarch of a clan of a hundred sons.

Radhika, Aseema, and Tara were enthralled despite being familiar with the story. Tanya emphasized that Gandhari never "for the rest of her life" took off her blindfold, relying on the magical television of her aide's reports to transport her to the battlefield, where her beloved sons fought in the fratricidal war. There were many tongue clicks of dismay at Gandhari's wifely and motherly plight. Tanya added playfully, "Ayoo, madam. I could not do for my husband!"

Tara exploded from her lounger, "Why should you? How stupid, na? At least if she could see, then she could help the king and see her sons in the war." Aseema, like many Muslims in India, culturally familiar with the Hindu epics, offered an explanation: "She wanted to be full patni-pativrata style [Hindi = wifely devotion]!" Radhika chimed in with her social commentary: "I can't imagine marrying a young girl to a blind old fart like him! Didn't they have any sense in those days?"

After Radhika's hair had been foiled into a neat ziggurat, Lakshya left the room. Fleeing the intense chemical smells, which were making me nauseous, I followed. I found her in the beauticians' "break room" at the rear of the salon with a young Tamil girl named Selvi, who was employed as a cleaner. They were drinking water and kneading their aching elbows. Through the curtained doorway back into the treatment room, I could hear the rise and fall of Tanya's voice as she told yet another story from the serial.

Sensing that Lakshya and Selvi were discomfited by my presence, I awkwardly turned to leave, when in a corner of the break room I spied a faux oil lamp in an alcove and above it a series of photographs and images: a stupa-like temple tower; the image of a stone yoni, the labia of the goddess, captioned in Hindi and English, "Sri Kamakhya Devi Temple, Guwahati, Neelanchal, Assam"; a calendar image of Lakshmi, seated on a lotus surrounded by gold foil; and a small statue of mother Mary with a crucifix around it. Lakshya caught me looking at the images and said with some sadness that she was from Guwahati, though she had not been back for many years, and Kamakhya was her family deity. Selvi watched quietly.

Radhika's timer went off, and Lakshya, Selvi, and I hastily returned to the main salon. Lakshya shampooed Radhika's hair and blow-dried it into a lustrous curtain. Tara said appreciatively, "Hair looking soo good! Totally shandaar

[Hindi = beautiful]!" Aseema added admiringly, "Full apsara[3] *mode . . . to-tal!" waving her hands to ensure her hot-pink nails dried. When Radhika was done, they all stood in front of the salon's wall of mirrors admiring themselves.*

There was a moment's quiet. I absorbed the frozen, silent tableau reflected in the mirrored wall. Radhika, Aseema, and Tara stood front and center. Behind them, holding hair dryers, mirrors, and brushes stood Lakshya, Tanya, and Jimphong. Just beyond the circle stood Selvi, with her mop and bucket. I spied Rina in the waiting room with the bright and noisy street as backdrop, and in the opposite sliver of the mirror, through the parted curtain of the break room beyond, I could just glimpse the lamplit Kamakhya Devi image. Radhika caught my eyes in the mirror and, gesturing to her reflection, jokingly said, "Teen Deviyaan [Hindi = three goddesses]!"[4]

Beauty Matters

This was what I came to understand had happened that day in retrospect. In the moment, I was completely overwhelmed by the experience. As Radhika and I got into the car to leave the Lotus, she asked me why I looked "so sick." I realized that the chaotic sights, smells, and sounds of the parlor had left me feeling unmoored. My field notes, usually so meticulous, were a jumbled array of words and phrases, of impressions and emotions. The cacophony of conversation, some about nail polish colors, others about the stories of goddesses and queens, was a confused babble. The images of women in their foiled hair pyramids and manicure baths, gossiping loudly about the sexual lives of people whom I did not know and probably would never meet, was for me like entering a bawdy play in the third act, not knowing what had happened before. The endless ringing of cell phones with their many signature Bollywood tunes, and the buzz of the timers, added to my jangled nerves.

I also felt physically ill, revolted by the unfamiliar smells of the parlor—the stench of burned hair, body sweat, and expensive perfume mixed with the chemical smells of hair color and nail polish, rose soap, strawberry wax, and incense. The impact of these mingled smells was so violent that I could not even describe it as an odor; rather, I experienced it as a physical punch to the gut. Hence, my dive into the break room to recover, where the beauty workers were clearly startled by my sudden entrance. Everything was happening so quickly around me, with different workers engaging in different unfamiliar procedures. I was terrified, in my uptight and prudish Brahmanical way, that in the midst of this chaos, one of Radhika's friends would suddenly strip down for some sort of intimate wax, and that would be the last straw.

I described this vertiginous feeling to Radhika. "How do you stand it?" I asked her, miming nausea. She found my description of the strangeness of the salon hysterical and fell onto the leather seat of her car, giggling helplessly. "My God! Sooo funny you are! What world have you come from?" she said. "Haven't you been to a parlor before?" I confessed I had not, other than a few brief visits many decades prior. My mother had also not been a parlor habitué, and I had little experience with it growing up. In the United States, I could not afford salons for beauty treatments, only venturing in occasionally for haircuts. Radhika was aghast. "WHAT KIND OF GIRL ARE YOU?!" she yelled at me.

I sat back in the plush vehicle and peered through the tinted windows at the hazy city beyond. Was *this* what beauty was? Was I less of a woman for knowing so little about it? As the car rolled on, questions swirled in my brain. Two stood out as anthropologically valuable: What in God's name was going on in that parlor? And how was I going to find out?

Self-Reflections

Before we left the Lotus, Radhika said briskly, "Okay, ready? Shall we go?" As the women checked themselves in the mirror one more time, I saw myself reflected behind them, watchful, overwhelmed, and nauseous, yet ready with my notebook and pen.

On the surface, I was not the best person to write this book. In fact, beauty was the furthest thing from my mind when I started the "fieldwork," as anthropologists call this intimate participant observation study, in 1998. I had returned to Bangalore to study ritual creativity in modern Hindu temples (T. Srinivas 2018). My work at the temples was fascinating, but at times, the male-dominated and rule-bound world of the temple unnerved me, and I went looking for my female school friends with whom to blow off steam and reclaim some parts of myself. Many, like Radhika, had become the elite of Bangalore. They were entrepreneurs and civic leaders, often required by their social networks to be at various "chatterati" parties covered by the celebrity pages. When I went to their homes unannounced, I would invariably be met by a maid who directed me to the beauty parlor, or a fashionable restaurant, spa, or boutique, and I would follow. That is how I found myself at the Lotus and in hundreds of other parlors, salons, and spas in Bangalore, watching my friends, other women, and later, queer and gender-nonconforming people as they threaded, colored, waxed, depilated, bleached, injected, packed, and painted their faces and bodies.

Beauty has always been a thorny subject for me. I was constantly chided, never by my parents but by well-meaning friends and relatives, for going out in

the sun and getting "dark," for having messy curly hair, for biting my nails. As all my friends seemed to know, being well "turned out"—with waxed arms and legs, fair and glowing skin, smooth, shiny hair with the "right" highlights, and perfectly arched eyebrows—was indicative of being elite and powerful in Bangalore. It was the sign of being cared for and of being worthy of care.

