On the last days of the village goddess Gangamma’s annual festival (*jatara*), celebrated in May at the height of summer heat in the South Indian pilgrimage town of Tirupati, the streets leading toward Gangamma’s largest temple become filled with *stri veshams* (lit., female guises)—men who have taken the guise of women through wearing saris, breasts, braids, and ornaments (figure 2.1). While for onlookers outside the tradition, particularly as reported in the press, these *stri veshams* are the most notorious feature of the *jatara*, there are also other forms of guising connected with Gangamma traditions. Over the week-long festival, men of a particular weaving-caste family take on a series of ten guises of Gangamma, embodying her primary narrative (in which she herself takes disguises). These *veshams* transform the men into the goddess herself, who then walks through the streets of old Tirupati, where she is worshiped by female householders at the doorways of their homes. Women who participate in the *jatara* also identified the turmeric powder or paste applied to the dark stone face of the goddess and the faces of some of her female worshipers as vesham. Placing *stri vesham* within this wider repertoire of practices surfaces the material agency of all vesham forms, which transform those who take these guises.

Scholars of dress and fashion such as Joanne Eicher often distinguish everyday clothing from specialized, periodic dress (such as *stri vesham*) that
one might call costume or masquerade (2010, 151–52). Folklorist Pravina Shukla accepts this general distinction but argues that the performance identity created by costume is an intensification of the everyday, not dis-

Figure 2.1. Gangamma Jatara stri vesham. Photo by the author.
distinct from it: “In wearing costume we do not become someone else; rather, we become in some context a deeper or heightened version of ourselves. Costume provides an outlet for expression of certain identity markers that do not have an outlet in ordinary life” (2015, 15). Here Shukla suggests that both costume and everyday clothing reflect preexisting social and existential identities rather than transform them. However, other studies focusing specifically on guising and masquerade raise the possibilities of transformation, arguing that masquerade creates a moment of reflexivity that raises questions of the ultimate nature of reality—of the construction, deconstruction, and/or transformation of self through concealment and revelation (Handelman 1990; Napier 1986; Tseelon 2001).

The Telugu term “vesham” makes no distinction between everyday clothing, disguise, masquerade, or costume, suggesting that all clothing and material guising has the potential to be transformative. Gangamma Jatara veshams may reflect identities of the persons or deities who wear them, but they also have the potential to transform identities and selves. This possibility is one supported by the performative approach to materiality taken in this book—the materiality of the guise does something.

Kaikala Gangamma Veshams

The Gangamma veshams taken by male ritual specialists from an extended family of a weavers caste, the Kaikalas, give us an indigenous cue regarding the transformative and creative power of the material vesham. Here, it is the physical clothing and ornaments of the goddess that literally transform human males into the goddess. Venkateshvarlu—a Kaikala man who regularly participates in these goddess veshams—told us that when he takes the vesham of a prince (itself a disguise that Gangamma takes in her narrative), “as soon as I hold the sword and put on the crown, full ugram (power) comes to me. While roaming the streets, I feel like the goddess going to war” (figure 2.2). Each day of the weeklong jatara, the Kaikala guises perambulate the streets and gullies of the oldest neighborhoods of Tirupati, their rounds becoming longer and longer as the goddess becomes more powerful with each vesham. The goddess (Kaikala men in vesham) is met at domestic doorways by female householders who anoint her feet with turmeric and vermillion powders; make offerings of coconut, flowers, camphor, and new pieces of cloth; and perform harati (flame offering).
A week or so before each jatara, the Kaikala matriarch pulls out an old tin trunk in which are stored the jumbled material pieces of the veshams that will create the goddess. She lays out each day’s vesham, checking the condition of the ornaments, ankle bells, saris, headpieces, earrings, and other accoutrements unique to that day’s vesham. The oversized papier-mâché ornaments may need a new application of gold foil, necklace clasps may need repair, saris may need to be laundered. Presentation of new handwoven saris for the most powerful veshams who appear at the end of the festival is a ritual right and responsibility (mirasi) of families from particular castes, and these saris are given to the Kaikalas the week before the jatara. The Kaikala women have very clear ideas about what dress and ornaments the goddess both desires and require; they are meticulous in their preparations.¹

Adolescent boys take the initial Kaikala-worn veshams; as the goddess becomes more powerful (ugra) in the vesham sequence throughout the week, later veshams are taken by married men. The first year I attended the jatara (1992), a sixteen-year-old boy took the Chetti (merchant) vesham. His mother carefully applied a smooth covering of turmeric paste on his face; his grandmother adorned him with oversized, gold foil-covered earrings and headpiece, around which white jasmine flowers were circled, before she wrapped around him a white, red-bordered sari. His transformation complete, the boy goddess walked quickly (nearly running) alongside his father, with his head covered with a white cloth, to the temple of Veshalamma (lit., goddess of veshams; one of the Seven Sister village goddesses, of whom Gangamma is one). The vesham-ed goddess was not revealed to the public until she had worshiped Veshalamma and her head was uncovered; only then did she begin her perambulations of old Tirupati that gave opportunity for female householders to greet and worship the goddess, in her Chetti vesham, at their doorways.

