CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“We understand struggle and resistance, nowadays, rather better than we do reform and transformation. Yet ‘transformations’ are at the heart of the study of popular culture. I mean the active work on existing traditions and activities, their active reworking, so that they come out a different way: they appear to ‘persist’ – yet, from one period to another, they come to stand in a different relation to the ways working people live and the ways they define their relations to each other, to the others’ and to their conditions of life. Transformations is the key to the long and protracted process of the ‘moralisation’ of the laboring classes and the ‘demoralisation’ of the poor, and the re-education of the people. Popular culture is neither, in a ‘pure’ sense, the popular traditions of resistance to these processes; nor is it the forms, which are superimposed on and over them. It is the ground on which the transformations are worked.”

Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular”

“Could there be New Times without new subjects?”

Hall, “The Meaning of New Times”

This dissertation examines the popular faith formation in Kerala around the iconic figure Mata Amritanandamayi Devi. The question I ask in this dissertation is about the nature of the Mata Amritanandamayi faith and the moment of its emergence. I examine the phenomenon of the Mata Amritanandamayi faith as a cultural text in the making. This leads me to look at it as a ‘formation’ instead of a

community. The Mata faith formation, as I would then call it, is understood here as an aesthetic and discursive formation consequential to the interaction of religion, politics and media. I argue that the iconicity of Mata Amritanandamayi Devi is a product of the various forms (divine, charismatic and iconic) and modes (sensorial & discursive) of engagement between Amritanandamayi and her followers, and shaped by the intervening forces of religion, politics and media.

The Story of the Mata

Mata Amritanandamayi is the leader of a spiritual institution in Kerala, named Mata Amritanandamayi Math. She is popular across the world as a saint woman who spreads the message of love. She has followers across the world who address her as the ‘Amma’ (meaning mother) or the ‘Mata’. Mata Amritanandamayi was born into an Araya family on 27 September, 1953. Her parents named her Sudhamani, the name that she retained until 1981, the year in which the Mata Amritanandamayi Math was established. In her biographies Sudhamani is said to have lived a childhood devoid of love. In her early teens Sudhamani started to look after her younger siblings, help her mother with domestic chores and work for relatives. The loneliness she felt in the absence of love led her to find solace in devotion. Her expressive devotional experience drew the attention and interest of other people, especially those who are familiar with the imagery of similar expressions in stories of mystics. She was asked to perform for a religious audience. Within a short period she became popular as an ardent devotee of the god Krishna. People began to visit her when she performed as god, for an experience of devotion and sought advice in matters of life. During this period, a group of young men in search of spiritual enlightenment visits her. They identify their guru in her and give meaning to her acts inspired by the spiritual
learning they acquired in the company of seekers from Ashrams in other parts of India, such as the Ramakrishna Math. In their company Sudhamani identifies herself as the ‘divine mother’, takes the name Mata Amritanandamayi and establishes an Ashram to practice spirituality. The Ashram develops its discourse, spreads them as messages, attracts more people, builds other institutions and expands its reach across different parts of the world. Thus Mata Amritanandamayi, now called by her devotees as ‘Amma’ emerges as an icon of maternal love.

Institutions of Mata Amritanandamayi Math

The Mata Amritanandamayi faith as we see it now in the public sphere emerged following the establishment of the Mata Amritanandamayi Math (MAM) in 1981. In its early stage the Math was a small hut with two rooms built next to Mata Amritanandamayi’s ancestral home in Parayakadavu, a coastal village in Kollam district in Kerala. Initially there were less than ten members in the Ashram. Gradually, in a matter of two years, it grew to ten huts with more inmates joining the Math. During this period the Math developed its institutional characteristics and the name Mata Amritanandamayi Devi was taken by its leader, who had been called Sudhamani till then. As the infrastructure of the Math developed so did the popularity of the Mata. People began to make large donations and this led to further expansion of the institution. With the increase in the number of inmates new Ashram rules were made.

As an institution, the Math grew as it started new establishments under the leadership of the Mata.

