Sociologists and social anthropologists have been drawn to the study of religion right from the beginning of their disciplines (Klass and Weisgrau 1999: 1). For instance, Emile Durkheim studied the totemic religion of Australian tribes, Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown that of Andaman Islanders and Bronislaw Malinoswki that of Trobriand Islanders, and there are many others who have studied religion or religious practices of other tribes and communities. Three main aspects of religion have come under the focus of sociology and social anthropology, namely, ‘doctrine’ (dogma) and ‘rites’ (rituals), and ‘religious fellowship and association’ (organisation) (Wach 1947: 2). In the context of established religions, ‘more emphasis is placed on doctrine and mode of worship than on organisation’ (Lorenzen 1995: xi), and in the context of folk religion and religious practices, the organisation is amorphous (ibid.).

Religion as practised by people in communities and by groups is a vast subject linked to various aspects of human life. For instance, ‘Bhils believe that their lives are ordered by various gods and goddesses. A man's wealth or poverty, health or sickness, prosperity or adversity, everything depends on the vagaries of these divinities’ (Ahuja 1965: 24). And ‘their "methods of worship" include prayers, sacrifice, possession and charm [sic]’ (ibid.: 25). Similarly, the Phanse Pardhis, a hunter community, venerate cow; they do not sacrifice cow or eat beef. They also worship tree and plants. The Kales, a sub-group of Phanse Pardhis, worship Pipal tree (*Ficus religiassa*); the Chavans, another sub-group of the Pardhis, venerate the Vad banyan tree (*Ficus Bengalessis*) and the Pavars, yet another subgroup of Pardhis venerate ‘Tulasi’ plant *Ocimum Sanchim* (Sangave 1967: 86).

The religious practices among the Chitrakathi, a nomadic community in Maharashtra, members of which narrate stories from Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Puranas with the help of pictures painted by them, are simple. They fast; make and fulfil vows to god Khandoba of Jejuri in Pune district, to goddess Bhavani Mata of Tuljapur in Osmanabad district or to goddess Renuka Mata of Mahur in Nanded district. They also treat those who are possessed and offer a
goat to goddess Mariai during the lunar month of Ashad. They believe that the goddess protects them from all that is evil, from ghosts and spirits, and bestows health and happiness to the community (Chavan 2008: 125–26). Religious practices, rituals or ‘cultural acts tend to bind together and unite those animated by the same central experience’ (Wach 1947: 40).

Masan Jogis personify Vetal, the god of dead and spirits, on their begging expedition. As mentioned earlier, traditionally, they dealt with funerals and were associated with cemeteries or cremation grounds. The Masan Jogi life is closely associated with death and the religious practices connected to it. Though fundamentally Shaivite, they also follow gods and goddesses of other communities. This chapter deals with religious aspects Masan Jogis. It first traces their devotion to Shiva, the Mahadeva, and places them in the Shaivite ascetic tradition. It then moves on to understanding of their devotion to Pochamma, the folk goddess of Andhra Pradesh, describes the cult of Rama Mama, a deity recently added to their pantheon. Finally, it shows how Masan Jogis have crossed the boundaries of established religions to worship Sailani Baba of Sufi tradition and Jesus Christ and Mother Mary from the Christian tradition, in the true eclectic spirit.

**Masan Jogi in the Shaiva Tradition**

Since the elements of Shaivite Hinduism are most pronounced among the religious ideas of Masan Jogis, it is important for us to know the place of Masan Jogis in the Shaivite tradition. As an important stream of religious philosophy in both the classical and modern Hinduism, Shaivism has spread and developed in different parts of the Indian peninsula as well as in the neighbouring countries in varied forms. Rudra, the ‘foremost of the Devas [gods] that are tangible entities emerging out of the intangible and the absolute God’ (Parvati Kumar 2006: 19), is the prototype of Shiva in the Vedic religion. There are six main schools of Shaivism that evolved at different times in history; each emphasised a specific philosophical aspect:

i. **Pashupat.** Apparently the oldest school, the word *Pashupat* that comes from the etymological root *pashyati*, which means those who have seen or encountered god. It is not to be understood as *Pashu-pati*, the lord of animals.
ii. *Shaiva Siddhanta.* This school mainly spread in present day Tamil Nadu during the 3rd century BCE; it follows *Agama,* the doctrine of worship based on the Vedic texts and their commentary, known as *Nigamas.*

iii. *Kashmiri Shaivism.* This school is also known as *Trika Darshan.* The followers of this school propagate the philosophy of non-dualism and are therefore known as *Advait.*

iv. *Siddh Siddha.* This school evolved around the 10th century CE. It includes several small cults based on ascetic practices of various kinds, including Yoga. The Kapalikas and the Kalmukhas were ascetic sects that developed during this period connection of which will be traced to the Masan Jogis later in this chapter.

v. *Shaiva Advait.* This school believes in Shiva as the one united with the *Parabrahma,* the ultimate reality. It propagates qualified monism, known as *Vishishtadvait.*

vi. *Veera Shaivism.* This school is the most recent in its origin. It was founded by Ekantad Ramayya and was popularised by Basweshvara among the people in Karnataka. Its adherents are also known as Lingayats, as they wear the *linga,* phallic symbol of Shiva, around their neck (from original Marathi, Abhyankar 2001: 1282–1384).