¹ These desires of the goddess are also widely known in communities that worship her. When I attended the jatara in 1992 and wanted to buy the goddess a sari, the shopkeeper, when he learned of the intended recipient, immediately pulled out an array of appropriate cotton saris in maroon, green, and turmeric-color hues, with gold threads decorating the borders. Another year, when I asked the Kaikala matriarch what kind of sari I should buy the goddess, she made very clear that for this particular occasion I should gift a green silk sari with a gold border.
This sixteen-year-old boy’s father, Venkateshvarlu, called the Kaikala veshams Gangamma’s “festival forms” (utsava murtis), similar to the small brass forms of deities taken out in temple festival processions—an assertion that the veshams are indeed the goddess. Like utsava murtis, the Kaikala Gangamma veshams make the goddess present and accessible outside of her shrines and temples. Significantly, the transformed Kaikala males are not imitatively female; their ornaments are oversized and not “real” gold, and their gait and gestures remain culturally “male” as they stride purposefully down Tirupati’s gullies. This is in stark contrast to stri vesham taken by male dancers in Kuchipudi classical dance, where male dancers try to approximate, but sometimes exaggerate, female gait, gesture, and voice while performing female roles (Kamath 2019).

The Kaikala veshams not only become the goddess, but those of the first four days also materially reenact her primary narrative. Oral traditions tell the story of a pubescent human girl who reveals herself as the goddess. Gangamma was found as a baby in a dry rice field by her adoptive Reddy-caste family, who had no idea that she was the goddess. As a pubescent girl, Gangamma is spotted drying her hair on her rooftop by a local chieftain (palegadu), known for sexually exploiting beautiful young women in his domain. He demands Gangamma’s hand in marriage. Knowing the reputation of the palegadu, her father is, of course, reluctant to agree and becomes (quite literally) sick with worry. But the young Gangamma urges him to agree to the palegadu’s demand, saying she will take care of herself. As the couple—Gangamma and the palegadu—is rounding the sacred fire to solemnize the marriage, Gangamma turns around to show her true form (vishvarupam; the goddess now without the guise of the human body) to the palegadu, as a goddess who “stretches from earth to sky.” Fearful for his very life, the palegadu jumps off the wedding stage and runs to hide from the excessively powerful (ugra) goddess. Gangamma chases him, taking a series of disguises (veshams), so that he will not see her before she sees him. Ultimately, in the disguise of a prince, she beheads him.

In the narrative, the human body itself serves as a material vesham for the goddess, disguising her true divine identity; in her search for the palegadu, she also takes a series of veshams to disguise that body. Each

2. For further analysis of the vesham sequence, see Handelman 1995.
day of the jatara, a different Kaikala man puts on one of these disguises: mendicant, snake charmer, milkmaid, merchant, or sweeper. Finally, in the princely (dora) vesham (figure 2.2), Gangamma enacts the beheading of the palegadu. These narrative veshams conceal Gangamma’s identity as goddess, but they also reveal the range of left-hand (non-landowning) castes among whom she lives and who serve her. Thereafter, over the last

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3. These double guises, before Gangamma fully reveals herself, are accompanied by a guised Chakali (washer [laundering] caste) male. The paired veshams are said to be the two Gangamma sisters, with the Kaikalas taking the guise of the elder sister and Chakalis taking the guise of the younger sister. (The Chakali vesham accompanying the dora is the dora’s minister.) After the dora beheads the palegadu, the Chakali vesham is dropped. Like the Kaikalas, the Chakali families consider Gangamma to be a daughter of their caste. However, the Chakali veshams are performatively secondary to those taken by the Kaikalas. One Chakali twenty-something grandson complained,
three days of the jatara and her last three veshams, Gangamma drops her disguise and reveals her goddess identity.

The sequence of veshams of the first four days are double veshams: through vesham men become the goddess, who herself has taken disguising veshams. The last three Kaikala Gangamma veshams step beyond the narrative and are single guises: Kaikala men in vesham who are simply the goddess. These three are the most powerful forms of the goddess: the matangi, who is consistently identified as too powerful (ugra) to bear for long; the split form of the sunnapukundalu, or lime pots (lime is believed to be a cooling substance); and finally the perantalu, or auspicious woman/goddess. The matangi’s ugram is both created and reflected, in part, by the excessive kumkum that she is offered by householders, which she subsequently distributes to them from a pouch made by her sari. By midday her hands are dark red and her white-and-red-checked sari is similarly deeply stained. Gangamma’s ugram, fully manifest in the matangi, is materially modulated in her subsequent form, the sunnapukundalu, which is split between two human bodies. Venkateshvarlu explained that this vesham assures worshipers that the goddess will not stay so excessively ugra as to become the illnesses against which she has come to protect.

The lengthy preparation of the sunnapukundalu veshams is the only guising creation that takes place in a temple courtyard rather than in the Kaikala home and the only one whose transformation is witnessed by non–family members. The two men chosen to take this vesham grow their hair out in advance so that it is long enough for a few strands to be pulled through a hole at the bottom of clay pots smeared with white lime while still attached to their heads. The hair shank is twisted around and anchored with a small stick that sits at the bottom of the pot. A bamboo frame is attached to the pots, around which strands of jasmine flowers are wound, visually creating a temple structure atop each man’s head. As the sunnapukundalu, the goddess is again accessible to her worshipers, and her courtyard is filled with women who have come to witness her material creation.

During the close to one-and-a-half-hour preparation of the sunnapukundalu, Pambala-caste epic singers and drummers perform one of Gangamma’s narratives, with the goddess herself as their primary audience.