But like Ursula Le Guin, I was troubled by beauty when I encountered it in the flesh. In her essay titled "Dogs, Cats, and Dancers: Thoughts About Beauty," Le Guin (1992, 165) sees beauty as a game with rules "controlled by people who grab fortunes from it and don't care who they hurt," making people "starve and deform and poison themselves" in slavery to artifice. I shared her beautifully voiced concerns about selfhood and its complex relationship to the bodies we occupy, if ever so briefly, when we look in the mirror:

> I know what worries me most when I look in the mirror and see the old woman with no waist. It's not that I've lost my beauty—I never had enough to carry on about. *It's that that woman doesn't look like me.* She isn't who I thought I was. . . . Who I am is certainly part of how I look and vice versa. I want to know where I begin and end, what size I am, and what suits me. . . . I am not "in" this body, I *am* this body. . . . But all the same, there's something about me that doesn't change, hasn't changed, through all the remarkable, exciting, alarming, and disappointing transformations my body has gone through. There is a person there who isn't only what she looks like, and to find her and know her *I have to look through, look in, look deep. Not only in space, but in time*.
> (Le Guin 1992, 165; emphases added)

Looking deep across decades, I realize that even early on, my discomfort with beauty practices felt like a failing in my Bangalorean milieu, but after decades of feeling and being told, in some cases explicitly, that I was unbeautiful and of feeling a desire to be perceived of as "groomed" yet being acutely ashamed of that desire, I had made peace with my oppositional relationship to beauty practices. My positionality as an upper-caste, heterosexual, cis-gender[5] (by which I mean someone who identifies with her assigned gender at birth) Bangalorean woman granted me privilege, but I was uncomfortable with it and uninterested in compounding it through visible aesthetic markers that signaled beauty. This was reinforced by my everyday life as a graduate student and then a faculty member in American academia. With little money and no privilege except higher education, there was no assumption that I would maintain a meticulously groomed appearance, even if I had had the resources to do so. In fact, the liberal academic ethos valorized natural aging and makeup-free

looks. Too much concern with appearance was viewed as shallow, if not openly narcissistic.

Nonetheless, though I knew which camp I felt more comfortable in, these two approaches to beauty clashed. What in the academic world was viewed as evidence of living a life of the mind was perceived by my well-groomed friends back home in Bangalore as a lack of self-respect. They tended to remark on every photograph I uploaded on social media, commenting unfavorably on my graying hair: "Can't you color it?"; my clothing choices: "Are you blind?"; and my lack of makeup: "Why can't you wear some nice lipstick? You are letting yourself go, fully!" They seemed to view my carefree aesthetic as a form of insanity, an unbelievable carelessness.

But to their dismay, I had no interest in doing anything about it. Parlors and salons were alien worlds to me—unheimlich, uncanny, and strange. I was shocked by the painful and brutal processes, the easy objectification of bodies and selves, and revolted by the oversharing of intimate bodily details. Everything was oddly disorienting, from the technologies used, to the strange smells and leakages of the bodies in the parlor and the skill of the workers at ignoring these leakages, to the storytelling that harkened back to a mythical time but seemed to be interpreted in new and strategic ways.

Now, this may strike many as an inopportune moment to talk about beauty. The political landscape is poisonous, and we are a riven people. But I can think of no better time to talk of beauty, to hold it as a human desire and ideal, and to think about why women feel that they can never be beautiful enough and simultaneously that they are to resist and reconstruct the moral. As we war against each other, turn back the clock on women's rights, and move toward autocracy, perhaps a conversation on beauty is what is needed to remind us that what makes us human is the striving toward the beautiful and the divine.

When my disorientation turned to curiosity about the world of the Lotus, the most obvious resources I had for making sense of it were political and academic. But was I, as Laura Mulvey suggests in the epigraph to this chapter, seeking to destroy the pleasure of beauty by analysis, because I did not wish to master its intricacies? As a feminist, I had long ascribed to the idea that beauty was a form of oppression. When Radhika preened in the mirror and insisted, "Must be pretty, no? What's the use of being a girl if you are not beautiful?" my gut instinct was to think of her as a victim of the patriarchy, though a less "victimized" victim would be hard to find. When Western feminism is asked what beauty is for, it replies that women pursue beauty for men's approval and the resources that go along with it. Women,[6] feminists argue, are not only constantly trying to live up to ideals of beauty and subject themselves to painful procedures

to do so but also the beauty workforce is exploited, invariably made up of women on the margins who worked at these salons for low pay (Banet-Weiser 1999; Bartky 1990; Hesse-Biber 1996). Thus, feminists, particularly in anthropology, have typically offered critical readings of beauty and beauty salons around the world (Black 2004; Furman 1997; Liebelt 2023; Ossman 2002). This colored my reaction when the project began. In fact, one Indian sociologist of my acquaintance, whose smooth arms, perfectly tweezed eyebrows, and sleek hair marked her as parlor habitué, noted pithily that my study of beauty would be "useless" as parlor work was "so frivolous."

My experience, however, was that Bangalorean women did not beautify themselves solely to be the "objects of the male gaze" (Mulvey 1975). To dismiss them as "frivolous" was not simply misogynistic; it derived from a Christo-colonial understanding of what *should* be studied based on a moral hierarchy of knowledge in which women's embodied knowledge ranked as negligible. As Susan Sontag (1975, 119–22) put it starkly in her essay in *Vogue* magazine, "A Woman's Beauty: Put Down or Power Source," "by limiting excellence (virtues in Latin) to moral virtue only, Christianity set beauty adrift—as an alienated, arbitrary, superficial enchantment." It would seem that beauty has always been suspect in Christian thinking and continues to lose prestige in academic circles due to an unlikely alignment between Christian ethics, colonialism, and feminist critiques.

When I turned to philosophy, the resources provided to understand beauty were helpful and yet not. One strand of thought, coming from the Greeks through Kant, views beauty as morally valuable and purposeful, allied to aesthetic judgment, truth, and taste (Kant 1987). The poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, following this traditional line of thinking, suggests that beauty is "truth's smile," when "she" is reflected in a "perfect" mirror, significantly conflating beauty with gendered female virtues. More recently, classicist Elaine Scarry (1999) has argued in her manifesto on beauty that experiencing beauty impacts us in ways that can assist us in achieving justice, or rather, that beauty's impact instructs and inspires us in ways that enable us to respond to injustice. Scarry's descriptions of beauty, drawn from the *Odyssey*, speak to the overwhelming nature of seeing something or someone truly beautiful; where beauty comes upon one "like a wave" causing a "radical decentering" of self. It "quickens," "adrenalizes," and makes life "worth living" (Scarry 1999, 24–25).

Beauty's force makes one pause and catch one's breath in a moment of suspended delight and wonderment, all located in its perception which, according to Scarry, pivots us to a Deweyan ethical action. This is the idea that ordinary life and aesthetics sit on a continuum, forcing us to imitate and replicate

such beauty and perfection through laws and institutions (Scarry 1999). One might be tempted to argue that beauty's subjectivity makes it a difficult starting point for justice. However, what such philosophy makes grudgingly clear is that beauty is *real*, with real and powerful consequences. Beauty *is* power, and its privileges are immense. Thus, we have to contend with John Costonis's (1989, 15) accurate prediction: "We are condemned to come to terms with aesthetics, whether we like it or not."

But what of beauty's pursuit? None of these philosophical thinkers, valuable as they are, illuminate what happened that day at the Lotus, in the quotidian moment of beauty's making. Therefore, it seemed what was needed was not yet another philosophy of beauty, not an application of Western philosophy to Indian mores, but rather *an anthropology of beauty* that dignified not only what the women did in the parlor but what they said they were doing and why. Thus, in the following pages, I follow in the footsteps of Alfred Gell (1998, 17), who first thought of an anthropology of aesthetics and wanted to "wrest" the anthropological study of beauty away from the "soggy embrace" of philosophical aesthetics. And doing so requires us to explore the relationship between difference, as the structural fracturing of the modern subject, and differences, as a multiplicity of the sociopolitical as classed and casted identities, to contend with varying registers from the aesthetic to the overtly political where beauty's power resides.