**The Connection to the Kapalikas and Kalmukhas**

Around the time of 10th–11th century, asceticism had reached new heights, in which *tantric* practices gained prominence and Yoga became a characteristic of ascetic practices (translated from Marathi Dhere 2001/2010: 15–17). The Siddh Siddha school, which evolved during the time of Mahabharata, the great epic, includes several cults based on ascetic practices such as *Nath Sampraday,* a teacher–disciple tradition that began with Gorkshanath, the *Kanphata* cult; those who have a big hole pierced made in the earlobe and wear a large ring in it; the *Dasnami* the groups bearing ten (das) different title (name). One of the ascetic practices in those days was to adore Shiva in the form of corpses, ghosts, and spirits. The head of all was *Vetal,* the lord of dead. This ascetic cult was known as Kapalikas, the skull-bearers, and Kalmukhas, those who mark their foreheads with three black horizontal lines (Abhyankar 2001: 1267). This cult had spread to many parts of India, but unfortunately no religious texts of either the Kápálikas or the
Kálámukhas have survived’ (Lorenzen 1972: xi). Since the Kapalikas were ‘the most extreme sect’ (R.G.Bhandarkar quoted in Lorenzen 1972: vii) in their ascetic practices, they were also known as aghora, the terrible, and avaghad, the tough ones. They wore human skulls around their neck, adorned their body with several strands of necklaces made up of human bones, smeared their faces with ashes from the funeral pyre and wandered around in the manner of Mahavratya, the follower of Great Vow (Lorenzen 2005: 8049–50). This description fits Masan Jogis particularly when they wear the attire and smear their faces with colours (with ashes from the funeral pyre in olden days) are similar to that of Kalmukhas and Kapalikas, before going on begging expedition. Till recent times, the Masan Jogi lifestyle was based on renouncement of worldly possessions, similar to that of Shaivite ascetics. The Sidh Sidha School spearheaded several small cults but a cult of this kind of married ascetics finds no mention in Shaivite history. It is difficult to pinpoint the place of Masan Jogis within the Sidh Sidha School at this stage. However, they could be considered as the married-mendicant-ascetics, a group by itself.

Keeping to their own identity in the Shaivite ascetic tradition, Masan Jogis are not seen joining the festive gatherings of other Shaivite cults or sects or participate in their devotion. The Samadhi (grave) of Kanifnath at Madhi in Pathardi Taluka of Ahmednagar district is just 35 km away from Shevgaon. Thousands of people gather there in the festive season beginning from the fifth dark night of the lunar month Phalugn to the lunar New Year day, that is, the first new moon night of the lunar month of Chaitra (the Marathi New Year day) sometime during April and May. The Kaikadis, another nomadic tribe that has migrated from Andhra Pradesh to Maharashtra, are honoured to light the fire of the Holi to mark the beginning of the month-long festival. But Masan Jogis presence is never seen there.

**Devotion to Shiva, the Mahadeva**

Attributing their origin to Lord Shiva, Masan Jogis worship him. I have often joined the celebration of Mahashivratri, the birth night of Lord Shiva, on the 14th Shukla, the dark night in the lunar month Magha, which is an occasion for grand celebration for the community. Most of the rural communities mark special occasions with the reference of popular festivals and
movement of the moon. Masan Jogis too follow the same procedure to calculate the day of Mahashivratri with reference to the new moon night or full moon night that falls before or after the Makar Sankranti, a popular festival celebrated all over Maharashtra that marks the transition of the sun into the one of the twelve zodiac signs called Makara rashi (Capricorn) on its celestial path. The occasion is to mark the northward movement of the sun increasing the length of the day.

The process to ascertain the day of Mahashivratri begins with a discussion in an informal group. The group arrives to ascertain the current month by counting full moon nights and new moon nights starting from the Makar Sankranti festival. From these calculations they locate the day of Mahashivratri, the last day of the month of Magh, the second-last lunar month in Marathi calendar. Individuals confirm the festival by joining various groups in their discussions.

On this day, Masan Jogis are seen getting ready to visit the nearby Shiva temple early morning. They perform a kind of ritual-worship by offering flowers to the Shivalinga, the phallic symbol of Lord Shiva, called pind in Marathi, and to the Nandi, the bull, the carrier of Shiva. The conch shell carefully preserved by Masan Jogis, as a symbol of Lord Shiva, is a symbolic article of Hindu devotion. The shell is blown on auspicious occasions and during prayers. Masan Jogis pour shell-full of water over the Shivalinga, as a ritual. Then the conch is blown aloud several times rendering echoes of devotion in the temple premises (see Video Clip 4.1). Masan Jogis distribute jiggery (coarse brown sugar) as prasada, among the devotees to mark the ceremony. On other days, when on begging expedition, Masan Jogis recite Hara hara Mahadev glorifying the name of Shiva the Mahadeva in a soft voice.

Masan Jogis do not follow other communities who adore Shiva, offer bel, (fruit of Aegle marmelos), beetle leaves, and pour stream of water over the Shivalinga and circumambulate around the temple in clockwise direction. Every Masan Jogi household may have a picture of Shiva in meditation or of Vetal hanging on the wall, but there is no Shiva temple found in Masan Jogi clusters anywhere in Maharashtra.

Lord Shiva, who holds power over ghosts and spirits, is believed to have given his power to Vetal, making him the Lord of Ghosts (translated from Marathi, Joshi 1976: 60, 61). Vetal wears
several strands of necklaces of *Rudrksha* (literally the Rudra’s eyes), beads made out of the fruits of the evergreen tree, *Elaeocarpus ganitrus*. He wears necklaces of human skulls and his face is smeared with ashes from the cremation ground. In his appearance as Kapalika, the skull bearer, and Kalmukha, the one with blackened face, he is believed to move freely in the burial or cremation grounds in the night. As devotees of Lord Shiva and assigned to his ascetic band as Yogi/Jogi of the burial places, Masan Jogns worship Vetal. The dress they wear while going on begging expedition is a representation of the ferocious and fearful Vetal (see Picture 4.1). Vetal, in many folktales, is depicted as carrying a corpse on his shoulder in many folktales. When villagers see a Masan Jogi at their door, they have this understanding of him; there is a feeling of fear as well as respectful admiration at the same time.