“We don’t get much [respect, from the Kaikalas], but our grandmother is insistent that we take the veshams. . . . [saying]: This is god’s work [daivam karyam], not something we do for our family [for family respect].”
The story they sing is of Adi Para Shakti, the primordial goddess who ultimately divides into thousands of *gramadevatas*, of whom Gangamma is one. It is as if Gangamma needs to be reminded of her fullest power (shakti, ugram) even as that power is being modulated so that humans can bear to interact with her. And female members of the audience do interact with her, thronging to get the sunnapukundalus’ blessings once their vesham is complete (figure 2.3). The veshams then begin their perambulations around Tirupati to receive worship of householders; of all the veshams, theirs is the widest spatial circuit in the *uru*, taking up to forty-eight hours.

Males taking stri vesham is common in many Indian ritual and performance contexts: male actors or dancers take female roles through stri vesham in classical dance and village drama performance genres in which women did not (and often still do not) traditionally perform. Baby boys are often dressed in girls’ clothing in order to deflect the evil eye from the preferred male child or simply for the enjoyment of “beautifying” infant or toddler sons, as several mothers have told me. In other
contexts, male ritual specialists become the goddess through possession, when they sometimes don the stri vesham of the goddess. Because of their prevalence, occurrences of stri vesham in Indian performance and ritual contexts—like Gangamma Jatara—are not particularly noteworthy for Indian audiences and are, as Harshita Kamath has argued (2019), less “disruptive” to normative gender roles than, for example, the American drag impersonation analyzed by Judith Butler (1990). No one—including the pilgrims who throng Tirupati’s main bazaar, bus stand, and train station on their way to or from visiting the famous pilgrimage temple of the god Venkateshvara—pays particular attention to the goddess as she strides down the street, unless they are participating in the jatara and waiting for Gangamma to come to their doorways.

While the Kaikala veshams are worshiped as the goddess, performatively—with their male bodies quite visible—they are also men who have become the goddess. This ambiguous identity is performed midday during the matangi’s perambulations when she returns to the Kaikala residence for a particularly powerful ritual before resting for a short while. She first sits facing material images of herself and her brother, Potu Raju, that have been set up in the small Kaikala courtyard for the duration of the jatara (figure 2.4). Slowly she begins to stamp her belled feet, moving faster and faster until she is possessed—by still another form of herself. To cool down Gangamma (to dissipate the power of her possession), her tongue is pierced by a tiny silver trident; gradually her stamping slows and she slumps over.

The day I witnessed this ritual and its aftermath, after their possession was cooled, the exhausted matangi was walked to an interior room of the house where the vesham-ed man’s wife took off their heavy flower garlands, loosened the goddess/husband’s sari a bit, brought him water to drink, and hand-fed him some cooling curd rice. His curious toddler begged to sit on her father’s lap. Simply putting on Gangamma’s vesham transforms the Kaikala men into the goddess. However, this image of the utterly exhausted matangi, whose high energy on the streets was now totally dissipated, without flowers but still wearing parts of her vesham

4. Kamath (2019, particularly chapter 2) demonstrates ways in which stri vesham in the dance tradition of Kuchipudi village actually creates and enables hegemonic normative Brahmin masculinity rather than being a subversive tradition.
(sari and ornaments), raises the question of whether the matangi at rest is the goddess or a human male (figure 2.5); performatively, they seem to be both. When I tried to elicit from Kaikala family members how they experience Gangamma’s veshams—when a wife worships her husband as
the goddess or a toddler sits on the lap of her vesham-ed father—they answered only, “She is Gangamma.” Surely the experience is interiorized by Kaikala wives and daughters, sons, husbands, and uncles at a nonverbal, bodily, sensory level that leaves in their imaginations and everyday lives

Figure 2.5. Matangi at rest. Photo by the author.
traces of the fluidity of vesham, body, gender, and identity. After an hour of rest, the matangi’s garlands were put back on, and she strode out of the house to complete her rounds of Tirupati, again full of energy and fully the goddess.

Through both indigenous commentary and performative analyses, we learn that Kaikala veshams do not simply represent the goddess; they create Gangamma and make her tangibly present to the uru outside of her temples and shrines. Women who meet the goddess at the doorways of their homes and apply *pasupu-kumkum* to her feet worship the vesham-ed Kaikala men *as* the goddess, not *as if* they were the goddess. While the goddess possesses some of her worshipers in other contexts, the Kaikala men do not become the goddess through possession but through vesham. Remember Venkateshwarlu’s assertion that as soon as he holds the sword and wears the crown, “full ugram comes to me.” That the Kaikala veshams literally transform the male into the goddess—and this is readily accepted by jatara participants and most Tirupati residents—suggests the transformative power of vesham in other Gangamma contexts, such as that of laymen taking on stri vesham during the jatara and the turmeric vesham applied to the faces of both Gangamma and her female worshipers.

**Lay Stri Veshams**

While laymen (that is, non-Kaikalas) who take on stri vesham (saris, female ornaments, breasts, and braids) do not become the goddess or women (they are always identified as stri veshams, not women), their veshams nevertheless transform the men wearing them. However, into who or what these men are transformed is not as explicit as in the case of the Kaikala veshams that create the goddess. I look to broader jatara narrative, ritual, and vesham repertoires for clues of the effects (agency) of stri veshams on the laymen who wear them.