3 I have gathered the information about the Mata’s institutions from various sources such as the media department of MAM, the website of various institutions run by MAM, *India Today Mata Amritanandamayi special edition*, *Mata Amritanandamayi: Transforming the World* The New Indian Express Special Feature, *Mathrubhumi 60th Birthday Supplement* and features in various dailies.
Kodungallur, Thrissur district, Kerala. In 1990 the Amrita Institute of Computer Technology was started in Kollam district. Following this, the trust started a school of engineering in Coimbatore in 1994, the Amritakripa rehabilitation centre for cancer patients in Mumbai in 1995 and the Amritakuteeram project to build houses for the poor in 1996. In the same year, the College of Pharmaceutical Science was established. In 1998 the multi-specialty hospital and medical college Amrita Institute of Medical Science began functioning. In 2001 the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission Trust constructed and offered 1200 houses for those who lost their houses in the Gujarat earthquake. The next year the Amrita School of Engineering was started in Vallikkavu. Later, all the institutions in the Mata’s name came under the Amrita Viswavidyapeetham, which was then given a deemed university status in 2003. In the following year, the Amritakripa hospital started functioning in Wayanad. In 2005 the Ashram started a television channel named Amrita TV.

Today Mata Amritanandamayi has many educational institutions across the country. Amrita Viswa Vidyapeetham is a deemed University, which has six campuses in different states. The main campus of the university and Amrita Viswa Vidyapeetham Health Science Campus are in Kochi. There are other campuses in Kollam, Bangalore, Mysore and Coimbatore. Amritavidyalayams are schools under Mata Amritanandamayi Mission. The Mission has 29 schools in the state, twelve in Tamil Nadu, three in Maharashtra, two in West Bengal, and one each in Telangana, New Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat. Apart from the Amritavidyalayams there are thirteen other schools in various districts in Kerala.

Besides the institutions in the private sector, another significant mode of institutionalization in the Mata Amritanandamayi Math are the temples consecrated across the country. Brahmastanam temples, as they are called, are considered by the

Apart from these there are subsidiary centres of the Math in most districts in Kerala such as the bhajan centres, Amrita Kudumbam and Amrita Ayalkootam. These are the grassroots level functionaries of the Math. Amritakudumbam is a group of devotees of the Mata organised to conduct bhajan and seva in their neighborhood. They organise the interested population in a locality to gather for bhajan and other collective work that are useful for the locality. They also find people who are in need of assistance from the Mata’s various schemes for the marginalised. Whereas Amrita Kudumbam is primarily a prayer group, Amrita Ayalkootam consists of non-devotees in the locality too. These little groups provide the space for identifying the needy and undertake ‘seva’⁵. They engage in activities such as collective farming, micro-finance, and self-help.

⁴ Cited from the Ashram website www.amritapuri.org
⁵ The term seva in many Indian languages, literally, means “service”. However the term has been used as part of different political discourses in India. I will elaborate on the concept later in this dissertation.
Tours are a very important factor in the programs of Mata Amritanandamayi Math. The Mata visits different bhajan centres across the state, nation and in different parts of the world. Within Kerala the Math has centres in Alappuzha, Changanassery, Eranakulam, Irinjalakkuda, Kannur, Kasargod, Kattappana, Kodungallur, Kollam, Koyilandy, Kozhikode, Majeri, Malappuram, Mananthavady, Pala, Palakkad, Thalassery, Thiruvalla, Thiruvananthapuram, Thrissur and Vatakara. When the Mata is in Kerala she travels to these place every year. Outside Kerala, she has Maths in Tamil Nadu, Hyderabad, West Bengal, Uttarakhand, Odisha and Maharashtra. Across the world she has centres in the following places. Kenya, Mauritius and Reunion Island, Canada, California, Chicago, Iowa, Los Angeles, Michigan, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Arkansas and Washington D.C. Argentina, Brazil, Sao Paulo, Chile, Mexico, Venezuela, Philippines, Fiji, Bahrain, Hong Kong, Israel, Japan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, U.A. E, Sri Lanka and Singapore. In Australia, The Math has centres in Melbourne, Sydney and New Zealand. In Europe, there are centres in Ireland, United Kingdom, Norway, Sweden, Netherlands, Finland, Austria, Denmark, Belgium, France, Portugal, Holland, Germany, Greece, Italy, and Luxemburg.

