CHAPTER 2
THE DIVINE MOTHER, SPIRITUAL MASTER AND THE HUGGING SAINT: IMAGES OF MATA AMRITANANDAMAYI

Fig. 2.1 A poster of Mata Amritanandamayi signifying three images of her.
The photograph shown (fig. 2.1) is a poster that advertises one of Mata Amritanandamayi’s visits to Secunderabad city in Andhra Pradesh. It was a few months after I wrote this chapter that the poster appeared and hence I restructured it to begin from a different point. Nevertheless, I was happy because it assured me that one of my earliest assumptions about the way people might be seeing Mata Amritanandamayi has something to do with the ‘conscious’ making of the faith (assuming the poster mirrors a popular perception). The poster presents Mata Amritanandamayi in three different perspectives—the Divine Mother, the Spiritual Master and the Hugging Saint. Are these three different signifiers of the same persona or are they pointing to three different personas? It is in this background that this chapter will examine the construction of the image(s) that Mata Amritanandamayi represents through looking at the stories, newspaper and magazine articles, testimonials, images, videos and biographical accounts. Since we already begin with the three signifiers in front of us, the construction of which we are looking for, I will introduce the chapter with a description of these.

The first signifier, the “Divine Mother” refers to an extraordinary quality of Mata Amritanandamayi as a woman who projects a maternal attitude towards all people. The second one, the “Spiritual Master”, signifies a charismatic leader who is assumed to have an enlightened view of the sensible world in which she is a part, someone who is capable of envisioning its working schema and hence able to ‘foresee’ an individual’s working path or destiny within it. By this ‘working schema’, I mean something similar to what Ranciere calls the “distribution of sensible”. According to him, the distribution of sensible “reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in
which this activity is performed” (Ranciere, 2004; 12). I will engage with that analogy later. The third signifier is “the Hugging Saint”, which would sound a bit strange to the uninitiated as it does not reflect any pre-existing mythological category and in this sense stands out from the other two signifiers. Apart from these there is emphasis on the “experience of healing touch”. I do not claim that these three images exhaust the different significations of the Mata, and here I am also aware that the Mata faith is a dynamic phenomenon. What I wish to do in this chapter is to understand the representative images that form the Mata faith, from a certain point in its trajectory.

As I have mentioned earlier, this chapter was conceived before I came across these signifiers articulated as such in the poster. Hence, my classifications of the development of the images of the Mata, which parallels those in the poster, are made in different terms. I classify the three perceptions or images of Mata Amritanandamayi as the divine image, the charismatic image and the iconic image, to bring out the discursive field in which each image was constituted and carried across to the next images. I argue that these images have followed a chronological order (as stages) in their formation as they got deterritorialised from the field of emergence towards an idea of universal spirituality and then reterritorialised as the icon, the hugging saint. To show this, I approach the history of Mata faith through the different transformations and appropriations it underwent in its course and try to identify the agents, statements, and presumptions that enabled each.

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9 I take the concepts of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation from Deleuze and Guattari to mean “the movement by which ‘something’ leaves the territory” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; 508) and after breaking the unity reconstitute it.

10 Etymologically, the word ‘saint’ means sacred and hence, represents a sacred person. In various contexts the meaning of saint differs. Sainthood is usually associated with a practice of asceticism rather than religious worship. For instance, a priest (pujari) need not be a saint (sanyasi). In the usual Christian instance, the Church ordains a saint. However, when Mata Amritanandamayi is called a saint, it denotes the ascetic nature of her life.
The story of Amritanandamayi that I study is taken from biographies, video documentaries, testimonials and devotee accounts. These narratives are the 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.