Unfortunately, however, the anthropological sources did not precisely fit this project either. Traditionally, anthropology has divided thinking about beauty into two categories. The first is the magical in which beauty is a gift of enchantment achieved by powerful decoration, capable of elevating the ordinary into the divine (Strathern and Strathern 1971; Taussig 2012, 44). This emphasizes beauty's multisensoriality and cultural embeddedness. The second is the mundane, where beauty is understood as a set of practices that acts on the embodied subject and, as such, enables an analysis of gendered subjects' desires and body images as projects of self-making, embedded in transnational and locally mediated "beautyscapes" (Holliday et al. 2015 in Liebelt 2023), expanding in recent years to include the medicalization of beauty standards (Jarrin 2017; Plemons 2017). I found, however, that what are considered two distinct and separate anthropological understandings of beauty are interwoven in Bangalore: the magical and mundane come together in the parlors. This slippage between gift and practice meant that beauty was doubled in everyday life: first, as a natural attribute, a divine gift that was magical in its power (Taussig 2012) and then as a culturally determined goal to aspire to, since certain practices allow one to appear "naturally" beautiful (Liebelt 2023).

As the years passed, I explored these understandings of beauty and found myself at more and more parlors (outgrowing the attendant nausea) as I waited patiently for someone more appropriate than me to write the book on Indian beauty that I needed to understand the dynamics of the Bangalorean parlor. But I waited in vain. It seemed that my sociologist friend was right. No one was interested in studying "being, becoming, practising and doing femininity," particularly in the Indian parlor (Skeggs 1997, 98). In the meantime, what had once been a baffling site of frustration became thoroughly intriguing to me as I began to make friends in the parlors among the clientele and the beauticians, and make sense of what was happening within it.

Then, one snowy winter's day in Boston, while watching a movie where the heroine went past a salon, hesitated, and then entered, I realized that it was up to me to write an ethnography of beauty parlors in India. What had originally seemed to me like a negative—my total lack of familiarity with parlors and beauty practice, my visceral revulsion—was actually an asset. Approaching beauty ignorantly forced me to look at it differently, as it were. I needed to enter the parlor and decipher the practices precisely *because* I was a stranger to them; after all, moving from unfamiliar to familiar and stranger to friend is at the very core of the ethnographic enterprise (Powdermaker 1967). But another concern raised its ugly head. I was not thought of as a gender scholar, and I had never been thought to be politically "cutting edge." Gender scholars were the radical, the politically active, the "cool kids" of anthropology. I did not fit here either. What were my bona fides? Why was I, an ethnographer of religion, studying gender? These fears would paralyze me from time to time.

But in fact, as I continued to pursue beauty through the parlors of Bangalore, ethnography turned out to be a lifeline. Ethnography enabled me to document a moment in time where the Indian beauty industry was metastasizing. My connections in Bangalore, the many people I knew, allowed for detailed observation of women undergoing beauty treatments from "vampire facials" to laser waxing and showed not only how beauty functioned as an intervention in the problem of the aging or unbeautiful body but as an intimate experience between beauty worker and client. The women clients whom I followed initially, who populate these pages, were the elite of the city. They were the people who were idealized and who everyone else, including the beauticians like Lakshya, Jhuma, Tanya, and Lumlang, aspired to imitate. Similarly, participant observation allowed me to notice the subtleties of beauty practice. It made me sensitive to the value of pedagogy, as women around me learned how to embody the beautiful as the broader society saw it. Recent Indian economic growth has brought with it new and highly globalized ideas about the "ideal" female body.

The dramatic increase in the visibility of women with slimmer bodies and higher cheekbones, false eyelashes and Western-style makeup in public spaces (including billboards) and popular media (such as Bollywood and lifestyle magazines) indicates that the physical appearance of the Indian female body is increasingly imagined to be an indicator, and facilitator, of socioeconomic success.

Interlocutors who became friends, like Lakshya, Tanya, Mary, and Lumlang (whom I met later), made me consider the hidden lives of the workers that I met. Parlor workers were typically migrants from provincial and lower middle-class backgrounds who catered to wealthier upper-caste clients. The distance in terms of education, income, and social standing between beauty worker and client was generally insurmountable. The bodies of client and worker were layered with various meanings in terms of class and socioeconomic positions, but meeting frequently and working on the body in collaboration led to intimate and personal relationships between beauty workers and clients that occasionally transcended caste and class.

Watching women in the parlor over time enabled me to adopt a "critical realist" position where the body is seen as both real, as a physical and biological entity, and at the same time socially constructed in terms of narrative and bodily practice (Collier 1994). It also allowed me to distinguish beliefs about social reality from *actual* social reality.

Finally, a deep longitudinal ethnography over a decade and a half in a city that I knew intimately but that was constantly evolving allowed me to complicate and contextualize beauty's symbolic, transactional, and affective dimensions, teasing out how its dynamics serve as a medium through which new, unexpected, and strategic configurations of power and meaning could emerge. Anyone who has gone through the haptics of fieldwork knows the thrill of discovery, the sense of "this is what the question is." Such a long-term ethnography reminded me that it is not always clear when fieldwork begins and ends, what the questions might be, and where one might land. An anthropology open to unexpected encounters, juxtapositions, and serendipitous research questions was to be cherished.

Although many of the women in the Bangalorean parlor were Hindu, as my afternoon at the Lotus so clearly showed, the parlors were multiethnic, multilinguistic, multireligious, and variously classed and casted spaces, where a diversity of voices, inhabitations, and ontologies were at play. My previous work on Bangalore had demonstrated that this urban pluralism was further complicated by Bangalore's position as the software capital of Asia, where a large international population and many foreign expats and NRIs (non-resident Indians) with global ties to the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States, the Middle

East, and Singapore also live (T. Srinivas 2018). The women in the parlor were comfortable with the complexities of navigating this cultural tapestry, though they operated with certain strict notions of how one should comport oneself in such complex cultural spaces.

However, most of the stories told in the parlor were Hindu myths with which many Indians, regardless of their religion, were familiar. I realized as beauty clients and workers spoke of the ideal women in Hindu cosmology—the goddesses, apsaras, and other heroines—with a fondness and familiarity where my expertise in Hinduism, which I never anticipated being an asset in a space like the parlor, proved invaluable. I remembered that as a child I had been fascinated by Hindu myths and had pestered my parents, relatives, and neighborhood maids to tell me the stories endlessly. My parents bought me the popular graphic novel series *Amar Chithra Katha* (Hindi = Immortal Pictorial Stories), and I read them until I knew them by rote. Branching out, I went to the library and took out books on Greek myth. Keeping track of the various characters and their intersecting stories was like following a cosmological soap opera. I found the dramatic tales of gods and humans fascinating and deeply moving.

However, as my interest in anthropology grew, my interest in myth diminished. In the contemporary anthropology of my time, the study of myth seemed old fashioned and outdated, a vestige of an earlier, troubled era for the discipline. But when I stumbled across goddesses, apsaras, and other heroines in the secular space of the parlor, I felt a jolt of joy and recognition sweep over me. This was where the myths were hiding—in plain sight! I started noticing how often Indians, Hindus primarily but others as well, spoke about myths as a reality in their lives. In the parlor and beyond, they used mythical tropes and ideals to imagine the future, rehistoricize the past, and fabricate selves. It was, I realized, time to reinvigorate the study of Hindu myth, not as a stand-alone intellectual project but one woven into the ethnographic study of beauty and women's selfhood.

The Beautiful City

The story of beauty and the parlors in Bangalore starts with the growth of the beauty industry in the city, which really got underway in the 1980s, when Bangalore developed a reputation as a beauty capital in the niche circles, where beauty was a profession and preoccupation. Prasad Bidapa Associates,[7] a modeling agency that trained beauty pageant winners and movie industry hopefuls, gained renown throughout India when several of its protégés won international pageants and global modeling contracts. Other imitators followed.

By the late 1990s, Bangalore had become the premier destination for beautiful and ambitious young people from all across the country. The city, previously sleepily tolerant if slightly conservative, was suddenly host to crowded fashion shows and parties run by the modeling agencies, where models danced in the briefest of clothing. Billboards (known in India as hoardings) all over the city displayed larger-than-life images of men and women selling everything from cars to condoms to soap.