Picture 4.1: A Masan Jogi dressed in the attire of Vetal

Source: Fieldwork collection

In Maharashtra, Vetal is also regarded as a guardian of village boundaries. As a protector, he is placed on village boundaries at the entrance of a village in the form of round stones lying in
neglected manner, almost invariably together with Mariai, the goddess particularly adored by the Mahar community, who protects people from small pox, measles and other communicable diseases. As villages are progressively becoming secured from these diseases and are protected in many ways, these deities seem to have receded to the background. Vetal, a folk deity, is generally worshiped by the lower castes.

As a consort of Lord Shiva, Parvati has a prominent place in worship among the followers of Lord Shiva. In many a Shaiva folktale, it is she who requests Lord Shiva to help the devotee who usually is in utter distress and desperately crying for help. Surprisingly, however, Parvati is absent from the pantheon of Masan Jogis. Instead, Yellamma, Durgamma, and Pochamma – the folk deities of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and some parts of Maharashtra– are adored. The pilgrimage centres of many of these deities are located in the wilderness away from the villages. Masan Jogis believe that basically ill health is caused by offending or unknowingly dishonouring a deity. When someone gets sick in the family, it is a sure sign that someone in the family has offended a deity. Masan Jogis first make a vow to one of these goddesses. After the disease is cured, the whole family undertakes pilgrimage to the centre, performs some kind of puja and offer a goat or chicken in sacrifice to please the deity. Masan Jogis feel compelled to undertake the pilgrimage and perform the ritual as early as possible, for, they believe, the wrath of the goddess might escalate and may cause more harm to the family in case of such delay.

**Devotion to Pochamma**

Pochamma is a folk deity who is very popular among the lower castes in Andhra Pradesh. The origin of the deity is unknown. The goddess is known for bestowing prosperity on the devotees and protecting people from diseases. Many come to her seeking cure or protection from disease or asking for progeny. A visit to the shrine of Pochamma during the year or on the occasion of the feast is a must for a Masan Jogi family.

The solitary temple shrine of Pochamma is located in the forest about 3 km from the main village Adeli in Nirmal district of Andhra Pradesh, bordering Maharashtra. Picture 4.2 shows the idol of Pochamma in the garbhgriha, Sanctum Sanctorum of the temple.
I first went to Nanded and from there to Hadgaon, a railway station in Nanded district in Maharashtra. From Hadgaon I went by a narrow road that leads to Sarangpur, and then to Adeli. There is no officiating priest at the temple shrine of Pochamma; the pujari mainly functions as an attendant. There is also no formal way of offering puja or any ritual to be performed in the temple. People walk in the temple and take darshan (the devout glimpse of the goddess), offer coconuts and then proceed to offer a goat or chicken outside of the temple where hundreds of goats and chicken are slaughtered on the feast day. Picture 4.3 shows the place where goats are slaughtered. The legs and the head of the goat are donated to the temple. The temple authorities auction it altogether and the cash is added to the treasury of the temple. The butcher does not charge his services but takes the skin of the goat. He sells the skins after curing them and thus earns his living. The whole area is infested with blood and filled with unbearable stench.

People from other communities decorate the goat take it in a procession to the temple to be offered to the deity. Picture 4.4 shows a painting on the side wall of the Pochamma temple at Adeli, depicting a goat being taken in a procession with music and dance for sacrifice.
Picture 4.3: The place where goats are sacrificed

Source: Fieldwork collection

Picture 4.4: Painting on the wall of Adeli Temple

Source: Fieldwork collection
Every Sunday hundreds of people come to visit this temple. There are two broad categories of people who come to pay homage to the goddess. The first category is of those people who come to pray for a short while. It may be an individual, a group or a family. They first take a darshan, then offer a coconut. After moving around in the surrounding area of the temple, they go away. Though it appears to be a casual visit, it is in fact, an intended visit.

The second category of people consists of those who come to fulfil their vow to the goddess. They come in a big group or with families and relatives and friends, carrying along the sacrificial animal, and the utensils for cooking. As they arrive, they look out for a place where they can cook and spend the entire day. After they have settled down, everyone takes bath near the pond referred to as the well (see Picture 4.5). Then they go to take a darshan of the goddess, offer a coconut at the shrine and proceed to slaughter the goat. While taking the darshan, the devout glimpse at the goddess, the devotees offer some small amount (about ten to fifteen rupees) that goes to the pujari directly. At the time of the darshan people also are seen pray in and uttering some words in silence for a very brief while. They thank the goddess for bestowing upon them good health and
happiness and beseech her to ward off all that is evil. Some sit in the sabha mandapam (the open hall of the temple) for some time to gain more peace.

After breaking the coconut, the sacrificial animal is taken to the spot for slaughtering, located in front of the temple a few meters away. There are some men assigned only to slaughter the animals. The whole ground is spilled with blood. The man has a sharp knife in his hand. He traps the goat so that it lies on its side. He holds the front part of the animal so tight that it cannot make any movements. He swiftly cuts the throat of the animal and let the blood flow till the animal stops its movements. The head and the legs are cut. They are offered to the goddess. The remaining animal is then neatly made into prices to be cooked. The women see to the cooking and serving the food. They are helped by young boys and girls of the family. A few men assist them too.

Meanwhile, the area is filled with several such camps spread in the forest around the temple. The lines of shops come alive with the bustle of buyers and sellers. The makeshift shops are constructed with branches of trees and the leaves used for making roof. Several items, such as, eatables, clothing for children, things that need to be offered to the goddess are displayed in these shops. Crowds of devotees arrive in trucks, jeeps and in bullock carts. The whole temple area is crowded with people.