The Charismatic Image

Charisma is a popularly used term nowadays in newspapers and popular magazines referring to a certain quality of an individual that appeals to a large number of people to have faith in their authority of certain knowledge. Basically, in this sense of usage, charisma concerns an engagement of faith or belief. The etymology of the word points to its religious origin in the idea of grace. In sociology, charisma is defined by Max Weber as one form of “inward justification” or ground for “legitimacy of rule” (Weber, 2008;157). He calls it the authority of special personal gift of grace, “absolutely personal devotion, and personal trust in revelation, in heroism or in other leadership qualities of an individual” (Weber,157). This is the form of authority exercised by the prophet or the populist leader. Weber defines charisma in two different categories of phenomena; first, a proximity of institutions, people or objects to the ultimate values of a society and secondly, a personal ability to
generate and express intense excitement. He calls the latter, genuine charisma. According to Liah Greenfeld, this latter form of charisma is the “ability to generate internally and externally express extreme excitement, an ability which makes one the object of intense attention and unreflective imitation by others” (Greenfeld, 1985;120).

If what Weber and Greenfeld mean by genuine charisma is to be taken as a true phenomenon, then there must be two ways in which it exists –first, as the ‘expression’ of some intense feeling and secondly, as a ‘spectacle’ or sensible force that conveys the same. Enthusiasm is not a feeling that comes out of meaninglessness; rather it is a feeling that identifies the possibility of meaning in apparent chaos or when encountering a crisis. The chaos itself may be a unique vision that breaks the existing continuities, suspending the elements to reconceptualise a different possibility for the situation at hand. Thus, if the discourses of devotion in a certain period convey freedom from caste structure, the enthusiasm affected by devotion is a mental impression of this sense of freedom that sees creative possibilities in the field where one is free to operate.

**Kerala Renaissance and Spiritual Institutions**

There are various kinds of practices of *bhakti* or devotion among the lower castes and dalits in Kerala. A very common practice belonging to the Hindu fold among these is the evening prayer called *sandhyanamam* practiced in front of a sacred lamp and an idol or a picture of any God, mainly by old women and children in the house. In most houses of the young labouring class couple, this is the only form of worship. The idea is that prayer keeps mind and body focused and thereby, brings God’s grace to the family. The practitioners ‘purify’ their body by taking a wash
before the ritual and sing songs praising the Gods. Although this is a widely held practice for some period now, it does not exhaust the modes of personal asceticism found among the Dalits and the lower castes. Historically, prior to this form of individual and family oriented devotional practices, more commonly, there used to be caste/community oriented ritual practices. The latter form of individual practice of asceticism is a result of various reform movements among the lower castes and Dalits.

The idea of spirituality in the first decade of the twentieth century in Kerala, the period also known as the Kerala Renaissance (*Kerala Navoddhanam*), specifically meant to communicate a certain vision of the modern individual “self.” Lower caste leaders reinvented prayer, particularly community prayer groups, as one of the first steps to construct sovereign selves among the subaltern groups. Apart from the prayer groups, daily lifestyle changes were also introduced into lower caste communities through an invocation to focus on personal hygiene, prayer, expenditure etc. (Mohan, 2016). The Araya community leader Pundit K.P. Karuppan published the booklet titled *Acharabhooshanam* in the year 1904 for the subaltern people which offer information on how to carry out personal hygiene, prayer, childbirth, marriage ceremonies and other rituals (Karuppan, 2013). The following generations inherited the practices and also made changes appropriate to their period. Sudhamani’s community also had a small prayer group in the neighborhood, which possibly inherited its ideals from such caste reforms. Thus for the subaltern groups, prayer, devotional symbolism, and religious performance, are the ways in which a liberated self is archived through “radical imagination” (Castoriadis, 1987). Also, as Sanal Mohan notes “it was through the learning of prayers that the slave castes of the mid-nineteenth century could acquire a new social imaginary” (Mohan, 2016; 46).
To have a strong-willed opinion on anything that determines one’s political existence, one needs to negotiate the subjective reality with the ideas and practices that make possible, primarily, one’s immediate sociality. However, this sense of immediate sociality is not something given, but constructed through engaged practices, ideas and relations thus formed. If a transformation occurs in the larger domain in which this sociality is located that infiltrates its present constitution and creates an imbalance within, it makes a reconceptualization imperative for survival of people and culture. In order to make this reconceptualization possible an individual within the cultural sphere should assert his or her agency and difference. She should individuate. If this reconceptualization occurs through a random transformation in the realm of practices and is not envisioned in terms of its objective as equality, then it creates at least temporarily a state of extreme chaos, inequality and oppression. It is also up to the individual to choose whether he or she would act according to the ‘ethic of ultimate ends’ or according to the ‘ethic of immediate responsibility’ or do neither until she figures out her own identity. During these times the community looks out for a statement from within, that makes a collective address of its people. In this context, a charismatic is a person who makes a statement that has universal implication for the community. She addresses the people as a collective by invoking the concerns common to them. The establishment of a charismatic authority involves wider acknowledgment of a creative power that seeks to liberate the community from its ‘present’.