The modeling agencies, in turn, were catering to the advertising needs of a burgeoning beauty and "personal care" industry in India that was globalizing. The French cosmetics giant L'Oréal was the first to enter India in 1994, followed quickly by German cosmetics giant Benckiser and then Revlon in 1995.[8] By 2021, the beauty industry in India was the fourth largest in the world at 1.1 trillion Indian rupees (approximately US$16 billion) and expected to grow to 2 trillion rupees (approximately US$24 billion) by 2025,[9] making it ripe for franchise opportunities.[10]

This spectacular trajectory has been fueled in no small part by the growth of cities like Bangalore[11] as information technology and biotech hubs, where talented young software and bioengineers, many of them women, have flocked in the thousands to get lucrative jobs and live the good life (Heitzman 1999; T. Srinivas 2018; Upadhya and Vasavi 2013). Besides providing new avenues for making money, opportunities for social mobility and aspiring middle classness have also been important factors in these professions' popularity in recent years, and bodies that were beautiful and well groomed were textually (through Bollywood movies, advertising, and social media) linked to notions of socioeconomic success, cosmopolitanism, and even professionalism. Thus, image consciousness, primarily to land jobs and secure deals, led to a democratization of beauty practices. Rising incomes and shortage of time meant that what was previously done domestically, such as hair and skin care, was now outsourced to the local parlor. Business boomed, leading to ever more parlors opening and more beauty workers migrating to the city.

The profession of beauty worker in Bangalore needs to be understood within the context of related professions, such as coffee baristas, gym trainers, and those employed as salesgirls in shopping malls in urban India (Baas 2020). Such professions are generally thought to be open to provincial, aspiring middle-class workers, but they require highly specific, on-the-job training to cater to urban customers and require education through enrollment in diploma courses at commercially run training institutes in the city. As more beauty parlors opened, beauty institutes struggled to keep pace. The need for qualified workers grew every day as more parlors opened up.

FIG. 1.1. A small parlor called Choppin in north Bangalore

In 2004, a research firm based in the city of Pune, Value Notes Database, studied beauty parlors in towns with over a million inhabitants and concluded that by rough estimates, India had sixty-one thousand beauty parlors in these towns alone. Since then, the beauty industry[12] in India has been expanding at 13 percent year on year, far surpassing the overall economic growth rate. The beauty business is so profitable that it has even caught the attention of global and national private equity firms.[13] Thus, in every village, provincial town, and neighborhood of India, salons and spas, known collectively as "parlors," abound, catering to different classes of clientele. As one client proudly noted, "in every nagar (township), every locality, every layout, every chawl, every village in India, there'll be a beauty parlor for us ladies."

Indeed, as Menaka, one of my interlocutors, confirmed, by the late 1990s, less than ten years after the tech boom hit Bangalore, there were "literally *hundreds* of new parlors." Walking through Bangalore in the early 2000s, I often saw painted banner advertisements for salons and spas hung crookedly all over the city, on walls and fences, and from trees the names of the parlors advertised redolent of an overt femininity: "Lotus," "Senorita," "Petals," "Blow," and "Rain." Newspapers were littered with color advertisements and discount coupons for hair and skin care "packages" at local parlors, alongside matrimonial

FIG. 1.2. A storefront converted into a neighborhood parlor called Posh Salon and Spa

advertisements for "fair-skinned" brides. Parlors were listed and reviewed on Yelp and Google and other customer service sites.

Menaka was an avid parlor goer, and she classified the parlors in Bangalore into six different types based on price point and image: "garage parlors" (small and affordable, catering to maids and recent migrants, they were usually in the garage of someone's house), "auntie parlors" (individually owned and housed in a few rented rooms or a small apartment or bungalow, these were local parlors where the beauticians knew the clientele and treated them like kin), "corner-wali types" (neighborhood parlors individually owned and run by women that were slightly more expensive and had better treatments and trained beauticians), "franchise parlors" (located in stand-alone bungalows or shops, these were more expensive, catered to a middle-class clientele, and were part of a national or global franchise, with trained beauticians and an efficient anonymity), and finally, "spa types" (located in sylvan settings, offering "exotic" treatments, some of them medical and therapeutic as well as aesthetic, these were the total-immersion experience where the staff were highly trained and pampered their elite clientele). With Menaka, Radhika, and others, I visited all of the above, traipsing through a quarter of Bangalore's two hundred listed and reviewed parlors in the decade and a half of my research, settling down in some

FIG. 1.3. A three-story franchise parlor with towering images of Western women on its glassed frontage

for many years of interrupted participant observation. I learned something new about beauty every single time.

BEAUTY TALES

Myth and Meaning

The way a particular ideal body is produced and reproduced in the Indian parlor cannot be attributed to increased spending power, consumerism, image concerns, or the ubiquity of parlors alone. Even that first time in the Lotus, one of the things that struck me most palpably was the way Tanya told the story of Gandhari, focusing on her elevated status, her beauty, the aesthetics of her life, and finally, her sacrifice in binding her eyes. In fact, it was *I* who had been blind to how women in the parlors, both workers and clients, continually wove the stories of goddesses into their own everyday lives, responding almost viscerally to the myths. These interpolated stories and their aesthetics, set against the consumer publics of global India, offered an interplay of factors that layered the way in which the Indian female body was interpreted and understood.

FIG. 1.4. A shrine at the reception desk in the lobby of a parlor with a small Indian flag

I suppose that this should not have been that surprising. It was a way to explain the extant world ("as is") and the subjunctive world ("as if") with the goal of negotiating the current world and bringing an aspirational world about via the imagination. Indeed, as David Shulman notes in his exhaustive history of the imagination in South India, unlike in the West, the imagination *is* reality to Hindu Indians; seeing in the mind's eye is as powerful as perception itself or perhaps even more so, for imagination is causative and is able to create new, future-facing worlds (Shulman 2012).

Nonetheless, I *was* surprised to find myth so imbricated in the conversation of the parlor. Undoubtedly, one of the reasons was the particular moment in which I began fieldwork, when the epic 1980s teleserial the *Mahabharata* was being replayed on television. It seemed like almost everyone watched it, and it was a good topic of discussion for the parlor as it created common ground and seemed to circumvent more politically charged topics, though I found that political themes, national and gendered, wound their way in anyhow. As my fieldwork continued into the second decade of the new millennium, more Bollywood blockbusters that replayed history and myth in creative, sometimes (to me) disturbing ways that seemed to aid a conservative agenda, were released. They focused invariably on beautiful renegade queens, disgraced goddesses,

or outlawed female revolutionaries and their ethical quandaries, and they flooded the marketplace and the popular imagination not only with supposedly historical dress, hairstyles, and adornment (which were rapidly adopted in Bangalorean parlors) but also with the ubiquity of female beauty and expanded notions of the power of a beautiful woman in the world as a moral force. Guided by these media phenomena, it was not unusual that Bangalorean women reflecting on themselves in the mirror wanted to create beauty that was inspired by myth, and to fabricate moral selves that aligned with mythical values. Indeed, as Leela Prasad has observed, such stories "illustrate the multifarious ways in which the 'moral life' is experienced, imagined, and constituted" (Prasad 2006, 183).

This tendency was bolstered by the ubiquity of myth in the everyday life of Bangalorean Hindus, especially as represented in the classical epics. As A. K. Ramanujan notes, stories drawn from Hindu epics are universes of meaning in themselves. For the reader or listener, the epic is never a new experience (hence Ramanujan's aphorism, "No Hindu ever reads the *Mahābhārata* for the first time") but an old one brought to life again, like a memory (N. Hawley 2022, 26). Through rehearings and retellings of stories from the epics, listeners experience a fully developed alternate world that is internally consistent and, crucially, that is being offered as an alternative to reality, one in which suffering exists, yet virtue overcomes all suffering (what J. R. R. Tolkien [2008] elegantly calls a "eucatastrophe," a catastrophe that ends in happiness). Thus, Bangalorean women told mythical stories not only to negotiate the moral requirements of everyday life but also to think about the divine female in relation to their own lives and the lives they wanted to lead. I came to realize that the women of the parlor existed in a spectral landscape, where concrete, mundane everyday life was spiked through with imagined spaces and fantastic emotions, allowing them to not only dream of better futures but to hope and at times even to act and transgress in the everyday. In the site of the Bangalorean parlors, myth and beauty were adjacencies, acting in concert and on each other toward the building of new subjunctive ethical worlds.