The cooking has reached midway and now there is nothing much to be done. Those men and women wash themselves clean and set out with small children to take a round in the shopping zone of the temple premises. As they move watching and gazing at the articles displayed in the shops, they decide what they want to buy discussing with each other. The process of buying starts with enquiring in the first few shops the prices of the items they are interested in buying. While this is going on, there are others who are also in the same process. Often the relatives bump into each other. And sharing of each others’ well-being lasts according to the proximity of the relatives or friends. Closer the relative, the longer the time it takes to share information. Meeting of relatives, friends and well wishers is the common scene all across the crowd. Those who are close to the family are invited to share the prasad, the gracious gift of god or goddess in the form of a meal. Invitation is honoured respectfully. During the course, information, good wishes and
welfare are exchanged. Nothing is planned ahead yet, everything seems to follow a sequence in an easy manner. It is almost late night when the all activities are over. The family usually chooses to spend the night there and move out only after about ten in the morning next day.

The main feast day is on the day of Dasara, the tenth day of Shukla in the lunar month of Ashvin, during September–October. The festivities start a week before the main day and last for more than a week. Those who cannot make it during these days choose to be there on one of the following Sundays. Thousands of people of different communities flock to the temple on the main day of the feast. It is the time when rains would have subsided, there is greenery all over and crops are getting ready. The atmosphere is full of hope and happiness. It is the time for the communities to take a break from their routine work. Masan Jogis are one among the numerous communities that come to adore Pochamma and join in the celebration.

Many members of the Masan Jogi community in Shevgaon visit Pochamma temple on the feast day. The whole family travels to Adeli, where they join their relatives and friends, mainly from Andhra Pradesh. They perform puja, offer their sacrifice together and spend a day or two in the temple complex renewing the old acquaintances. Just as the people from other communities, Masan Jogis come to the temple seeking the blessing of Pochamma and ask for good health and protection from illnesses. Masan Jogis believe, ill health is basically caused by the evil spirit and only Pochamma can deal with the evil spirit. It is not that they pray or speak out their wishes to the deity. They believe that, by their mere travelling all the way to the Adeli temple and offering the sacrifice, Pochamma takes care of the needs and pleas of her devotees.

Several women from other communities are seen offering a small wooden cradle to Pochamma. It is a symbolic presentation of the gift of child received through the miraculous power of the deity. The cradle is tied to a branch of the tree near the temple in gratitude to the goddess who has blessed the devotee with a child (see Picture 4.6). Though, many of other communities come to Adeli asking for the gift of progeny, Masan Jogis ask for good health.

Religious worship has integrative power; it is ‘revealed in the creation of transient or permanent organizational forms’ (Wach 1947: 43) in a society. Religious ceremonies and traditional religious practices influence cohesiveness of the communities and groups. As
Durkheim (1912/1995) observed about the totemic rituals practised among the Australian tribes, ‘if religious ceremonies have any importance at all, it is that they set collectivity at motion; groups come together to celebrate them. Thus, their first result it is to bring individuals together, multiply the contacts between them, and make those contacts more intimate’ (ibid.: 352). Similarly, as Robert K. Merton observes, the rain dance, a ritual performed at the onset of rainy season by the Hopi Indians, has ‘latent function’ for the community than its intended function of inducing rain. It reinforces the group identity by providing a periodic occasion on which the scattered members of the group assemble to engage in a common activity (Merton 1968/1949: 118–19)

Picture 4.6: The tree where wooden cradles are offered

Source: Fieldwork collection
For Masan Jogis too, the feast is an occasion to meet people and exchange news of each other’s wellbeing. The feast serves a great need of keeping in touch with one’s roots that strengthens the bond of belonging to the community. This is also an occasion for finalising marriage alliances. The eligible girls and boys join their parents for the festival. The parents take this opportunity to propose for a boy or a girl and finalise it during the celebration with the consultation of relatives. The occasion is the most convenient time to pass on messages; within few days information reaches far and wide. The dates of marriages are fixed and communicated to the relatives who are around. Often the marriages take place within a week’s time at a convenient place of a relative. After the marriage, the family travels back to Shevgaon. This saves time and money to Masan Jogis who live in faraway places.

The Cult of Rama Mama

Masan Jogis have tremendous faith in Rama Mama; not to be mistaken with Sri Rama of the epic Ramayana. Rama Mama is a historical figure who has been revered by the community almost as a deity. He is described by Masan Jogis as a great person who lived few generations ago; he is believed to have possessed extraordinary strength and abilities. Rama Mama, in fact, belonged to Tirumali or Nandiwale community, another nomadic community which migrated from Andhra Pradesh. The main temple of Rama Mama is located near a village called Wadapuri in Indapur taluka of Pune district.

Wadapuri is 6 km away from Indapur, off the Pune–Sholapur highway. The whole area was once an arid zone. There was hardly any greenery seen in the area, except few wild trees and bushes. The location of the temple was a vast open tract of land where deities of various other nomadic communities were placed in the form of round stones. One of the collections of round stones of different sizes depicted Rama Mama, his wife, his sister, brother-in-law and his mother. Chillams, the smoking pipes, one big and another small, that were supposed to have been used by Rama Mama and his brother-in-law were lying with the stones. The two sets of traditional stone-grinders, one big and another small in size, that were supposed to have been used by Rama
Mama’s wife and sister for grinding grains, were also lying among the stones. The round stones with the artifacts laid there for many years in a neglected manner.

The situation changed in the 1980s when the irrigation project at Ujni in the adjacent Mhada taluka of Sholapur district was completed. Vast tracts of parched area were brought under irrigation. Long stretches of sugarcane and vegetable cultivations came up. A temple of Rama Mama was constructed by Nathu Ambu Pawar, a senior citizen over 80 years of age, a prominent member of Nandiwale community who is settled at Redke, a village in the vicinity. He owns more than a hundred acres of irrigated land, which is cultivated by his five sons. Each of the five sons has his bungalow around a vast empty ground at the centre of the property. The family has been at the centre of controversy with regard to the construction of the Rama Mama temple. The dispute is in the district civil court. Shri Pawar initially mistook me for a government official. Later, he understood the purpose of my visit and enthusiastically shared the information on Rama Mama and the temple.