Conceptual Framework for Analysis

In the present work I examine the phenomenon as a cultural text, which I name the Mata faith formation. By naming it so I wish to focus on some aspects of a large phenomenon. One focus is the leader of the phenomenon, the Mata—her life, messages, and her performative acts. Even though the Mata is a contemporary figure the story about her early life is already available in fragments in interviews, Ashram websites and oral accounts of narratives. Apart from this there are a few biographies
of the Mata that represent the main events in her life. Then, I focus on the aesthetic and discursive aspects of the cultural text of Mata faith. Since the Mata faith is based on the ascription of divine status on the Mata, it has the function of any religious text. Whether prayers, hymns or incantations, all must cross the forbidding barrier separating the living and the dead in an attempt to beguile the gods and ancestors to whom they are addressed. Texts traveling in the reverse direction must likewise convince believers that they are sacred messages. (Hofmeyr, 2008)

So in order to understand the text it also becomes necessary to examine the engagement between the production of faith and its reception, i.e., the Mata’s spiritual institution and the devotees. Here I will also briefly look at the ways in which the practices of devotees in turn shape the Mata faith. Aesthesis “refers to our total sensorial experience of the world and to our sensorial knowledge of it” (Meyer & Verrips, 2008; 21). Conceptualised as an aesthetic formation then, the Mata faith text is examined for “the modes through which imaginations materialize and are experienced as real” (Meyer, 2009; 7), produce subjects and forms a community. Thirdly, I examine the discourses within and outside the formation to understand how these discourses shape it. Here, I depend on the texts the ashram has published, devotee accounts, testimonials and featured articles in newspapers, and magazines to understand different objects, concepts and forms of discourse. Fourthly, I study how as an aesthetic and discursive formation the Mata faith assumes the subject of ‘maternal feminine’. This subject is identified in the iconic form the image of the maternal love acquires as various discourses attaches to it. Here I will also look at the iconoclastic criticisms in the public sphere. In this chapter I ask the following questions. How does the Mata become an icon? What meaning does the Mata
represent as an icon? In the following sections I will introduce the context in which this study is conducted and explain some of the concepts used.

Some Notes on Methods and Conceptual Categories

Religion, Media and Politics

Cultural institutions undergo a transformation during the modernization of society. In India the religious sphere underwent drastic changes in the decades after Independence, especially after the introduction of mass mediated religious images. In his work *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South India* (Babb & Wadley, 1995), Lawrence Babb notes that not only the religion but also the nature of religious change in South Asia, is itself transforming. He suggests that in a context where communication media has acquired a self-induced acceleration, religion needs to be examined in a new way. For this, a new perspective is suggested to examine changing forms of religion. In this view, a religious tradition is to be taken as “a ‘system’ that retains and transmits information” that are manifested in “beliefs, patterned behavior, written records, ceremonial performances, iconography and traces in human memory” among other things (Babb, 1995, 1). The media communicates these manifestations through “speech, writing, ritual gesture, iconography and music” (Babb, 1).

Religious traditions in distant regions have in the past shared symbols as mythologies spread across regions through bards, poets, artists and performers. However, this process used to happen much slowly that it entrenched in each region with its own specific distinctive material practices and symbolic systems. Various forms of media, such as the print, visual, auditory and other technological media have carried across cultures the representative symbols of religious traditions much faster than was imaginable at any time in the past. As a result the religious symbols have
increased social mobility and thereby have a “socially disembedding” effect on religious traditions (Babb, 4). This has resulted in the emergence of various new transnational religious movements such as the Hare Krishnas and the Sathya Sai Baba Movement. However, there are also locally embedded religious movements that emerged in resistance to dominant religious traditions, such as the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sangam and PRDS in Kerala. In this process of formation of modern faith movements and corresponding identities some lower caste ritual performative practices such as the Theyyam lose its traditional political significance as ‘resistance through mediation’ that emerged from an aesthetic imagination of the society, and is consigned to the realm of ‘performative art’ (Komath, 2012). It is in this context of modern popular faith movements that Mata Amritanandamayi Devi faith emerges as a syncretic faith formation claiming the universality of devotion through the gesture of “embracing all.” Central to its faith is an idea of the universal community conceptualised within a mother-child relationship. Although it does not claim allegiance to any particular caste, community, or political ideology, and it still remains manifestly dominated by a leadership of upper-caste middle-class groups and institutions networked across the country, different ideological groups try to represent the Mata faith⁶ using their own rhetorical categories. It is at this point that as a popular culture phenomenon, the icon of ‘Amma’ (Divine Mother) becomes a contested signifier.