So, in the parlor, the mundane world of beauty practice and the fantastic world of the myths constantly interrupted and built on each other, interdigitizing toward what I will call "edge work," work that ruptures boundaries and strategically explores limits. This edge work of storytelling and beauty practice sat on the boundary between the political and the social and often contradicted or adumbrated the dominant caste, masculine, heroic, nationalist narrative, instead offering a "countersystem," an "alternative way of looking at things" (Ramanujan 1991, 53).

Because of the centrality of myth in the parlor, I found myself pushing back against the current attitude in anthropology that the mythical moment is passé and that myths are best analyzed as evidence of some other cultural phenomenon. Myths have been defined by the famed anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski as a "primitive charter of moral wisdom" (Malinowski in Dundes 1984, 199), a set of rules or codes of conduct that enable the social functions of the culture to flourish. Malinowski (1926, 28) writes, "The myth comes into play when rite, ceremony, or a social or moral rule demands justification, warrant of antiquity, reality, and sanctity." For him, myths authorize and act as an imprimatur for the normative, a societal covenant as it were.

Emily Hudson (2012), in her work on the epic literature of the subcontinent, specifically the Mahabharata, would seem to agree. She argues that there is a defined relationship between ethics, aesthetics, and religion in classical Indian literature and literary theory that offers an ethical covenant. The Mahabharata, the epic myth of fratricidal war, where the Bhagavad Gita forms a central part, is considered to be a major transmitter of *dharma* (moral, social, and religious ethics that is also seen as one's duty), perhaps the single most important concept in the history of Indian religions. The fratricidal story itself, as Hudson (2012) argues, "disorients" the readers, or listeners, through a focus on the continuous problematic relationships between ethical self-formation and subjective suffering in varied contexts, and constantly reconstructs dharma (duty) and *satya* (truth), through the positing of ethical conundrums that get resolved in various ways based on each character's inclinations, contextual choices, and abilities. What Hudson sees as "disorientation," the women in the parlor saw as creative license to tell and interpret the story in the contemporary moment, thereby offering polysemic ethical possibilities to the audience and rendering the story and its characters unexpectedly alive and relatable.

For Claude Lévi-Strauss, the other great student of myth, however, content, context, ethics, and truth were distant concerns. Rather, Lévi-Strauss argued that comparing myths and the motifs within them across cultures allowed anthropologists to see their structural similarities, whereby one could conclude that myth was both timeless and timely, allowing for something very new to become something very ancient through a fabricated story, creating a distinctive cultural form (Geertz 1980, 9). The grammar of myth, its structure and patterns, Lévi-Strauss (1955, 428–30) argued, was laid out in mythemes, binary pairs of opposites that structured the story, thereby bringing order to chaos. Through his obsessive study of myths from all over the world, Lévi-Strauss believed that he had discovered some "universal human truths." Of course, this universality was shot through with the assumptions of the Christo-colonial

project. Nonetheless, Lévi-Strauss's theories of myth have haunted anthropology for decades, contributing in no small measure to the study of myth being hidden or ignored (Badcock 1975; Carroll 1978; Dundes 1997; Godelier 2018).

But neither of these approaches seemed to adequately describe the usefulness of myth in the parlor. Alan Dundes, a folklorist, comes closest to the Bangalorean women's perspective in his study of myth. He argues that myths are simply popular "sacred narratives" where the human world and the divine are united. Myths for Dundes (1984) are not regulatory but explanatory, detailing how humans came to be the way they are. In that sense, for Bangalorean women, myths are the ultimate elaboration of truth, an ideal that speaks to reality. In these women's tellings, myths are not Malinowskian charters, justifying the world as it is but rather anti-charters,[14] *living revocations* that afford women the possibility to recall the characters in the myths to rework and negotiate the expected outcomes detailed in them toward radically different horizons. Telling these stories, I argue, allows women to speak strategically, to interact with the myths and reinvoke their ideals but also to subversively refuse, use, and negotiate ideas, aspirational values, and idealized characters to (re)construct selves both as raconteurs but also *as women*. So Benjamin's remarks about storytelling—"the storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and sages" (1968, 14)—holds true, but in unanticipated and often quietly revolutionary ways.

In the following pages, Bangalorean women recast myth as a strategic tool for physical and ethical self-fabrication, sometimes knowingly and sometimes unknowingly. Myth here offers a polysemic possibility of an ethics with which one crafts a life. Indeed, I argue that these new tellings of well-worn stories offer challenges to our understandings of narrative theory and theories of culture in general (Scott 2016).

For as A. K. Ramanujan presciently tells us, women's tales—narratives spoken by women about women—offer alternative forms of storytelling that "present different selections, viewpoints and solutions," "different finite provinces of reality," forming a "counter system" to the everyday reality that the women face. Women's tales are reflexive, a dialogic response to the masculine-oriented heroic theologies and philosophies of Hinduism. As the following pages show, they steadily parody, invert, share, and overtake, face and deface characters, themes, and motifs; and they transgress and propel stories in new directions, often in opposite ones than those that were intended. And, as I found, storytelling is an art at which the women in the parlor excelled.

Beauty Work

It is no accident that the stories women told in the parlors were stories of beauty starring ravishing and seductive apsaras, goddesses, and heroines. Beauty is, in fact, a central ethical category in Hinduism through its association with *rasa* theory, a traditional Indian philosophy of aesthetics. The term "rasa" has a variety of meanings (among them "flavor," "taste," "juice," and "essence"), but in aesthetics it is understood to refer to an emotional experience produced by art (Schwartz 2004). The idea of rasa was codified in the ancient text known as the *Natyashastra* (200–500 CE), a compendium of knowledge on dramatic performance (including music and dancing) (Pollock 2016). This text argues that eight distinct rasas—the beautiful (*shrungara*), the comic (*hasya*), the pathetic (*karuṇa*), the furious (*raudra*), the heroic (*veerya*), the terrible (*bhayanaka*), the odious (*bhibasta*), and the marvelous (*adbhuta*)—can be aroused in audience members through skillful performances. Later commentators acknowledged a ninth rasa, the tranquil (*shanta*). Together, these comprise the *navarasa* or nine aesthetic experiences, but it is accepted that beauty is the foundational rasa. Ethnohistorical accounts of beauty (shrungara) note its centrality as "the substance of aesthetic experience" in the codex of rasa aesthetics (Coomaraswamy in Shukla 2015, 6).

Shrungara can be brought about by alankara, which are modes of decoration of the body, often mimicking the divine body of the gods (Comeau 2020a and b). While shrungara and alankara are both process-based experiences that produce beauty, saundarya is the effect, the resultant beauty. Saundarya is an attribute of the goddess, understood as linked to the feminine mythic essence, embodying the inscrutable and powerful female force, the shakti.

Simply put, beauty is telling—ethically and morally. In Hindu cosmology, the presence of beauty is one of the key signs of domesticated and valuable female divinity, moral worth, purity, and virtue. Goddesses, apsaras, and virtuous heroines all are beautiful. When beauty is absent, it signals the demonic, the dangerous, and the chaotic. Unruly goddesses, demons, and evildoers of all kinds are ugly. The quality of *saundarya* (beauty) and the practices of *shrungara* (appreciation of beauty) and *alankara* (beautification) are allied in the Hindu imagination as evidence of auspiciousness, a domesticated state, and goodness. But being that goddesses in Hinduism can also be a hot and seductive beauty, a dangerous allure, an untamable, erotic overflow, and finally, a transcendence. The idea of beauty thus encapsulates the ambiguity and ambivalence of the goddess within it affording a plurality of ontologies for everyday women (Flueckiger 2006; Kinsley 1988).