There are two main groups among the Nandiwale community. One is a nomadic group, while the other is settled in villages of different districts of Maharashtra. The members of the nomadic community, who are always on the move even now, find it difficult to come back to Wadapuri every year. Therefore, the dispersed community assembles together ‘once in three years’ (Zelliot and Maxine 1988: 132). It is an occasion for the Nandiwale nomads to ‘perform socio-religious functions, worship their gods and their ancestors, perform marriages and settle disputes’ (ibid.: 133). The month-long gathering takes place usually in the lunar month of Ashadh, sometime in month of June. This is the transition period between the seasons. It is the time that summer has just ended, and monsoon has just set in and heavy rains are yet to arrive. It is also the time for the thousands of travelling pilgrims, devotees, known as Varkaris, from all over Maharashtra to walk to the temple of god Shri Vitthala at Pandharpur, the principal deity of Maharashtra, to celebrate the auspicious eleventh day of bright nights in the month of Ashad.

The settled communities from Wadapuri village view the gathering as a routine one and find it nothing spectacular as such. They consider it as the affair of the nomadic communities; therefore, no one from the settled communities interferes in any of the matters of the gathering.
Several nomadic as well as settled communities gather together at Wadapuri to pay their respects to Rama Mama. They too do not interfere in each other’s affairs. Rama Mama grants their wishes, so believe Masan Jogis, and therefore they come to Wadapuri on the occasion to pay homage and offer their sacrifices to Rama Mama.

Rama Mama was a Chougule, one of the clans among the Nandiwale community, who lived several generations earlier. The devotion to Rama Mama started when a lady who was possessed by the spirit of Rama Mama several years after his death told the community to ‘sacrifice a pig, some alcohol, and other items to him yearly’ (Hayden 1999: 136) or face extinction. The members of the Nandiwale community see Ram Mama as a more important deity than their own traditional deity, Ambaji–Limbaji, known as Bapusaheb. ‘The Rama Mama cult has also spread to other Telugu nomads in Maharashtra, including the Fulmali Nandiwallas and Vaidus’ (ibid.: 145).

Shri Pawar spoke of Rama Mama, giving the impression as if Rama Mama was his contemporary. When probed for more details, he said, Rama Mama must have lived few generations earlier than my parents, then he added saying, may be 200 years ago. The use of the figure for an illiterate elderly person like Shri Pawar just means that Rama Mama lived very many years ago. No one was able to say when exactly Rama Mama lived. However, according to the rural custom, one cannot speak of an honourable deity using terms that show distance in relationship or in time. Therefore, I had always to place and interpret people’s statements in the context of their understanding. He was well educated man, Shri Pawar narrated further to mean that Rama Mama knew life and all its intricacies. He understood the rules of nature and could gauge the consequences of any happening. Rama Mama was a wise person. He was far ahead of his time, Shri Pawar added with admiration to Rama Mama.

When he advised people or suggested new ways to handle situations, they misunderstood him. The community members perceived him as a threat. Hence, they planned to eliminate him secretly. They took him along on a hunting expedition on Bhor Ghat on the way to Mahad. On reaching there, in the forest, they all attacked him and killed him. The place is along the road in the ghats which is marked with a big stone (Shri Nathu Pawar).

Shri Pawar provided with certainty the details of the place where Rama Mama was killed and buried with a certainty. You have to turn to the left after the 5th mile as you climb down the slope,
you come across three ravines. After crossing the three ravines continue walking in the forest for about 15–20 minutes in the southern direction. There you find a huge palas, [Butea monosperma] tree. A huge black stone is placed just beneath the tree. This is the grave of Rama Mama. Shri Pawar pointed out to a definite location with stone-marking along Mahabaleshwar–Mahad Road. Later, he mentioned that the location was in the forest in the western slope of the ghats. He spoke so confidently as if he had visited the place himself. Further discussion revealed that Shri Pawar did not know the location for sure. In order to understand who Rama Mama was, I became curious to know whether the grave did exist. If it did, I was eager to visit the location and record the oral history of the event from the people in the area. Together with my friends, I walked the distance in the interior of forest along Mahabaleshwar–Mahad Road, searched the ravines and visited the villagers around. No such grave or a stone-marking could be traced in the area. No reference to the event occurred in oral tradition of the villagers. After much reflection I realised that myths, as part of belief system are not necessarily based on concrete reality. The whole story about Rama Mama is the expression of a strong belief of the community in the person called Rama Mama. The physical details added to the story are intended to give it strength.

The Rama Mama temple at Wadapuri is nothing but an enclosure of three walls constructed in bricks and cement with a concrete roof. A structure, rectangular in shape, stands facing east. It has no door; the whole eastern side is open (see Picture 4.7). The structure of Rama Mama temple at Wadapuri differs from that of a Hindu temple. Generally, a Hindu temple has a sabha mandapam (the hall), and the garbhgriha (the sanctum sanctorum), the inner sanctuary where the idol of the deity is placed. The shikhara (the tower) is raised high on the sanctuary. There appear no such distinct parts in the architecture of Rama Mama temple. Shri Pawar proudly informed me about the stone images of Rama Mama, his wife, sister, brother-in-law and mother (see Picture 4.8); he got them made by a village sculptor in Pandharpur and transported to Wadapuri. The images are placed one next to the other in a line, facing east. The first idol to the extreme left is of Rama Mama, depicting him a well-built man with beard and huge moustache; it is the tallest image, with oval shaped face. Next to Rama Mama, to his left, stands the idol of his wife, shorter in height and dressed in a green coloured sari in typical rural Maharashtrian style. The bangles on
Picture 4.7: The Rama Mama Temple at Wadapuri

Source: Fieldwork collection

Picture 4.8: The interior of Rama Mama Temple at Wadapuri

Source: Fieldwork collection
her both wrists are also of green in colour. She is shown as a stout lady with round face to present her in good health and prosperity. To her left stands the idol of Rama Mama’s mother, depicted in the same manner as the daughter-in-law but only smaller in size and height. To the mother’s left stands the idol of Rama Mama’s brother-in-law and finally at the end is the idol of Rama Mama’s sister. The idol of the brother-in-law is also presented like Rama Mama, but smaller in size and height, though smaller than the three ladies. Among the ladies, Rama Mama’s wife is the tallest. Among all the images, the image of Rama Mama’s brother-in-law is the smallest. Both men are shown with a dhoti, shirt and turban. All these figures are shown with footwear.