People form different kinds of communities among which the most popular forms are the political and religious. Religious communities have their own nature and modes of articulation. As Jacques Ranciere says,

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⁶ Hereafter, I will be using the term Mata faith, wherever the phenomenon is conceptualised as an engagement of faith between Mata Amritanandamayi Devi and her devotees.
the history of the relations between political parties and aesthetic movements is first of all the history of a confusion, sometimes complacently maintained, at other times violently denounced, between these two ideas of the avant-garde, which are in fact two different ideas of political subjectivity: the archi-political idea of a party, that is to say the idea of a form of political intelligence that sums up the essential conditions for change, the meta-political idea of global political subjectivity, the idea of potentiality inherent in innovative sensible modes of experience that anticipate a community to come (Ranciere, 2004;30).

It is in the latter sense that I try to understand the community formation in the Mata faith. The ‘maternal affect’, or the feeling that one is connected to one’s mother, affects a vision, that one is part of the ‘phenomena’ and not different from it. Or, to put it in a different way, faith in the idea of mother as the total representation of the sensibilities of a community, makes one feel part of the community envisioned by the mother. It is an imagination of community in terms of harmony and pleasure. However, this harmony is in reality sustained within a limited perception of the “distribution of sensible” (Ranciere, 2004; 12). Those elements within the community that do not form part of this harmonious distribution of sensible find this ‘harmony’ a policing force. It is at this point that a potential for their politics is to be identified. Such a politics identifies the forces that delimit this decentered harmony and questions the legitimacy of the autonomy, which the community thus maintains. The way in which the community is imagined, is reflected in the ways media represent it. Hence an analysis of how this harmony is represented and the oppositional voices from outside enables to locate the boundary of this ‘harmonious’ formation.
If print culture represented the nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983), with the advent of films, documentaries, photographs and other mass produced images visual culture also represents various imagined communities such as the nation and also, those within or beyond it. Various identities are being forged in both traditions of representation. However an image, unlike the printed text, is ‘multivocal’ and cannot be grasped fully. As Stuart Hall puts it in an essay on looking and subjectivity, “the power or capacity of the visual sign to convey meanings is only ‘virtual’ or potential until those meanings have been realized in use” (Hall, 1999). This means that for the agents of visual culture its possibility lies in the potential to represent an intended meaning in a particular context without revealing its contextual specificity and thereby emphasizing its naturalness or universality. Whereas the language allows for signification, the image allows for representation (Silverman, 1983; 154). With the technology assisted increase of image production, representation or the meaning becomes more complex. “Representation,” Stuart Hall says, “has become a more problematic process, but that does not mean the end of representation” (Grossberg, 1999; 137).

In this period of complex coding, the complex meanings are fixed on certain points of signification called icons, in order to enable their ease of use and sustain the complexity and ambiguity. Icons, in psychoanalytic terms, act primarily at the level of identification, or the Lacanian ‘imaginary’ where the subject looks for similarity and coherence. Kaja Silverman explains this relationship between the imaginary order and symbolic identification in Lacan,

Imaginary is the term used by Lacan to designate the order of the subject’s experience which is dominated by identification and duality. Within the
Lacanian scheme, it not only precedes the symbolic order, which introduces the subject to language and Oedipal triangulation, but continues to coexist with it afterward. The two registers complement each other, the symbolic establishing the differences, which are such an essential part of the cultural experience, and the imaginary making it possible to discover correspondences and homologies. The imaginary order is most classically exemplified by the mirror stage.
(Silverman 1983; 157)

Unlike language, a visual sign or image has the potential to encounter the coexistence of imaginary and symbolic registers. An icon acts at both the imaginary and symbolic orders, that is, at the level of identification and that of establishing the difference. At the level of the imaginary the icon is formed when a specular affect is produced between the subject and the image. In the symbolic order, the image is already identified as part of a system of representations and distinguished within the system. In this sense when an image becomes more than just a signification of difference, and used primarily as an object of identification it becomes an icon. Such icons, just as they produce the primal affect of identification, are used to mobilize people around it. Slavoj Zizek puts the relation between imaginary identification and symbolic identification as follows,

imaginary identification is identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, with the image representing ‘what we would like to be’, and symbolic identification, identification with the very place from where we are being observed, from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable, worthy of love. (Zizek, 1989; 116)