FIG. 1.5. Another shrine at another parlor with a crucifix, an image of the infant Jesus, and Devi alongside some Chinese Tibetan symbols of luck

In fact, as the cleaner at the Lotus, Selvi, explained to me several years after I had met her, beauty was ungraspable (Tamil = *ìtavika mudiyade*), evanescent, and elusive, yet when it could be provoked, caught, and curated in a body, it was an all-powerful force, capable of transforming worlds and selves, just like the divine feminine. Moreover, the diversity of women in the parlor, all from different classes and castes, religions and regions, languages and ethnicities, and gender and sexual orientations, all concerned about beauty, suggested that beauty work (Kannada = *kelsa*) mirrored the multiple forms of the feminine divine herself (Biernacki 2007; Kinsley 1988).

Invoking rasa theory also ties into a significant difference in ideas of ethics and selfhood between Hinduism and the West. McKim Marriott has suggested, drawing from Louis Dumont, that Hindu personhood is "dividual"; unlike Western individuals who are encapsulated, autonomous beings, Hindus are caught in a miasma of humor-based relations. Their bodies and souls, the argument goes, are porous. I do not think this quite captures what is going on, however. My work suggests that the women I interacted with in the parlors of Bangalore had neither a "dividual" self that was entirely porous and divisible, nor an individual self that was entirely bounded and discrete (Marriott 1990).

Nor were they somewhere in the middle, on a journey of inevitable progress toward individual selves (Englund and Leach 2000, 229). Challenging these notions, I draw on theories of ethical personhood (Lambek and Strathern 1998) to argue that women's subjectivities are "multiauthored entities" (Finlay 2018) that are constructed as composite in the parlor as women work on their bodies in intimate encounters with other women. My interlocutors are partible persons who have a composite self, made up of fragments that they stitch together. Women's selfhoods are porous and need to be protected from pollution and dirt, but they are also oddly impervious to external influences. They draw from multiple sources to stitch themselves together, always raveling and unraveling, fabricating their selfhood as they go, disallowing some ideas about beauty and enunciating others. Indeed, rather than seeing women as known entities (even to themselves), I argue that they are only seen and recognized in intimate relations with others, crafting selves as they go along, creating a shared idea of who they are. So instead of asking whether we are known, it may be more fruitful to ask whether we have arrived in collaboration with other people with whom we have relationships, intimate and not, at a conception of ourselves that we recognize. Thus, Bangalorean women are acting as much as being acted on in constructing their selfhood, using various influences and experiences to craft a composite self that is contingent and flexible yet fleshly.

As such, the parlor offers us another illustration of what I termed in the first book of this Bangalorean trilogy a "creative ethics," where the ethical (as the morally valuable) and the strategic (which includes the morally questionable) are braided together (T. Srinivas 2018). The ethos of Bangalore is best encapsulated, I had argued, by a Kannada exhortation, "solpa adjust maadi" (Kannada = please adjust). This "adjustment" is a creative circumvention of an obstacle: a hack that by its existence enables a future, and it can be applied to any challenge, small or large. Creative ethics is an "anthropological imagining of doing rather than philosophical thinking," which offers a way for locals "to get beyond the tedium of habit, the 'uncanny of everyday life' (Das 2015), where a broader understanding of 'new regimes of living' inheres in the category of experience (Collier and Lakoff 2004)" (T. Srinivas 2018, 30–31). Creative ethics allows for the building of a future amid the precarity of the present. In the parlor, creative ethics becomes an aesthetic ethics through the expectations of and aspirations to beauty.

Interestingly, while the women of Bangalore recognized and articulated their connection to the feminine divine constantly, they rarely used indigenous or Sanskritic terms for beauty. They were not versed in aesthetic theory or interested in how beauty functioned in the construction of the self. Rather,

they used terms such as "pretty," "ultra glam(orous)," and "super cute" as complimentary and discretionary phrases that spoke to a contemporary discourse of beauty. Even in talking about mythical beauty, they often applied contemporary language, calling apsaras "too beautiful" or mythic queens "slim and glam." Thus, beauty was telling not only in the relations between selfhood and divinity but also in its language, gesturing toward the natural bricolage of the modern and the mythic that took place every day in the parlor.

The Endless Story

In listening to the beauty workers telling stories, I was reminded of the fables of *Panchatantra* that I read as a child. That work makes frequent use of frame narratives to link the stories together. The form of these stories is endless, one story weaving into another in a perpetually unfolding telling. Many stories are of adventure; others are bawdy love stories, drama, and tragedy. Sometimes the nesting devices are as simple as the repetition of a phrase that links two stories together. In other cases, they are more complex: the characters within one story start to tell another story, or a new story spins off from an older one to tell us the backstory of the lead protagonist in what we might today call a prequel. At other times, the stories wind forward toward what we might think of as a sequel, or we hear of the adventures of a minor character as a whole new tale, with its own cast of characters and its own landscapes. Thus, the mythical landscape becomes populated through these interlinked and nested stories. At the core of each narrative typically lies an ethical riddle, which is solved by following threads through the maze of words. This threaded form, like a tapestry where colors are woven together to create meaning, is so common in Indian oral and written storytelling that it is almost invisible to native audiences; a fugitive power. As the story dives into and pulls back from deeper layers, it creates loops within the frame narrative, demonstrating the connection between the present and the past, the mythic and the literal, the personal and the cosmic.

The version of this endless story that most people in the West are familiar with is the Orientalist fantasy of the *Arabian Nights*,[15] which is thought to derive from Indian storytelling and which serves as a useful metaphor for understanding the stories women in Bangalore told. The teller, Princess Scheherazade, wove her endless story at night to postpone an existential threat to her life. She deferred inevitable death at dawn by leaving the story at a tantalizing edge as it unspooled into yet another story, a masterpiece of storytelling.[16] I argue that the endless narratives in the parlor are also survivalist, allowing Bangalorean women to craft selves, to see their lives in both retrospect and

prospect, to form ethical horizons, and to link aspirationally to divinity. But these are no simplistic renditions of a putative ancestral past. By mixing "intention and accident" (Cavarero 2000, 1), multivocal tellings of mediated myths are stories of self and the "primacy of life" (M. Moran 2017, 298), and they act as a reflective soundtrack to a world in which women live stories and are their authors as well. These tellings act as a talismanic territory from which to act in the present, not as in the name of progress, as Walter Benjamin might say, but in the spirit of "actualization" or the "suddenly emergent" (1999, 461–62). In the following pages, I seek to explore this selfhood as it is crafted in the parlors and identify the inclinations, the desires, and the cultivations that make these women who they are.

On Method

Scrolling endlessly through texts on WhatsApp, I finally located the one that I was looking for. It was from a beautician in Bangalore and included photographs of her client's facial, which I wanted to share with a fellow anthropologist of India. As my colleague looked through the pictures on the phone, it chimed with goodnight messages from Bangalore, adorned with hearts and flowers. When she handed it back, she marveled at the thousands upon thousands of texts and messages I had saved from beauty clients, beauticians, priests, and other Bangaloreans: "You have fieldwork at your fingertips!" she remarked.