A big chillam, the smoking pipe, is held by Rama Mama in his right hand. It is considered as a status symbol. He holds a stick in his left hand. He is shown with a jacket and towel on his left shoulder. A small chillam is place before the idol of Rama Mama’s brother-in-law. He holds a stick in his right hand. A big round stone is placed in front of the idol of Rama Mama to emphasise his athletic spirit. The stone placed before the idol of Rama Mama’s brother-in-law is smaller in size. It is shown to underline their masculine power. The idol of the brother-in-law of Rama Mama is shown without wearing a jacket and the towel on his shoulder. He is shown without beard.

The women, the wife, sister and mother of Rama Mama are shown wearing green colour saris and green colour bangles on their wrists. The colour green symbolises prosperity and the creative power of women. Both, Rama Mama’s wife and his mother are shown wearing nath, the nose rings and jodve, the toe rings and a huge round of vermilion mark on the forehead. All these are the symbols of a married woman in rural Maharashtra. A big traditional set of grinding stones is placed in front of Rama Mama’s wife to depict her in household feminine role. A smaller set of grinding stones are placed in front of the idol of Rama Mama’s mother. There is no such a set of grinding stone in front of Rama Mama’s sister. All these stone images are painted in bright shades in oil paints.

Surprisingly, no one could supply the names of the wife, sister, brother-in-law or the mother of Rama Mama. Nor, anyone could provide details of Rama Mama’s family, his progeny or other relatives in the community. Masan Jogis come to pay their respects to Rama Mama, especially
during the time when the Nandiwale community come together in Wadapuri for their annual or tri-annual meet. The temple remains the focal point of all activities during the meet. It wears a deserted look after the meet and bears no sign of any significance.

Folk deities are often placed in a row as the idols are placed in the Rama Mama temple, for instance, at the shrine of seven goddesses at Rahuri Khurd in Ahmednagar district, known as saat devi, seven goddesses or saat bahini, seven huge round boulders are placed on a parapet in a row under a tree. It is a simple shrine without any construction.

The Masan Jogis at Shevgaon are proud of having a Temple of Rama Mama of their own in the centre of the locality. Masan Jogis hold a different version of Rama Mama legend. For them, Rama Mama was the strongest person ever to have lived on earth. He possessed unmatched strength and abilities; he could do most difficult things in a most causal way. Though he appeared as an ordinary human being, he could easily defeat a horde of enemies by his intelligent moves. He could sweep several strong men with a casual stroke of his hand.

But great difficulty arose when Rama Mama developed the queer habit of gazing women with ill intent. The Masan Jogi community vehemently resented such behaviour, but could not find any remedy for it either. No one dared to speak to Rama Mama on this point, for they feared he would kill them instantly. Finally, the community got together under the leadership of his wife’s brother and decided to do away with him quietly. They took him along on a hunting expedition, during which they made him run after the kill in the forest, hoping that he would die of exhaustion. And they would save themselves from the blame. But Rama Mama was a strong man. After running across the whole forest, he was tired but not exhausted. Looking at his helpless condition, the group thought that he might revive and will come to know the trick they played on him. They seized the opportunity and attacked him. Though depleted of his strength, Rama Mama fought with vehemence and finally killed each of them. Before he succumbed to the injuries Rama Mama struggled a lot. This happened late in the evening when it was dark. That night, Rama Mama’s dead spirit haunted the community, sounding dire consequences to all the families if they did not worship him. Then he informed the community how he was killed and who were those who killed him. The members of the community were frightened and pleaded for mercy. Then the spirit
assured them every protection: Though my own people killed me, I shall not desert the community; the spirit of Rama Mama spoke in a loud thunderous voice. He assured the community saying, if anyone calls my name seeking help, I will oblige the person caught in worst of dangers, at any hour of the day or night. From that time on, Masan Jogis believe Rama Mama comes to their aid to save them from the most difficult of situations. What matters finally, is we are saved from any danger; Rama Mama just rushes to our rescue, the moment we utter his name, say Masan Jogis.

It is interesting to note certain changes in the story. The Masan Jogi version speaks Rama Mama as a Masan Jogi. They do not mention anywhere that he belonged to another community. Neither Nandiwale nor Masan Jogi know for sure when Rama Mama lived or know anything about his surviving relatives. The possibility of Rama Mama as a mythical creation cannot be ruled out altogether.

According to Masan Jogis, the place where Rama Mama was killed and buried lies somewhere along the highway between Lonavla and Khandala in Pune district. Some pointed out a place somewhere near the Rajmachi fort in the Khandala hills. Being keen in finding out the location of the grave, I surveyed the whole area but found no trace of any grave. The villagers residing in the hills could not give me any information of such a grave or provide any story about it.