Icons demand from its subjects a way of looking that affects identification, a *darsanam*. In an act of *darsanam* it is not merely that the subject sees and is seen by
the icon (Eck, 7), but the subject assumes the image as oneself. This identification is also voyeuristic in that it fixes a narcissistic gaze on the self-identified image, which constantly induces in the subject a sense of imperfection and desire for emulation. In the case of Amritanandamayi faith the darsanic identification of the female and male subjects of the faith, appears different. When the women subjects of Mata Amritanandamayi appear to have an imaginary identification with her image, the male subjects undergo symbolic identification. On a closer look, we will see that the metonymy and metaphor that represents the meaning of the icon determines the nature of this identification and its functions. An iconoclastic attempt would then require one to suspend the darsanic gaze in order to enter the symbolic depth of icon where differences are suppressed, and the agency of the gaze is hidden.

This kind of identification is not a unidirectional process in response to a fixed gaze. Rather, in the domain of popular culture the gaze is resisted and negotiated, and in order to pass for the rest of the society the dominant group or community will project an image that could easily be used to produce an affective identification with them. The act of darsanam in this context becomes an object of critique. As a result, different marginalized groups try to build subversive icons in what they believe as their own image. The dominant groups continue to thwart the latter’s effort by imitating them at an affective/commonsensical level. I suggest that in Mata Amritanandamayi faith formation, the iconicity of Mata Amritanandamayi is depended on her markedly lower caste appearance, dispositions and a discourse of commonsense philosophy, all of which are, as I will show in the following chapters, the highlights of her personality. It is behind the iconic surface that the agency of the

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7 To use Zizek’s categorisation mentioned above.
gaze that subjectivises both Amritanandamayi and her lower caste followers are to be discovered.

**Iconic Surface and Depth**

The icon may be understood as a complex representation of a surface that induces specular affect or identification, and a depth constituted by a multiplicity of coding. Iconic depth is constituted by differences within the larger system of representations, visual and discursive. The iconic surface is held in place by a group of signifiers, from the sensorial and discursive sources, acting collectively as a mental image (signified). A person who is an icon is also an image that performs. The popularity of an icon is the result of a *darsanic* engagement between the image and the subject, affected by the surface and carried over by the deeper structures of its meanings. According to Ranciere⁸ “the dominant fiction is the privileged mode of representation by which the image of the social consensus is offered to the members of the social formation and within which they are asked to identify themselves” (Silverman, 1992; 32). Where do we find this image of social consensus? How does any image gain social consensus in a rapidly changing society? These questions lead us to the various media such as the newspapers, magazines, films, advertisements, photographs, fiction and other forms of communicative media where images acquire consensus at an unconscious level. They produce a collective meaning that when addresses the society back, appears natural.

In order to give an instance of this process I will take recourse to a study on typecasting in Malayalam cinema. In his article “Visual Perception and Cultural Memory: Typecast and Typecast(e)ing in Malayalam Cinema” Sujith Parayil explores

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the dominant role such collective unconscious memory plays in the perception of dalit and subaltern bodies which are reflected in the representational strategies adopted by mainstream Malayalam cinema (Parayil, 2014). He demonstrates how memories of caste become an essential part of the visual perception of the Malayali spectator by examining the way the dalit identity and persona of Malayalam film actor Kalabhavan Mani is depicted in cinema. By representing Mani in roles with caste significations the cinema, as a medium is producing a subaltern image of social consensus.

In my study, the image of maternal love represented by Mata Amritanandamayi is to be looked at through a similar lens to understand how it acquires social consensus. ‘The maternal’ is an idea associated with mothering, the morphological and physiological engagement between child and the mother. But what is motherhood? A discourse of innumerable values imposed upon a person with regard to her relationship with the Other. Adrienne Rich writes,

Unexamined assumptions: First, that a “natural” mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace turned to theirs; that the isolation of mothers and children together must be taken for granted; that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless, that children and mothers are the “causes” of each others’ suffering. I was haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is “unconditional”; and by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded identity. If I knew parts of myself existed that would never cohere to those images, weren’t those parts then abnormal, monstrous? And— as my eldest son, now aged twenty-one, remarked on reading the above passages: “You seemed to feel you ought to love us all the time. But there is no human relationship where you love the other person at every moment.”
Yes, I tried to explain to him, but women—above all, mothers—have been supposed to love that way (Rich, 1986; 23).