For the oppressed, who are unable to articulate their agency in this transformative period, whose existence hitherto did not enable them to identify the intricate meanings of practices, it becomes crucial that until they identify themselves and can articulate this identification, they must transgress or resist any untoward
external authority of knowledge and mode of being. Construction of self is not only a path to truth or reality, but also a responsibility of the individual towards building a democratic society. However the ideological premises constituted by hegemonic powers defers this process of self-making, through well-articulated closed structures of identity imposed upon creative conducts. It is at this point that resistance becomes important as a strategy to maintain one’s creative imaginary.

One way to identify a new formation of identity in this context by such subaltern subjects as the lower-caste women is to focus on the practices, both traditional and creative or impulsive. This offers the possibility of rearticulating Sudhamani’s ecstatic acts in the formative context of her community life. According to Greenfeld,

‘Pure’ or ‘genuine’ charisma expresses itself through ecstasy, manic seizure and other manifestations of utmost excitement. Whatever example Weber chooses to give—a berserk warrior, a prophet, or a demagogue—it is this external expression (including rolling eyes and uneven breath), and not its causes, which is important. This is contrary to the view that a prophet is a paradigmatic example of a charismatic person, which implies that charisma resides in the prophetic vision. (Greenfeld, 1985;120)

There are two ways in which charisma is understood here. First, there is the genuine charisma, the effectiveness of which lies in an overtly expressed extreme feeling of excitement. Secondly, there is the charisma involving closeness to fundamental values, vision or message. It is the former phenomenon that will guide an understanding of the problem of Sudhamani’s distinction. Here Sudhamani’s distinctive ecstatic acts themselves become a statement of an event. The message or vision of this act articulated in the language of devotional literature or spiritual books
is only a secondary event, an articulation of reason and hence questionable with regard to its interest. However, this view raises the question that if it is ever possible for an act without articulated meaning to have authority and control over people over a long period of time. The answer is in the negative. The infatuation over a display of excitement is temporary and is only contingently effective in any mobilisation. In Greenfeld’s words “the revolutionary quality of charisma lies in its potential eventuation in charismatic authority which is the basis of most important revolutionary changes”(Greenfeld, 122). This explains why there is a need to find the gap between the genuine charismatic acts and their symbolization through specific events and contexts. This gap identifies narrative intervention in the production of a charismatic authority. The agent or author of this narrative could be the same person whose genuine feelings of excitement/ ecstasy acted out through their body as performance or speech, or it could be a totally different subject. In either case the symbolization of genuine charisma is a separate event. This genuine feeling is different from what is called ‘genuine experience’ in that the former is visceral and the latter, perceptual. We may call Sudhamani’s ecstatic acts as reflection of a genuine charismatic experience, following her biographical accounts. If Sudhamani’s ecstatic acts performed in the presence of others and the specific narrative discourse of spirituality written over them are separate acts, it demands an intervention within the text to identify the kind of subject the narrative and its rules produce.