**The Rama Mama Temple at Shevgaon**

Most of the members of Masan Jogi community at Shevgaon have visited the Rama Mama temple at Wadapuri. Their devotion to Rama Mama has increased in intensity and fervour over the decades. A huge temple has been constructed on the open ground where once two tall stones stood depicting Rama Mama and his wife. Both the idols are smaller compared to the idols at Wadapuri. The idol of Rama Mama’s mother, sister and brother in law are absent in this temple. The stone next to the idols of Rama Mama and his wife signifies Rama Mama’s mother. The chillam and grinding stone are placed in front of the idols of Rama Mama and his wife respectively. There are few round stones kept in front of the idol Rama Mama to indicate his
athletic abilities and to add a masculine attribute to the idol. A picture of idols of Rama Mama and his wife at Wadapuri is placed on the parapet (see Picture 4.9). The funds for the construction of this temple were raised through the contributions from Masan Jogi households in Shevgaon. No contributions or donations collected from any politician or wealthy person in the town.

Picture 4.9: The interior of Rama Mama Temple at Shevgaon

On occasions, and especially during the month of Ashadh, every family in Shevgaon pays respect to Rama Mama. Besides offering a coconut and a chicken or goat, they also offer a few drops of liquor to Rama Mama. Thus, there is, however, no fixed ritual for performing the puja.

The faith of Masan Jogis is not, however, restricted to the Hindu tradition. They also venerate Sailani Baba, a Muslim Pir of Sufi tradition, whose grave is at Chikhli in Buldhana district of Maharashtra. Sailani Baba is considered to be a divine healer who brings good health and prosperity in terms of wealth and progeny. Chikhli has become another pilgrimage destination for the community on the way to the temples of Durgamma in Andhra Pradesh or Yellamma in Karnataka. Some of the devotees of Sailani Baba are entirely dedicated to serve him and perform healing sessions in Baba’s name. Shri Shankar Maruti Shendre at Shevgaon has a specially decorated altar of Sailani Baba in his house where Shiva, Vetal, Durgamma, Buddha and Christ
have a place, while a green flag flutters atop his house. Shri Shendre is a faith healer and many sick people visit him and seek boon from Sailani Baba. When I spoke to Shri Shendre, he plainly told me that he does not possess any healing power: “I prescribe some herbs in the name of god and people believe it and get cured. It does not work always, added Shri Shendre. When it does not work, people insist that I give another treatment, so I change the whispers as prayer and the herbs. Somehow it works”. Shri Shendre does not reveal this to anyone and was reluctant to share this information with me. He feared if the information reaches the police, he will be arrested and put in jail.

A faction of Nomadic Tribes Federation in Maharashtra has accepted Buddhism as their religion, a move towards establishing political identity for some gain. As part of the Federation, a good number of Masan Jogis have officially become Buddhist; many are certified Buddhists. They benefited nothing though; Masan Jogis do not shift loyalties when it comes to religious faith. They are equally devotees of the Buddha, who is honourably added to their pantheon of gods. Buddha Pournima, the full-moon night the Buddha was born, is an important occasion for celebration in the community. The Panchsheela of the Buddha is not new to the already ascetic community. By accepting Buddhism, Masan Jogis have joined the dalits, imbibing not only religious, but also their social, cultural and political identity; an entirely different outlook altogether.

Going to any temple, shrine or church is also no aversion to Masan Jogis. Around the mid 1990s, some of them had attended the feast of Mother Mary at the Catholic Church at Shevgaon out of curiosity and zest for religious devotion. Since then, many have started flocking to the church. They began attending the religious services, offering sweets in honour of the Mother and seeking blessings from the priest. Practically, everyone adorns a cross around the neck, just a like a medal of any other god. Everyone joined the Easter feast celebration and shared a festive meal as they revered the risen Christ, that too in Rama Mama temple! Walls of many houses adorn with large pictures of Jesus Christ. It is astonishing for them to hear how a god man was cruelly tortured to death even as he stood for the good of the others. This greatness is far more valuable to them than any theology. It is interesting to note that even Marathi Christians offer alms to Masan
Jogis when they are on their begging expedition to their localities. Even the Christians are somewhat scared of the magical powers of Masan Jogis and their association with the dead too evoke some respect for them.

Masan Jogis understand god as the almighty principle, who comes to the rescue of humankind at any time anywhere instantly. God should show the outcome when invoked. If someone is sick, he or she must experience cure, or if someone is in distress, he or she must be relieved by god. For Masan Jogis, the traditions and religious philosophies are not important, what matters the most is the god who comes to their aid when needed. Depending on their experiences, everyone is drawn to different deities. The community has become a sign of eclectic syncretism.

**Beliefs in Ghosts and Spirits**

Traditionally, Masan Jogis lived in the graveyard or cremation ground. They have been dealing with corpses. People admire their courage seeing them live in the cemeteries. When I spoke to people of other communities, they told me how brave Masan Jogis are; they fear nothing. The fact that they can stay in the graveyard itself is an act of great courage. No ordinary human being dared to live in the graveyard for the whole night. Hardly did they know that, when it comes to the spirits of the dead, Masan Jogis are frightened to the core.

When someone dies among Masan Jogis, it is believed that the spirit of the person will hover around the place trying to haunt someone or cause harm to somebody in the community. In order to prevent this, the remains of the dead are taken to a forest somewhere in Andhra Pradesh where a sage ties it down to a tree, so that the spirit cannot move or cannot cause trouble to others in the community. I have seen family members of the deceased person taking the remains to the undisclosed location. When I asked the details of the location or the name of the tree the things are tied to, no one could provide any information, not even the name of the sage. Initially, I thought it must have been a community secret Masan Jogis do not want to disclose it to me. Later, when enquired quietly about the place and the sage, I realised that no one knows the place or the name of the sage. Just as everyone thought that the grave of Rama Mama was in the Khandala
hills, in fact, no grave found there; the location to tie the remains of the deceased to a tree and the
sage who does it, is hypothetical.