An egoless autonomous self ever prepared to care for and protect the child/other (that is conceived as part of the self) is probably a maternal instinct that manifests in the process of conceiving and delivering a child—what is in Rich’s terms a “physical and psychic rite of passage”, or probably as Rich says it is “nurtured”. But, in either case, both men and women can no doubt, nurture it. I think it is a matter of aspiring for an autonomous self that has not divided the inner and outer, but has taken the ‘rites of passage’ both ways and is capable of developing metaphors that relates to both. Individuals who can develop such creative autonomy on their own are the basis of an egalitarian community of interdependent relations. But keeping such integrity (of the individual or the community) is the challenge that drives a relentless engagement with the other/marginal or outcaste to the extent it turns into a totally disintegrating force that reconfigures the autonomy. The social law (which functions also as moral law from within) as an institution delimits the extent of this engagement. And in this way, it produces the other, which is the point of resistance and creativity.

As opposed to the paternal ideal, which is represented as the transcendent God, the maternal reconceptualise presence as immanence. The maternal embodiment enacts oneself as a medium to one’s engagement with the self and the outer world.

**Popular Culture: Visual Icons**

According to Stuart Hall, popular culture is a problematic term in that it combines two already vague concepts, ‘culture’ and ‘popular’. “Cultural change,” he says is a polite euphemism for the process by which some cultural forms and practices
are driven out of the centre of popular life, actively marginalized.” (Hall, 1998; 443)

Cultural change or transformation is an active reworking of existing traditions and activities and “from one period to another, they come to stand in a different relation to the ways working people live and the ways they define their relations to each other, to ‘the others’ and to their conditions of life” (Hall, 1998; 443). Popular culture is neither the authentic culture of the ‘people’ nor is it a representation of the struggle of the masses against domination. Rather it is the field where transformations occur.

Popular faith is the domain where certain faith sensibilities are articulated by use of symbols and ideas of a hegemonic class in order to effect a cultural transformation in their favour. However, in order to become popular, the dominant articulations negotiate with the masses in the same ground of cultural transformation. In this dissertation, I look at the Mata Amritanandamayi phenomenon as a popular faith formation, which acts as a ground on which certain cultural transformations are traced and political reconfigurations are worked. I will in the following chapters examine cultural practices such as the darsan, embrace, bhajan, manasapuja, Amma doll and seva in the Amritanandamayi faith, and the discourses that are part of its everyday existence, the spiritual discourse within the Ashram, the narratives of devotees, the discussions and debates in news papers, magazines and online networking sites, in order to understand the domain of cultural transformation within and around this devotional institution.

Icons are not unnecessary constructs in the cultural sphere. In fact, most of them emerge as natural cultural phenomenon. Jeffrey Alexander and Dominik Bartmanski give an explanation to this phenomenon. According to them,

Societies organize the empirical avalanche of facts into patterns, classes and types to overcome cognitive saturation and effectively navigate reality. This is
an inductive move from the atomistic to the general, from the empirical to the theoretical. Once constructed, however, these types must be exemplified and classified in turn. Iconic archetypes are one of the cultural bits that do this job, embodying meaning aesthetically and allowing a deductive move from the theoretical back to the empirical once again. This circling back and forth between the concrete and the theoretical, the mundane and the aesthetic, the fragment and the icon sits at the core of culture. (Bartmanski & Alexander, 2012; 3)

For the viewer, icons in popular visual culture are like the tip of the glacier, showing their simplistic affective face above the surface and carrying their complex meanings and contradictions in the semiotic depth of culture. From within, they are also discursive formations around an object and delimited by other formations. Since the existence of an icon is dependent primarily on the visual/performative engagement between the viewer and the image it derives the meaning of this act from pre-existing modes of such engagement. While enunciating the significance of sacred pictures in South Asian culture, Lawrence Babb says that one important reason why the “mechanical reproduction of pictures of deities (and other sacred entities) has become pervasively manifest in the modern religion in South Asia” is that “*darsan* or auspicious seeing of the divine being is central to religious observance in the Hindu tradition” (Babb, 1995; 6). What I find interesting in this with regard to my study is the connection between icon and *darsan* as a practice of perceiving.