**The Caste-Gender Context**

In order to understand the context in which Sudhamani lived we will examine the socio-cultural context that marks Sudhamani’s identity as a lower caste woman. The dalit and lower caste women in Kerala were historically unprotected workers, an
object of voyeuristic and sexual enjoyment by uppercaste men. Their primary aim as subjects of democratic discourse has been to be a woman physically protected in the security of family or culture (Rowena, 2011 & 2015; Devika, 2003 & 2010). So post-independence, as subjects of modern democratic discourse the self-identity of lower caste dalit women were primarily shaped by their demand for secure married life, besides education, and protection from caste violence. However, within this family she uses the available discursive resources and practices such as labour to creatively construct her self. Often, this was not an easy affair and involves contradictions, struggles and negotiations. In order to creatively actualise their own selves within the confined structures of family, lower caste women adopt different strategies. There are those who identify entirely with the family, enjoy their specific roles, domestic responsibilities and share its so-called material gifts. There are others who find their thinking valuable for envisioning a future in their own terms and make better life for everyone within the limits of family and community. Also those who utilize their sensitive, imaginative and intuitive faculties who are uninterested by routine work within the much limited circles, struggle to contain their feelings and excitements, and seek their creative expression and its appreciation. By denying them a political community, education, their own traditional art forms and cultural practices as superstitions, they are also kept away from such cultural institutions where people interact with each other to grow their sensibilities and form their agential subjectivity. These women limit their faculties for the sake of protection from a society that perpetually reinvent the image of lower caste woman as the licentious other.

Conversely, this confinement of dalit and lower caste women to the limits of family or mothering and their nurturing in individualised devotional sensibilities also keeps the public sphere unprepared for her emergence making her further lonely, and
vulnerable in these spaces. They cross oceans altogether in a jump when they plunge into the modern social and cultural institutions, which have been havens fanatically protected for themselves by uppercaste intelligentsia over generations and sanctuaries of their knowledge, without anything ‘significant’ to be taken with them from their own past. As J. Devika says most of the early representations of women in early 20th century Keralam came from “women who had been exposed to modern education, were members of emergent middle-class and largely hailed from jati groups that had taken a lead in the highly uneven and complex process of the transformation of jati groups into closely-knit modern communities in Keralam” (Devika, 2003; 202). On the one hand the lower caste women who enter the modern public sphere have to find out why they are what they are, or the nature of their subjectivity, and on the other hand, they struggle to put in perspective the political order, how people’s ideas, emotions, and sensibilities are distributed in the society.

As a representative of these women Sudhamani cannot be an embodiment of motherhood in the form of unconditional love, tolerance, and patience, the spiritual capital of an upper caste grihalakshmi. She represents the enthusiasm, intuition, sensitivity, anger, struggle, contradictions, inconsistencies, interruptions and resentment those women who identify with her lower caste status embody even behind their customary compassionate smile. Her charisma on a closer look, at least at a particular moment, reflects the abundant energy, courage, conflicts, inconsistencies, mental burden of secrets and humiliation that even if unexposed, belong to all such dalit/lower caste women. However, in order to resignify Sudhamani’s charismatic authority, one needs to intervene at the point where this violent ‘erasure’ of a meaning happened within the text. This would not only make visible a truth the phenomenon
hides within it but also liberate those dalit/lower caste women who struggle to conform totally to this ‘labourer with a *mathrubhavam*’ image against all odds.

When imagining her location within existing definitions of modern democracy it leads to an impasse where as a lower caste woman Sudhamani’s complete emergence into the totally symbolic world is limited by the unavailability of an institutional other. What Patricia Hill Collins writes in the context of African-American women is similar to this,

African-American women occupy a position whereby the inferior half of a series of these binaries converge, and this placement has been central to our subordination. The allegedly emotional, passionate nature of Black women has long been used to justify Black women’s sexual exploitation. Similarly, restricting Black women’s literacy, then claiming that we lack the facts for sound judgment, relegates African-American women to the inferior side of the fact/opinion binary. Denying Black women status as fully human subjects by treating us as the objectified Other within multiple binaries demonstrates the power that binary thinking, oppositional difference, and objectification wield within intersecting oppressions (Collins, 2000; 71).