Although I began fieldwork in person in Bangalore in the mid-2000s and spent years visiting parlors and interviewing dozens of beauticians, managers, and customers, by 2016 I often kept in touch with my interlocutors via the WhatsApp platform and other social media when I was not in Bangalore. Because of robust fieldwork connections in Bangalore, and the ubiquity and accessibility of phone technology in India, when the pandemic hit and my elderly mother's care regimen became more intense, confining me to Boston, I began to communicate regularly with my interlocutors on WhatsApp. When a particular fruitful conversation happened, I simply took a screenshot of it with my phone. Technologies such as these suggest that we need to not only write and read "against culture" (Abu-Lughod 1991, 137–39) but also to think about place and positionality differently, as being more porous to flows of goods, telecommunications, and ideas, a collection of "experimental and discursive spaces" in which people situate themselves "physically and imaginatively" (Hastrup and Olwig 1997, 3 in D'Alisera 2004, 7).

Doing digital fieldwork, I found myself literally in two worlds. I spent half the Boston night virtually in Bangalore, listening to the koels singing and

crows cawing and hearing the blow dryers in the parlors and the election megaphones in the streets as I spoke with beauty workers. Messages from workers and friends came through at all times of day, wreathed in rainbows (indicating hope), glasses of wine (indicating relaxation), flowers (happiness) and hands pressed together (which meant thank you but was also sometimes used to indicate prayer), or images of deities. As the emoticons and memes on offer became wider, so also my contacts' use of them broadened. Messages now had personalized gifs where my friends endlessly twirled, showing off a new dress or hairstyle, or permanently batted their new eyelashes or applied lipstick. They shared photos of themselves pre–and post–beauty treatments and sent selfies and screenshots of prices and services. They liked and hearted certain salons and followed them on social media platforms. At the other end, I was wading through this river of data mostly at night when they were at work, and my days in Boston became exhausted stumbles through work and life.

Generally, questions of fieldwork still center on the characteristics of the fieldwork site itself (Gupta and Ferguson 1997a). However, the effect of new communications media on fieldwork cannot be ignored, especially in the wake of the pandemic. The sounds of incoming texts, messages, chats, and memes and the endless chiming and ringing alerted me to the fact that my cell phone was becoming my field. I was torn about this. On the one hand, I knew that the algorithmic architecture of social media platforms was a powerful tool for reproducing normative identities and intimacies, programmed to create a self-reflexive bubble. On the other hand, in thinking about media not merely as an object of study, as has been posited before, but as a new ground for fieldwork and a new methodology, I realized, as Patrick Eisenlohr (2009, 9) notes, that the more mediated we get, the more the medium fades away, making the technology seem as natural as embodied interaction. Thus, the immediacy of the data, the constant availability and the whittling away of temporal and spatial distance through technology has begun to make the field constantly present in a way that it was not in decades prior.

This is not always positive. In my case, it was not unlike trying to drink from a fire hydrant, drowning in streams of information about beauty that came unbidden, pinging late at night into my phone. The data were rich because my interlocutors were already habituated to social media, which depended on deeper, faster, and richer flows of affect, attention, and expression, rendering communication into private capital and reshaping their intimate relations. In fact, this way of doing fieldwork mimicked the way beauty work was done in Bangalore—partly in real life, partly virtual, all ruptural. Ruptural of time and space, and most of all, of attention. Thus, this book also serves as a meditation

on ethnographic fieldwork in the twenty-first century, an invitation to reconsider our tools and methods and to recognize their limitations.

Representing this new fieldwork, with its ruptures, anxieties, uncertainties, and inaccuracies, requires a shift in writing to include more communications like texts, gifs, images, and words from the field. I thought that privileging interlocutors' communicative styles meant writing a meta-text of texts within a text, and so I began to consider what the text really is and what the writing of it means. The staccato rhythms of communication across oceans and the cadence of abbreviated typescript were both incredibly efficient and yet often dropped sentences and even whole thoughts. Moreover, the tensions between orality and textuality were immanent. If the world of the parlor was a world invested with endless story, how could I represent those fragmented stories and the meandering, looping nature of them?

This and the many other challenges of this project have led me to think deeply about who I am in relationship to this work. The politics of representation sees selfhood as a struggle around positionalities (Hall 1991). In this work, my positionality has been a preoccupation. As I continued to do fieldwork in the parlors, I became wary, concerned that I was ventriloquizing women who were of a different status than I was, a cultural inauthenticity and violent grabbing of voice that was deeply troubling to me. To avoid this, I include beauty parlor vignettes that reflect and refract the dynamics of the parlor, deploying and intensifying images from my field notes and diaries.

I find that in many ethnographies, defining one's positionality has become a rote confession designed to counterattack the danger of essentializing or ventriloquizing a marginal Other. This often reduces the author to a singularity, but the point of positionality, it would seem, is to do the opposite: to bring forth a nuanced identity both social and political, "to build those forms of solidarity and identification which make common struggle and resistance possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities" (Hall 1995, 225). As ethnographers, we need to think about our positionality not as a defensive measure but as a dialogic act that assigns agency to the act of enunciation, sometimes through a recognition of the appropriation, or even the theft, of that which belongs to an Other. The question of dubious ethics has haunted our profession and our process since its inception, and engaging in twenty-first-century ethnography pivots them into focus in a way that cannot be ignored.

But ethnography can also be transformatory—a braided twine of time and place, subject and language, that turns the techne of representation into an agent of transformation rather than a mere medium of expression. Thus, enunciation of a nuanced position is not only necessary; it is ethically urgent,

allowing for an unsettling of fixed identities and inversions and reversions in the positioning of the agent as subject and object in the field, as my interactions with the beauticians and clients demonstrated. This unstable equilibrium demands a translucent critical practice to ensure its health, not a fixity of enunciation but a fracturing of established positions to develop structures of power to speak orthogonally to the people whose habitus we study.

My wariness about representation extended across the technological and human connections of fieldwork. Therefore, this ethnography is also haunted by the idea of integrity in the face of the acquisition that ethnography requires. For ethnographers take images and ideas and offer a representation of them, sometimes compassionate, sometimes not. Being sensitive to such intimacies across cultures and temporal distances, despite limited knowing, is a form of solidarity. Understanding, as Édouard Glissant (1997) says, allows us to "share the unknown with those whom we have yet to know," a poetics of blind relationality that is key to the ethnographic enterprise.

The Form of the Text

As I have mentioned, when I set out to write this book, I followed in the footsteps of Alfred Gell. Writing an anthropology of beauty, however, at times felt evanescent in itself. It reminded me of Birgit Meyer's contention about religion, that it is "an unseen reality" that affects how we think about and represent it. Meyer (2020, 9) writes, "For me, the intriguing thing about studying religion is that it involves a sense of an unseen reality that is held to exist and yet can only be sensed and rendered present through special techniques. This calls scholars to grasp the ways in which such an unseen reality, a professed transcendent, becomes tangible through practices of mediation, the issue being 'how to capture the wow.'" This, I found, is true of beauty as well. I wondered how I could capture its wow. Yet, in writing these interactions into chapters, I found that they fell serendipitously into attributes of the goddess's power that Bangalorean women sought to emulate: allure, radiance, heat, woundedness, fortune, and fluidity.

Chapter 1, "Alluring," tells the story of a local Bangalorean beauty pageant winner of the 1970s—Miss Vegetarian—in order to trace a microhistory of the beauty industry in post-independence India. It coalesces around the creation of the mythical *Bharatiya nari*, the ideal Indian woman, who showcases upper-caste values and is both modest and alluring in imitation of the goddess. The question the chapter raises is how allure, though an attribute of the goddess, raises the problem of recognition for women in the nation.

Chapter 2, "Radiant," explores some of the technoscientific processes of beauty, including depilation and skin lightening, building toward an athwart theory of beauty that emerges from the diagonal links between beauty and the fair skin attributed to mythical heroines. Fair skin is thought to be a characteristic of upper-casted and classed bodies and seen as evidence of status. Focusing on the potentially explosive dynamics of colorism in a caste-based society, where some are deemed "untouchable," this chapter alerts us to the inequality and opacity rife in the parlor, evidenced in the intimate relationship between "fair" upper-caste and classed clients and "dark" tribal and marginalized workers. Through the retelling of the story of Draupadi, the heroine of the epic the *Mahabharata*, set against the narrative of Dopdi, a tribal woman, this chapter explores the complex workings of social violence, particularly against marginalized, darker-skinned women in contemporary India. In thinking through the forms of life that women inhabit, I argue that the patterns of practice that they engage in reinforces and subverts caste hierarchies and ideas of female domestication.