Lay men (or more often their mothers on their behalf) initially take stri vesham to fulfill a vow made to the goddess when they have experienced a childhood illness with which the goddess Gangamma is closely associated. Mothers vow to Gangamma that if their sons recover from their illness, their sons will take stri vesham at least once during the jatara. Other adult males take stri vesham vows later in life for their physical health or educational and business opportunities. Many men take stri vesham only once in their lifetimes; however, some men continue the
practice year after year, long after the vow has been fulfilled. Some men are dressed in everyday cotton saris; others are draped in silk or synthetic saris. In earlier days, sari-ed men of left-hand artisan castes wore their saris over their right shoulders—as women of these castes used to do and as pictured in the photograph of an elderly mother with her vesham-ed son (figure 2.6). Today, most men wear their saris in what has become the “standard” style, draped over their left shoulders. In the early days of the jatara, most vesham-ed men and boys who come to Gangamma’s biggest temple have taken vesham for ritual reasons. Many of these veshams self-identify as the matangi (taking her vesham), covering their faces with turmeric paste, sandalwood powder, or white ash and wearing

Figure 2.6. Lay stri vesham with mother. Photo by the author.
a crown of jasmine flowers, ritual materials dropped by those men who take vesham more “for fun.”

The individual male body performing stri vesham—whether it be an elderly male, a young man, or a child—can be considered part of the vesham. I picked up this idea from a female jatara participant who used the word avatara (lit., descent; used to identify deities who take form on earth) when speaking of jatara veshams. Seeing my quizzical look, she explained, “You know, Gangamma takes avatara and humans take vesham,” equating the two words. Several Gangamma narratives recount the goddess taking a human body as a disguising vesham. Recall that she took the form of a human female baby in the palegadu narrative above, a baby found and raised by a Reddy family that was unaware of her divinity until she showed her vishvarupam as she rounded the fire with the palegadu during her wedding rituals. Another story tells of members of a wedding party traveling by foot when they came across an old woman walking by herself on the side of the road. The women of the wedding party invited her to join them, saying it wasn’t right for an elder to be traveling by herself. After stopping to camp for the night, one of the younger women offered to groom the old woman, checking for and picking out the lice from her hair. When the younger woman began to part the elder’s hair, she saw on the old woman’s scalp the thousand eyes of the goddess and only then recognized her as Gangamma.

Hindu mythology is replete with examples of deities taking a human body guise. Sometimes the human vesham disguises the deity, and other times it enables the deity to become accessible to the humans who would not be able to bear revelation of the god or goddess in their “true” form. In one story, Shiva takes on the vesham of a mendicant to test the loyalty of his devotee, demanding that the devotee make a curry from the body of his own son. After the devotee complies and the curry is served to the god, Shiva reveals himself and miraculously brings the son back to life (Shulman 1993). In the Bhagavad Gita, the warrior Arjuna asks Krishna in the guise of his charioteer to show him who he truly is. Krishna reluctantly complies, knowing that Arjuna will not be able to sustain this vision. As the god predicted, Arjuna cannot bear this vision and begs Krishna to return to the form he knows as his charioteer (Gita 11:41–46 [Patton 2008, 135–38]). Wendy Doniger suggests that god masquerades as a mortal “to make it possible for us to gaze upon him; he presents us with a shaded lens through which we can view his solar splendor without
being blinded” (1980, 69). Understanding the human bodies inhabited by Gangamma and other deities as vesham raises questions of all human bodies and the identities they perform and create.

Part of the ritual fulfillment of a stri vesham vow is display—not only for men to put on a sari but also to be seen in a sari, both by the goddess and other festival participants. On the last days of the festival, Tirupati streets become filled with stri veshams whose visual, material, performative effect helps to create a “world become female.” Some of these lay veshams try to imitate female body language (but without the nuanced training, for example, of Kuchipudi dancers performing stri vesham), usually exaggerating the swing of their hips or manipulations of their sari ends. Others, like the Kaikala veshams, make no effort at imitation of female body language. While on the first days most stri veshams are accompanied by their mothers or wives, by the last day of the jatara, many men in stri vesham come to the temple and linger on Tirupati’s streets in boisterous groups (whose culturally male behavior is often enhanced by alcohol). For these men, vesham seems to take a role of Butlerian masquerade and parody rather than in fulfillment of a vow—what is identified by celebrants as “for fun only.” That is, they seem to be self-consciously and with great fun breaking/bending gendered roles and identities. One year I met two men in stri vesham riding motorcycles and stuck in traffic. When I asked whether their mothers had taken a vow on their behalf that they were now fulfilling, they laughed and said no, they were Muslims. They were taking vesham “for fun only.” But these parodic veshams are framed by a performance repertoire that includes the Kaikala veshams and stri veshams taken as part of vows, leaving open the possibility of their transformative agency even if the human intention behind them is only fun. This parodic performance of stri vesham constitutes the dominant representation of the festival in the press, whose members write from urban, middle-class, and dominant-caste perspectives on gender and ritual and who decontextualize the practice of stri vesham from Gangamma narrative, ritual, and vesham repertoires.