**Images, Popular Religion and Media**

In India, religion, images, symbols, idols and stars are still the most significant part of public life. They persistently supply the domain of popular culture. Hence the
significance of media cannot be discarded if we want to understand the way in which these entities interrelate and fuse one another to emerge in a new form. According to Lawrence Babb, “the spread of printing technology, introduction of television and video recording and the new communication media have profoundly altered the creation of symbols, including religious symbols in South Asian societies” (Babb, 1995; 1).

He argues that media and religious system in South Asia are interlaced in a complex manner in that in each manifestation of the religious tradition – such as “in belief, patterned behavior, written records, ceremonial performances, iconography, traces in human memory, and so forth”, a religious tradition is conceived as a “system” that stores and transmits information encoded in the form of symbols disseminated through speech, writing, and images and “deposited in human memory, books, durable artifacts, carved images, and so on” (Babb, 1995; 2). These symbols are rearticulated in various ways in different periods and sites. Some of the most significant forms in which these symbols are represented are *chitrakadha* (comic books), television performances, religious cinema and god posters. In the essay “Video Vachana: Swadhyaya and Sacred Tapes”, John. T. Little says, “the venerable tradition of religious oratory has been faced for some time with such cultural changes as the advent of widespread literacy and technological innovation such as the small printing press. More recently, the arrival of various forms of electronic media has added a new dimension to the situation” (Little, 1995; 255). Apart from films, music, and print media the representations of religious rhetoric through *chitrakadha*, television serials, religious/ devotional cinemas, calendars and posters have influenced the formation of semi-divine figures such as Satya Sai Baba and Mata Amritanandamayi whose performative life provides continuity to the images and
narratives mentioned above, and fix them in specific real-life sites and a commonsense of modernity.

Such ideas that constitute a religious rhetoric, as the virtuous mother, female lover or ‘devotee’, ideal wife, ideal son or law-abider or hero, and the divine authority are narrativised, pictured and performed in various media sites such as the magazines, newspaper, popular cinema, advertisements, reality shows and other television programmes.

In the Mata Amritanandamayi phenomenon the iconic mother image of ‘Amma’ is the pivotal sign around which the subjectivity of the son or daughter is constructed. These subjectivities I argue, are formed during the devotees’ various disciplinary and discursive modes of engagement with Mata Amritanandamayi. In order to approach the question of subjectivities produced through the engagement between Mata Amritanandamayi and devotees, a conceptual framework needs to be built that would recognize the significance of the affective language in which the subjects narrate their encounter. Here I adopt the concept of “aesthetic formation” introduced by Birgit Meyer in order “to better account for the affective power of images, sounds, and texts over their beholders” (Meyer, 2009; 6). Scholars such as Christopher Pinney, Charles Hirschkind, and Vivian Sobchack have introduced concepts that study imaginations as not just representations but also linked with feelings, emotions, perceptions and sensations. Pinney describes the Hindu cultural practice of darsan as a part of a more widespread practice underlying Indian visuality that he terms ‘corpothetics’ or sensory corporeal aesthetics. He uses the term in opposition to ‘aesthetics’, “which is about the separation between the image and the beholder, and disinterested evaluation of images” whereas ‘corpothetics’ entails a desire to fuse image and the beholder, and the elevation of efficacy as the central
criterion of value (Pinney, 2004; 194). Similarly Shusterman, Hirschkind and Sobchack use the concepts ‘Somaesthetics’ and ‘cine-aesthetic subjects’ in order to stress the importance of body and senses (Shusterman, 1999; Hirschkind, 2006; Sobchack, 2004). Jonathan Crary offers in his book *Techniques of the Observer: Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Crary, 1990), another interesting explanation that underscores the experience of the body in perceiving. These are some of the works that deal with the aesthetic or embodied aspect of signification.

Even as the Amritanandamayi phenomenon exists as a popular faith formation, it is represented as a spiritual movement in the public sphere through the Ashram publications, prints and television channel. This prompts one to ask questions about the nature and the form of the spirituality that we encounter in contemporary popular culture in India. The ideas of spirit or spirituality have been there in human cultures in different forms, since time immemorial. Also, they may have carried particular meanings and formed particular relations between people in different periods in history. This makes it a practice of imagining, perceiving and constructing a subject in a given time within a given historical context. Focusing on the context one may also understand the Mata faith as a discursive formation that produces in spirituality a certain object of discourse, and that is delimited by the existing subjective positions available in the contemporary society in Kerala. Looking at it this way we will see that the Mata faith text presumes a few subject positions and its possible transformations.