Chapter 3, "Hot," details the sensual category of heat, which defines the presence of the goddess and her *ugra*, her excess. Through an understanding of heat as a quality of power and sensuality, the chapter details heated interactions with the goddess as "leaky" and "bloody." Further, the chapter discusses the sensible and sensual register of the olfactory presence of migrants whose bodies offer a scent that is deemed "foreign" by Bangaloreans, interpreted as representing migrant women's sexual hunger. This chapter examines the intimacies of the parlor and the unwritten rules that mask those intimacies.

Interlude, "Nightmare," describes an encounter held over WhatsApp with Lakshya, one of the migrant beauticians from the Northeast whom we met at the Lotus, and her story of migration to Bangalore.

Chapter 4, "Wounded," builds on the story of Lakshya's migration to explore the political economy of beauty within the nation-state of India. It weaves together the myth of the dismemberment of Sati with the experience of displacement suffered by many beauty workers. Reflecting on sacrifice, the chapter moves from Bangalore to the Kamakhya temple in the blue hills of Guwahati, Assam, the home of most migrants from the Northeast. Tackling the question of labor and belonging through the politics of migration, the chapter details the legal construction of new regimes of citizenship in India, a dismemberment of the nation into fragmented parts, and its impact on Dalit and tribal women working in Bangalore.

Chapter 5, "Fortunate," describes the beauty processes inherent in preparing for a Hindu wedding. It reflects on the charged place of conjugality in Bangalore to argue that the notion of being fortunate, "bhagyam," is directly linked

to marital status and the domestication of female power in the form of Lakshmi, the radiant, divine consort of the god Vishnu. Detailing myths of domesticated wives such as Sita and Savitri, both of whom are beautiful, chaste, and forgiving, the chapter unpacks the centrality of conjugality and savarna politics in understandings of contemporary Indian womanhood.

Chapter 6, "Fluid," follows my failed attempts to visit a queer parlor in Bangalore and ends up discovering an emerging space of digital beauty practice. There, I find new and dynamic queer resistances that speak to embodiment and sexuality in formative ways: in hijra cosmetic acquisition, a butch lesbian's discomfort with Bangalorean body shaming, and the sharing of myths of female asuras (demons) and queer divinities. Embodying gender-bending goddesses, such as Mohini, as the ideal and aspirational mythic figures of queer lives, trans celebrities in Bangalore tell stories of divinity that highlight transgression and divine capaciousness to make political claims for greater social inclusion.

In "Conclusion," we find ourselves with Selvi, who is getting made up to receive the goddess Amman. This experience of possession touches on many of the book's themes and thus provides a mirror to reflect on the lessons learned through the journey toward beauty. Selvi guides us in unpacking the meaning of beauty as edge work, a practice that gestures to what lies beyond the horizon of our imaginings.

Finally, "Postlude" brings us back to everyday preoccupations of care and intimacy and the question of recognition and imagination in a fragile world.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. The ringtone sang, *Suraj hua maddham, Chand jalna laga, Aasman yeh hai, kyon pighalne gaya?* (Hindi: The sun is setting, the moon is on fire, why does the sky melt into rain?).

2. Gandhari is a prominent character of the epic the *Mahabharata*. She is the princess of Gandhara and the wife of the blind King Dritharashtra, king of the Kurus, the mother of a hundred sons known as the Kauravas. According to the epic, after her marriage, she blindfolds herself to live like her husband and is a devoted wife and pious queen (see Adi Parva Sambhava Parva: *Mahabharata* Book 1, Section LXVII, 139). But the anthropologist Iravati Karve argued that her enforced blindness was a sign of her anger at being hustled into a marriage she did not want to a blind king (Sundar 2007).

3. *Apsaras* are mythical Hindu celestial shape-shifting female spirits. They are beautiful and seductive, eternally youthful, and skilled in courtly music and dance. They live in the court of the king of the gods, Indra, and periodically seduce gods, sages, and men, disrupting narratives and changing outcomes. Depicted as ethereal, romantic, seductive, and mischievous, the most famous among them are Urvashi, Rambha, and Menaka.

4. Teen Deviyaan (Three Goddesses) was the name of a Bollywood hit movie from the 1960s, inspired by D. H. Lawrence's works. It tells the story of a poet who falls in love with three women. But the phrase "teen deviyaan" in Hinduism usually refers to three forms of the goddess: Sri Lakshmi, Parvati, and Saraswati.

5. Now shortened in common parlance in the United States to "cis-het."

6. In the following pages, women as a broad category includes queer and gender-nonconforming people as well.

7. Rashmi Rajagopal, "Prasad Bidapa Talks About His Latest Venture, the Virtual Runway, and the Future of the Industry," *Indulge Express*, June 4, 2020, https://www

.indulgexpress.com/fashion/trends/2020/jun/05/prasad-bidapa-talks-about-his-latest-venture-the-virtual-runway-and-the-future-of-the-industry-25471.html.

8. Suresh Nandi and Sindhu Jain, "India Becomes New Priority for Many International Beauty and Cosmetic Giants," *India Today*, November 15, 1996, https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/19961115-india-becomes-new-priority-for-many-international-beauty-cosmetic-giants-834100-1996-11-14.

9. For statistics on the personal care industry and its long-term growth, see https://www.statista.com/outlook/cmo/beauty-personal-care/india.

10. "How Spa Industry Made It Large in India," *Opportunity India*, September 29, 2017, https://www.franchiseindia.com/wellness/How-Spa-Industry-made-it-Large-in-India.10018.

11. Today, the unofficial estimate of Bangalore's population is twelve million, though all counts agree that Bangalore's population will probably be over twenty-five million by 2030.

12. The beauty industry is also called the personal care industry in India.

13. Arunima Mishra, "Beauty and Grooming Industry is Booming in India," *BTMag*, September 14, 2014, https://www.businesstoday.in/magazine/features/vlcc-clsa-everstone-kpmg-ac-nielsen-report/story/209609.html.

14. I am deeply indebted to Brad Weiss and Michael Herzfeld for their help in thinking this question of charter and anti-charter through with me.

15. The *Arabian Nights* as an Orientalist fantasy overtook the spaces of storytelling that were not part of the Christo-colonial world.

16. Recently, storytelling has become a much vaunted craft and subsequently a much reviled trope of twenty-first-century popular culture.

1. ALLURING

1. Women who were considered too thin did not get away either. I was frequently called "stick poochi" (Tamil: stick insect) or "bamboo kaddi" (Kannada: bamboo stick). Passing comments included catcalls on the street as well as shaming remarks in more intimate or even domestic settings.

2. Bangaloreans termed it the "mass molestation."

3. The rise in gender violence in the city over the past decade is startling with increased anecdotal reports of catcalling, groping, touching, and more police reports of overt harassment and even rape.

4. Michael Safi, "Bangalore Police Detain Six Men over New Year's Eve 'Mass Molestation,'" *Guardian*, January 4, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/04/bangalore-police-investigate-new-years-eve-sexual-assault-india.

5. The power of allurement most often drawn from mythical divine women like the apsara Menaka and Shakti goddesses, cast as sirens who lured heroic men to their doom through their beauty, is the central trope of many myths (Kinsley 1988).

6. A version of the goddess who used to be a rural, wilderness, and healing goddess in the village of Banashankari that had become part of the city.

7. The first fifty-one names of the *Lalita Sahasranama* describe the goddess's beautiful form, yet quickly thereafter the poetry turns to the description of her violent conquests