I asked several jatara participants why it is, for this particular festival, that vows of stri vesham, rather than other kinds of vows, are made to the goddess. One sari-ed man speculated that during the festival, when the goddess is most ugra, “We should not appear before her as men.” Another sari-ed man responded, “After all, she’s just beheaded a man [the palegadu].” Significantly, lay stri veshams appear on Tirupati’s streets
in greatest numbers only after the goddess in her princely vesham has ritually beheaded the antagonist of Gangamma’s primary narrative, the sexually aggressive palegadu.

The Gangamma narrative repertoire includes another story about the transformation—but, in this case, not death—of men/masculinity that gives us another clue as to what stri vesham may create. In this story, Gangamma in her original form as Adi Para Shakti (lit., primordial goddess) was all alone in the universe. When she reached puberty, she experienced sexual desire and created the three gods—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—one by one, in hopes that he would fulfill her desire. The first word out of the mouths of Brahma and Vishnu was *amma* (mother), which precluded their becoming sexual partners. But the first word out of Shiva’s mouth was *eme*, a Telugu pronoun that husbands use to address their wives; he was what one performer called a “candidate” to fulfill the goddess’s desire. Recognizing and fearing her superiority, Shiva demanded that Adi Para Shakti give him some of her shakti in the form of her third eye and trident—another example of the agency of materiality, the eye and trident being material forms of her shakti. The goddess thought to herself that only a relationship between equals would be satisfying, and she agreed to give some of her excessive shakti to Shiva. However, Shiva recanted on his end of the deal, thinking that, with the power of the goddess’s eye and trident, he now had the upper hand. In her fury at being betrayed, Adi Para Shakti changed the three gods she had created into women—specifically, female servants who massaged her limbs. But then she realized that an all-female world is not *dharmic*—not according to the natural order—and she changed them back into men. But the gods (and their arrogant masculinity) were transformed, now accepting the superiority of the goddess. They agreed to marry her but only if she divided herself into their three consorts (Sarasvati, Lakshmi, Parvati) and 360 (unmarried) village goddesses, so they could “bear her.” Both narratively and visually or materially (while not always “in fact,” on the ground), aggressive masculinity is transformed: through the narrative destruction.

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5. Many of my middle-class female friends were not willing to go with me on the last morning of the festival to witness the dismantling of the *ugra mukhis* (large clay heads of the goddess that are said to have a particularly powerful gaze), saying they were uncomfortable in the mostly male crowds and feared encounters with increasingly aggressive (often drunk) groups of sari-ed men.
of the threatening palegadu, the narrative transformation of gods into women and back into males, and the ritual proliferation of material stri veshams on the streets of Tirupati.

Male Experience of Stri Vesham

Several male acquaintances in Tirupati remembered taking stri vesham as young boys, and some showed me photographs of their sari-ed selves during earlier jataras. One friend recounted that he had taken stri vesham only once, when he was fourteen years old, “for fun only” and not part of a vow. But then, significantly, he added, “I wanted to see what it would feel like to be a woman. My mother felt very happy to see me as a female, a girl. She said, ‘Oh, my lovely daughter.’ I wanted to see how I would look as a woman. I felt shy. I felt everything differently in stri vesham.” But most of the men I spoke with were surprisingly (from my perspective) unreflective/reflexive about it—perhaps in part because I didn’t ask the right questions or because of my own gender or American identity, but perhaps also because stri vesham is an embodied experience about which they had had no need to be verbally articulate.

I heard a more direct comment about male experience of stri vesham when, rather serendipitously, I met a man who had taken stri vesham during Gangamma Jatara every year for thirty-five years. My fieldwork associate and I had stopped at Hathi Ramji Matham (the religious institution that used to administer the Tirumala temple of Shri Venkateshvara) to ask why the matham was one of the three sites where, during her perambulations, the matangi’s tongue was pierced with a tiny silver trident. Having been directed by a sadhu sitting on the veranda into a large office, at the first desk we were warmly greeted by a Brahmin man whom we came to know as Srinivasan. He answered our questions about the tongue piercing rather cryptically and then surprised us by saying, in English, “Madam, you would be interested to know that I’ve taken stri vesham every year for thirty-five years” (figure 2.7). Prior to this, I had assumed that Brahmins did not participate in the jatara, except perhaps by sending both vegetarian and nonvegetarian offerings to the goddess through the hands of a non-Brahmin servant. But now, here was a Brahmin male who spoke of taking stri vesham as something quite ordinary, not exceptional for his caste.
Srinivasan explained that when he had been a sickly child, his mother had made a vow to Gangamma that if he regained full strength and health, he would take stri vesham during her jatara. At the urging of his grandmother, however, he said he had kept up the tradition for many years following fulfillment of the initial vow. He said his grandmother had told him again (reported in English), “Taking vesham, just once a year, you can get a corner on women’s shakti.” The use of the term “corner” suggests that stri vesham has the potential to give men just a bit of the experience of being female or access to female shakti. Or if we accept

Figure 2.7. Photograph of Srinivasan stri vesham. Photo by the author.
that guising not only disguises and creates but also reveals, then one may speculate that stri vesham reveals the potential of masculinity to include a feminine “corner.”