The spirit of the dead from other communities can also cause havoc to Masan Jogi families. When someone from the Masan Jogi community is possessed by a spirit, they try to find to which community the ghost belongs. They perform a ritual to trace this. Usually, a male person holds a plate filled with water who sits on his toes balancing himself and the plate, keeping the water steady. He swings the plate a little as he whispers the names of various communities. It is believed that the water in the plate would spill over only at the instance of pronouncing the appropriate name of a community that the ghost belongs. As the water moves towards one side of the plate, names of other communities are whispered. The list of names whispered includes usually of backward communities. It is rare to find a person possessed with the spirit of the dead belonging to high caste communities. The treatment goes by the community to which the ghost belongs. Several promises are made to please the ghost, so that it ghost leaves the person. A ghost from the deceased of lower caste communities can be pleased with simple offering of a cock or a wild animal. It is difficult to please the ghosts from the deceased of higher caste communities. They demand certain observances to be meticulously followed involving elaborate rituals. Animal sacrifices are not acceptable for some, others ask for pure vegetarian treat for the whole community. The promises are to be fulfilled as early as possible, lest the ghost returns to haunt the person again. In any case, the situation can turn grim or can be even fatal, if the promises made are not complied to.

There are numerous episodes of ghosts that have caused havoc in the community. Some are relentless; they do the rounds visiting the community for several times. Whenever they narrated these stories to me, I noticed their voice becoming so soft that it was difficult to understand what they said. Masan Jogis fear that telling these stories aloud may invite them some trouble. They told me how a ghost killed a six-month-old healthy child in sleep. The child was active and did not show any sign of sickness till the previous evening when it was put to sleep. In the middle of the night, the ghost entered the house though the door was latched from inside. It tied the senses of all those who were sleeping in the house. Therefore, no one realised what happened at that
time. After getting up in the morning, everyone thought that the child was asleep. But when it was not making any movement for a long time, the mother tried waking it up and found it was dead. The unknown fear gripped the family members. The family sacrificed three goats in order to please the spirit. But it was difficult for the family to overcome the painful tragedy. I was shocked to know the real story that came out after some time. The drunk husband had mistakenly stamped over the sleeping child in the dark. It died instantly without making a slightest sound. It was only discovered in the morning. The ghost story was cooked up to elude legal complications.

Beliefs in ghosts apparently help the community to deal with harsh reality of life. Hence, situations beyond human control are often attributed to ghost and developed as strange stories. On my initial visits to the families of Masan Jogi community, one day I saw a three year old boy tied to a cot. The parents told me that the boy acts like a mad because he is possessed by a ghost since his conception; therefore, he is tied to the cot. It was unbelievable. I played with him for a while and soon learnt that the child neither can hear nor can speak. I tried to explain the phenomena to the oblivious parents. They refused to accept any explanation and were fully convinced that the child was possessed. On my next visit I saw the boy still tied to the cot. This time he was struggling to free himself just to jump around and play as he saw other children did. The parents played the ghost story to me again. Formal preparations were undertaken to rescue the boy. Meanwhile, one day, the boy freed himself and went missing. He was found dead in a pond nearby. He got drowned in the pond and died. The parents, supported by the community members, said that, finally the ghost killed the child.

**Summary**

We began this chapter, trying to locate Masan Jogis within the Shaivite tradition. They do resemble Kapalikas and Kalamukhas, the ascetic sects that belong to the Sidh Sidha school of Shaivism which emerged in 10th CE, in many ways but they are not the same. Understanding Masan Jogi distinct way of life, we have termed them as married ascetics. Except celebrating Mahashivratri, the birth night of Shiva and following ascetic lifestyle which is undergoing rapid change, there are no other prominent signs of Shaivite religion among them. There found no
symbolic icon of Shiva venerated or a devotion to certain aspect of Shiva prevalent in Masan Jogi culture and ritual life. In fact, no Masan Jogi settlement has a simple Shiva temple. The Masan Jogi belief is centred on Rama Mama instead. They have created an exclusive myth of Rama Mama, as they glorify his extraordinary abilities and strengths. They have a firm belief that as soon as they call on his name, Rama Mama is there to help them instantly. They have invested large sum of money to construct a Rama Mama Temples in the centre of the Masan Jogi settlement in Shevgaon.

Masan Jogis are ardent devotees of Pochamma, Sailani Baba and other deities. Although the religious roots of Masan Jogi faith lead to Shiva tradition, their faith pervades many religious traditions such as Folk Religion, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism, etc. Masan Jogi faith hinges on the particular idea of god they have in their mind. They do not understand an abstract idea of god. For them god is the one who instantly relieves the devotee from most difficult situation. The difficulties Masan Jogis encounter in life is sickness and thereby impending death. They do not understand physiological dysfunctions of human body or viral infections can cause ill health. For Masan Jogis believe that any sickness is the result of dishonouring a deity or it is a menace created by unsatisfied dead spirits and it has to be instantly attended to. In either case they harbour tremendous fear. Masan Jogis believe that, if they do not surrender to the deity they have offended; it can wipe out the whole family instantly. The menace created by ghosts and dead spirits can only be dealt with by god who possesses immeasurable strength. If a deity does not come to the rescue of its devotee another deity needs to be approached. It is just as they move from one doctor to another till they find someone who attends to them instantly at any cost. This view invariably puts Masan Jogis into difficulties in government offices where delay in work is frequently experienced.

Most of the deities Masan Jogis adore belong to other communities. Rama Mama belong to Nandiwale, a another itinerant community, Pochamma, the folk goddess from Andhra Pradesh adored mainly by lower caste communities in Andhra Pradesh, Sailani Baba, a Sufi belong to Islamic tradition, Buddhism, a traditions by itself, and Jesus Christ of Christian tradition. In this
sense Masan Jogis appear to be syncretic, a distinct identity. In the time of growing religious intolerance, Masan Jogi can be a modal community amidst religious pluralism in India.