The earlier book-length scholarly work on the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission in India is limited to Maya Warrier’s anthropological study on the modern self-making practices among urban middle-class Hindus in Mata Amritanandamayi Mission. In her book *Hindu Selves in a Modern World: Guru Faith in the Mata*
Amritanandamayi Mission, Maya Warrior tries to explain how modernity is experienced by the devotees of Amritanandamayi and how they construct a Hindu self in accordance with this understanding of modernity. Maya Warrior’s work takes three main routes to understanding this. First, she gives an analysis of the narrative the Mata and the mission gives to the movement. Secondly, she gives the devotees’ narrative of their expectations, and experiences. Thirdly, she gives her narrative of the movement. There are also articles written on specific aspects such as the seva and affect in different contexts (Pandya, 2014; Ahonen, 2010). Apart from these there are works that deal with other such phenomena under the rubric of new religious movements or global religions in India (T. Srinivas, 2010; S. Srinivas, 2008; Copeman & Ikegame, 2012; Babb, 1986). Some works in this field focus on the leaders or gurus of a modern form of Hinduism argued as following neo-liberal and Hindutva ideologies (Lise McKean, 1996). Apart from these, there are different collections of studies on gurus in various regions such as the South Asia, the US, and India (Copeman & Ikegame, 2012; Forsthoefel & Humes, 2005).

Chapterisation

Chapter I is a brief introduction that covers the main ideas and contexts in which the analysis of the phenomenon is undertaken. It draws upon various concepts in the study of religious phenomena, politics and media to make the argument for the analytical framework that has been deployed.

In Chapter II I examine three signifiers frequently used by the organisation to represent Mata Amritanandamayi, that also form the imagination of the devotees. Through Mata Amritanandamayi’s hagiographies and accounts of miracles, and other unusual events I map the various stages of the phenomenon from Sudhamani’s
divinity to Mata Amritanandamayi’s iconicity. The story of Amritanandamayi that I study is taken from biographies, video documentaries, testimonials and devotee accounts. These narratives are produced during the charismatic stage of the Mata and it is at this point that a story is written retrospectively about her ‘divinity’. Hence I try to begin from the stage where the Mata acquires her charismatic image. It is at this stage that the Mata (or Sudhamani) meets her friends, the spiritual seekers who wish to lead a spiritual life in her presence. And from there I will talk about the stories that narrate her divinity. Later, I will show how through various discourses and debates Mata Amritanandamayi gets shaped as an icon. In this stage, politicians in Kerala and some at the national level, identify the Mata faith as a domain of popular interest. I will elaborate on the significance of this while I engage with the iconicity of the Mata.

Chapter III examines the Mata faith as an aesthetic formation. To do this first, I try to understand how rituals and performative acts mobilise aesthetic sensibility through ideas such as bhakti, sankalpam and bhavam. Secondly, I examine the relationship between dominant images of motherhood in Kerala popular culture and the Amma image of Mata Amritanandamayi by comparing images of the ideal mother produced in popular cinema and those by the Amritanandamayi Ashram. Thirdly, I examine the various sensorial practices in Mata Amritanandamayi Math such as darsan, bhajan, and puja.

Chapter IV examines Mata Amritanandamayi faith as a discursive formation. In this chapter I look at the discussions and debates in popular culture about Mata faith and the criticisms against Mata Amritanandamayi. It argues that Mata faith is shaped by the debates and criticisms in the popular culture on the nature of religion, faith and politics.
Chapter V concerns with the iconicity of Mata Amritanandamayi. In this chapter, first, I will examine the role of icons in the society and how it has been formed and reformed in the changing economic and discursive contexts using the example of the ritualized performative art, *Theyyattam*. Secondly, looking at the social and political contexts in which Sudhamani’s subjectivity is formed I will show how she comes out as an icon of recuperated feminine other. Thirdly, I will examine an iconography used in Mata worship in order to show the way in which the Mata is located in a certain Hindu guru iconography.