Although taking stri vesham during the jatara may give men access to women’s power once a year, photographs commemorate that experience outside of the ritual context. When I went to Srinivasan’s for dinner one night after our initial conversation, he showed me a family photo album that held several professionally taken photographs of himself in stri vesham. He explained that he had first taken the guise at about the age of eight, initially wearing a half-sari (a style worn by South Indian young girls); as he grew up, the vesham changed into a full sari. His mother and, after marriage, his wife had carefully chosen his sari, ornaments, and sometimes a fashionable purse. When he was young, he used to go around in stri vesham with his friends: “We would dance. If I didn’t dance, they would pinch me. Of course, it’s not necessary to dance, but that was for fun only.” Srinivasan’s two adult sons, who have never taken stri vesham, looked on in some amusement.

Representing another educational, caste, and class level, a tea stall owner, Venkat, answered my question about whether he had ever taken stri vesham by proudly pulling out from under the greasy counter a photograph preserved in a dusty plastic sleeve. In the photograph, he is dressed in an aqua, red-bordered silk sari, posing with two male friends (one also in stri vesham). Venkat gave little verbal commentary to that photographed experience except to say he had taken this vesham several years ago in fulfillment of a vow; however, his smile suggested a memory of pleasure and some pride. That he kept the photograph of his stri vesham close at hand suggests its importance to him.

Many sari-ed, ornamented men, like Srinivasan and Venkat, go to photography studios and pose for formal portraits of their stri veshams.

6. Some earlier readers of this chapter have suggested that “to get a corner” may mean men who wear stri vesham will gain a measure of control, domination, or advantage over women’s shakti, as in the English phrase “cornering the (financial) market.” However, placing this grandmother’s comment in the context of Gangamma traditions that are female centered, in which the goddess has beheaded an aggressive male, and in which some men are afraid to come before the goddess as men, I do not think this is the meaning of “corner” here. I am also not aware of an Indian-language phrase that idiomatically uses “corner” as advantage or control.
or document their veshams on cell phones. These photographs are still another example of the performativity of materiality in the Gangamma repertoire. Stri veshams are not iterative performances on the male body that “naturalize” and stabilize gender (Butler 2008); rather, their performance is only temporary and periodic (sometimes only once in a lifetime). However, their preservation through photography makes tangible and keeps accessible the memory of that experience and helps to keep open the possibilities for the transformative “work” of the vesham.

In *The Coming of Photography in India* (2008), Christopher Pinney argues that photography is more than simply an index (a “transfer of the real”). Rather, it is an agent that creates, that suggests possibility and impossibility, and that may have “unpredictable consequences” (5), as do all material acts. Pinney suggests that “photographs become ‘image acts’ which, like J. L. Austin’s ‘speech acts,’ are ‘performatives: in the act of enunciation they do not simply describe the world: they change it” (145; my emphasis). Photography records whatever appears in front of the camera without distinguishing whether the recorded image has been achieved or is aspirational (137–38). In Tirupati photography studios, vesham-ed men stand in front of generic nature scenes or plain backdrops that give few clues of the contexts in which they live their everyday lives—their domestic or occupational contexts—thus obscuring distinctions of class and caste. The resulting photographs record in a single image the performance of both gender and class, which may be realized or (in Pinney’s term) subjunctive, achieved or aspired to.

The veshams that laymen wear in these photographs—silk or polyester saris, pearled or gold-plated jewelry—perform middle-class identity. It is unlikely, for example, that the elder male I photographed dressed in an everyday cotton sari and blouse with ash smeared on his face, without the adornment of costume jewelry, would choose to pose for a professional photographer. Turning to Srinivasan and Venkat, both borrowed saris from females in their own families. However, what the silk or high-quality polyester sari signifies for each family is quite different. Taking into account the class backgrounds of the men who took these stri veshams, Srinivasan’s portrait records an achieved middle-class identity, whereas that of Venkat records middle-class aspiration. Photographs of both men record subjunctive gender possibilities.

The stri veshams in professional photographs make permanent a temporary female guise, but the photographed stri vesham is not wholly imitative and the male body is never totally disguised, as it interrupts the
female vesham through facial features and body stance. Remember the injunction of Srinivasan’s grandmother that he should experience only a “corner”—not the full measure of—female shakti. Lay veshams do not create and are rarely mistaken or viewed by others as fully actualized females. They are seen and experienced, both during their perambulations on Tirupati’s streets and in photographs, as veshams, not women. Indigenously understood, while stri vesham “plays with” gender and may raise questions of the nature of masculinity, it does not question its very existence on either a social or an existential level. A subjunctive potential is created. Stri vesham has the potential to change its male actor—not by questioning his gender or transforming him into a female but by transforming the kind of masculinity he performs and embodies, one that embraces at least a “corner” of female shakti.

While writing my book about Gangamma, *When the World Becomes Female* (2013), I realized that I did not know Venkat’s caste. I asked a local male anthropologist if he would be willing to find the tea stall and ask Venkat a little more about his background and caste. The anthropologist heard the following: Venkat was a thirty-six-year-old Mudaliar-caste migrant from Tamil Nadu. Venkat reported that he had taken stri vesham four times and had planned to do so again that year (2011). The first time, in 1998 (he would have been about twenty-three years old), he said he took vesham for “fun,” joining other friends who were taking vesham. Later, however, when he was experiencing ill health and difficulties in his business, he decided to take the vow to Gangamma of stri vesham. He attributed his return to health and a better economic situation to the resulting intervention of the goddess.

Venkat told the male anthropologist that when he took vesham, he not only wore female garments and jewelry but also tried to enact “the gaze and seductive gait of a woman,” approximating a male perception of the body language of a flirtatious woman. He described his male friends’ reactions to this stri vesham: they “pulled his hand, kissed him, embraced him, fondled his [artificial] breasts, and pinched his buttocks.” His friends took liberties with his stri vesham that they would not have likely felt free to do openly, in public, with female friends. Venkat had started taking stri vesham as a kind of fun masquerade; however, when he was in need, he decided to take the serious vow of stri vesham. He has realized the power of the goddess; at the same time, in stri vesham he enjoys a certain freedom and abandonment of traditional, gendered mores of interactions between men and women in public contexts. We do not
know from this narrative or photographs how men may be transformed by stri vesham once they take the guise off. We have to look elsewhere in Gangamma vesham, ritual, and narrative repertoires for clues about the agency of female guising, including the possibility of transformation of aggressive masculinity.

Female Turmeric Veshams

Although rarely mentioned in conversations and press reports about Gangamma traditions, the practice of female turmeric (pasupu) guising—daily or weekly application of turmeric powder on the faces of both the goddess and her female devotees—is much more common than is stri vesham. I was led to identify turmeric as a form of vesham when, in my attempts to verify that women did not take Kaikala Gangamma veshams or stri veshams, one of the women gathered in Gangamma’s temple courtyard asserted, “But we do! We wear turmeric every Tuesday and Friday [days special to the goddess], don’t we?” In subsequent conversations, Gangamma worshipers were often explicit about what this pasupu “does,” thus providing commentary about the agency of other forms of guising in the jatara vesham repertoire.

Gangamma and her gramadevata sisters are often simply stone heads without bodies, whose faces are characteristically covered with turmeric (figure 2.8). The turmeric application is more than superficial; it acts, helping to create the goddesses so closely associated with the substance. In writing about another Telugu gramadevata, David Shulman characterizes her turmeric application as constituting the deity, intensifying her presence, and deepening her self-awareness (2005, 56). But pasupu as vesham goes beyond creating the goddess; it simultaneously hides and reveals her features and transforms her ugra nature. Gangamma’s weekly abhishekam (ritual anointing with milk and water) in her two largest Tirupati temples, on Friday mornings, is a powerful moment, as her turmeric vesham runs off and her dark, haunting face is revealed. Only now are the goddess’s fangs visible, fangs that indicate her demanding, excessive, powerful ugra nature. Her turmeric vesham keeps devotees from regularly coming face-to-face with Gangamma’s unguised self, as if this fanged form may be too much to bear on a daily basis (much like the Kaikala Gangamma vesham of the matangi).
Venkateshvarlu, who along with his mother serves Gangamma at her Tallapaka temple, has the responsibility to perform Gangamma’s weekly abhishekam. After pouring gallons of milk and water over her image until there are no traces of pasupu left, he performs harati and then carefully reapplies her turmeric mask, flicking the dry powder on the wet surface of her face and gently smoothing it over with a feather.
When I asked him the significance of the turmeric, Venkateshvarlu’s immediate response was that it made Gangamma shanta (tranquil) and a muttaiduva (auspicious woman, a term usually associated with married women). Gangamma’s turmeric vesham transforms her ugra nature, not only hiding it but also making her shanta. However, the turmeric mask does not materially destroy Gangamma’s powerful ugram; although hidden, her fangs are still present and their protuberance is barely visible under the turmeric. She is still ugra—as she is consistently characterized by Tirupati residents—but not only ugra.

Based on Venkateshvarlu’s response, I had initially interpreted the turmeric application as modulating the goddess’s ugra nature. But when I ventured this interpretation to the flower sellers at another Gangamma temple, they disagreed. Rather, they explained, the turmeric enabled devotees to see (reveal), quite literally, Gangamma’s features, so that she could be “known.” Without the pasupu, it can be difficult to distinguish the dark stone’s facial features. Other female worshipers likened the turmeric to “makeup,” which both beautifies and accentuates Gangamma’s features. One female temple employee elaborated: “Turmeric gives beauty and radiance [kala; brightness] to the face. Look at this stone. If you leave it just like this, it won’t look good [i.e., dry, cracked]. Only when we do alankara [ornamentation; in this case with pasupu] does she look like a muttaiduva. Married women also wear pasupu-kumkum [like the goddess].” The speaker then caught herself, saying, “No, no. Actually, she’s not married.” This self-correction suggests that the unmarried goddess unsettles the dominant characterization of muttaiduva as a married woman—just as her tali unsettles that ornament’s association with marriage. Gangamma’s turmeric masking both reveals, in letting us see her features, and conceals, hiding her ugra fangs. Materially, she transcends the traditional dichotomy of ugra and shanta (as a muttaiduva); she is both/and.

Women share the performance of turmeric vesham with the goddess. Many female devotees come to Gangamma’s temples on Tuesdays and Fridays with turmeric marks on their cheeks and necks or with their entire face covered with turmeric paste. (Turmeric is also applied to women’s feet in some rituals for married women, such as Varalakshmi Puja.) One explained, “We [women] are equal to the goddess . . . so we can put it [turmeric] on our faces,” suggesting that men are not equal and thus should not, or perhaps do not have the right to, wear turmeric. Turmeric vesham identifies women with the goddess and materially performs their
shared quality of shakti.\textsuperscript{7} A female sweeper at my guesthouse asserted this identification when I asked her if women were afraid of the \textit{ugra mukhis} (oversized clay heads of the goddess constructed on the final day of the jatara), as men seemed to be, who told us this form was too ugra to look at directly: “No, we’re not afraid. We have shakti and she [the goddess] has shakti, so we’re not afraid. But men. They don’t have shakti, so they are afraid.”

However, one male who consistently wears turmeric is Gangamma’s brother, Potu Raju, who stands outside of his Seven Sisters’ shrines as a nonanthropomorphic stone form (often a small rounded stone or a conical larger form). He is covered solidly with turmeric, over which are applied vermillion dots. This pasupu-kumkum vesham performatively feminizes him (as turmeric and vermilion are traditionally female-associated substances), materially identifying him with his similarly turmeric and vermillion vesham-ed sisters. He retains his name, Potu Raju (lit., “king of male-ness”), but arguably he is transformed into a different kind of male in the presence of his powerful sisters and by the application of turmeric. Venkateshvarlu identified the turmeric-covered stone facing Gangamma at the Tallapaka temple as both Potu Raju and \textit{shaktiswarupini} (lit., one whose form is shakti; female noun). Potu Raju’s female-associated turmeric vesham and appellations (Potu Raju and shaktiswarupini) give us another clue as to how stri vesham has the potential to feminize sari-wearing men, even as they remain men.

Some women take the turmeric vesham daily, along with pronounced, large \textit{bottus} (vermilion forehead markings) and sometimes matted hair. This “excessive” vesham, in relationship to the smaller bottus and restrained, oiled hair most women wear every day, identifies a greater than “normal” religiosity and service to the goddess. This group of women includes those called \textit{matammas}, women who ritually exchange \textit{talis} with the goddess. Thereafter, these women serve as ritual specialists to the goddess and do not traditionally marry human males. Talis are part of their matamma vesham; the tali is particularly significant for women who would not traditionally wear this sign of marital status, such as unmarried women and

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{7} That women appear before the goddess with turmeric vesham suggests it makes the goddess happy/content (\textit{santosham}) to see a reflection of her own shakti identified in women through their turmeric markings—just as it makes her happy to see men-become-female in stri vesham during her jatara.}
widows. This was the case for the matamma Pujaramma, who had married a man but continued to wear a tali after she was widowed. In her case, matted hair was also part of her vesham. She told me that she had tried to cut off her matted locks numerous times because of the problems it caused her by “hiding lice.” She narrated that she and Gangamma argued back and forth every time she cut off her matted hair, but the goddess always won and the matted hair always grew back. In one conversation, Pujaramma reported a dream in which she saw her matted hair growing back in the form of a serpent’s hood, a Shiva linga (sign of the god), and Venkateshvara’s jada (braid). Shiva and Venkateshvara are male gods, and yet here their signs of a linga and jada indicate the presence of the goddess—a play of gender much like stri vesham. Pujaramma specifically identified her matted hair as a kind of vesham, a guise that performs her special relationship with the goddess and Gangamma’s presence on/in her human female body.

The performativity of veshams taken by women contrasts significantly from that of men. “Stri vesham” literally means “female attire or guise.” This is what women wear every day, and therefore it is unremarkable on a female body.8 In the context of the jatara, “stri vesham” refers specifically to men wearing female clothing and adornment; men are, quite literally, the marked category in a world that becomes increasingly female as the jatara progresses. Women do not need to take a different vesham than what they wear every day in order to have access to the ugra Gangamma during her jatara, as do men. Similarly, the women assert, turmeric vesham does not transform them; rather, both sari and turmeric veshams recognize them for who they already are. In the same way turmeric lets us “see” the goddess, its markings on female ritual participants reminds both them and those who see them of who they are: powerful women who share the shakti of the goddess.

8. For some women in contemporary India, saris have become a matter of both choice and debate. Many women do not begin to wear a sari regularly until they have completed their education, since to begin to wear a sari every day is an indication to her community that she is now ready for marriage. Other professional women may choose not to wear them to work as a matter of convenience. See Zare and Mohammed 2015 for discussion of a debate between two feminist poets on the patriarchal restriction of a sari or its comfort and utilitarian potential.
Female clothing and ornaments, turmeric, matted hair, and photography are all material elements of a performance repertoire of vesham in Gangamma traditions. Each element of the repertoire provides a commentary on the others. Through their juxtaposition, as well as through ritual and discursive cues, we learn that vesham transforms the deity or human who puts it on. While the transformative agency of veshams taken on by the Kaikala men is not discursively questioned or discussed, it is acted upon when women greet the vesham-ed Kaikalas at their doorways as the goddess. This material act provides commentary on the transformative possibilities of other material acts in the vesham repertoire. Similarly, Venkateshvarlu's comment that the turmeric vesham he applies to Gangamma’s stone face transforms her very nature, from ugra to shanta, suggests that stri vesham performed by laymen may transform their nature. Stri veshams perform gendered possibilities that are not easily or openly recognized in the everyday social world outside of the ritual contexts. These possibilities—created by material acts of vesham—include recognition of an imaginative reality in which women are the unmarked, encompassing category in a jatara world that at its core is female, and men (or aggressive masculinity) are transformed in order to have access to and a place in that world.