As indicated by Collins, the symbolic world formed by the logic of binary thinking leaves no space for the lower caste woman for self-definition within it other than as the mother. The mother is the subject relegated to the domain of the “imaginary” by the normalized symbolic world and is patronised so. However, from the perspective of the lower caste women subjects, the domain of “imaginary”, (something that is not confined to the act of mothering or being a woman) itself provides the ground for her emancipation as an autonomous individual. But, this

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11 The concepts ‘Symbolic’ and ‘imaginary’ used in psychoanalytic terms.
autonomy helps to answer only the question of her being. The question of her political existence cannot be answered on the basis of this autonomous self.

The Charismatic Stage in Biographical Accounts

The charismatic stage of the Mata begins with Sudhamani’s public performance of miracles and the passionate embrace. The anecdotal accounts that define the divine stage of Amritanandamayi’s hagiography were part of the practices constructing her charismatic authority. However, some of the earlier anecdotal events also disappeared from the subsequent accounts of Mata Amritanandamayi and new statements emerged in their place. This is because in the charismatic phase many narratives are recounted and questioned during Mata Amritanandamayi’s engagement with the public on various occasions. Those accounts that were sustained refer to a particular revivalist Hindu middle-class interest in ascetic ethics in the form of unconditional love, tolerance, patience and gratitude as attitudes towards society and celibacy, yoga and meditation as practices towards a ‘higher self’ (Chatterjee, 1999;74).

The Spiritual Seekers and the Divine Image

The divine mother image of Mata Amritanandamayi is established as her performative acts and attitudes are narrativised by those who come in search of one. In Gail Tredwell’s account, she describes one of the early experiences of her meeting the Mata (then Sudhamani). She recollects her memory of the account of “bhava” she got as she met Sudhamani for the first time.
In the devotional tradition, bhava means the mood of ecstasy, also the channeling of emotional energies induced by the intensity of devotion to one’s object of devotion. In Amma’s case I was informed, these manifestations had nothing to do with possession, when a spirit of deity temporarily takes over a body. Amma was supposedly in full control and manifesting these gods to enhance the devotion of the attendees, and for the good of the world. It was explained to me that Amma says she is like a tap and controls the amount of water, or in this case spiritual power that it released. That she is only manifesting an infinitesimal part of her power during these bhavas and if she revealed her full power, nobody could come near her! (Tredwell, 2013)

Sudhamani is not yet Mata Amritanandamayi when Tredwell meets her. In the description Sudhamani gives Tredwell, during bhava she is enacting a feeling that she is controlling the extraordinary power that she feels within while manifesting the gods in front of the devotees.

Tredwell’s memoir became very popular primarily because it is a confessional narrative of her life as the personal assistant of Mata Amritanandamayi, that could bring to the text what happens ‘behind the scenes’, where one looks to finds glimpses of Sudhamani, ‘the one who no longer performs in the public’. However, I found Tredwell’s accounts particularly interesting as it depicted in the early chapters, Sudhamani’s life in the context of the difficult lives lower caste women led in that period. It provides a detailed picture of the context in which Sudhamani lived as a ‘gifted’ young woman. The passages where Tredwell describes her first meeting with Sudhamani, her bath, sleep, chores and routine visits to the neighbors and frequent sleepovers, give a picture of the traditional life of a lower caste woman in a village community in Kerala, especially the mid-Kerala from the 60s to 80s. What defines the
subjectivity of a woman from the laboring community here is divine in the perspective of an upper caste middle-class youth in the 1970s in Kerala. Tredwell describes the moment she was introduced to ‘Amma’ who was then just a young woman who performed ‘Krishna bhava’ once in a while to the relatives and neighbours. Tredwell had been staying in Tiruvannamalai for about a year until she met a young man named Chandru. Chandru introduced himself as a student of Sanskrit and ancient scriptures and told her stories about his guru, a young girl, whom he calls Amma. He and his two other friends have been visiting this guru three days a week. Chandru tells Tredwell that the village community understands ‘Amma’ as just a girl who goes in trance once in a while and does not recognize her divinity as they do. In the narration of Sudhamani’s persona at the moment of their first encounter, Tredwell portrays an ordinary lower caste woman, just like other women around her.

Tredwell’s description of Chandru’s excited way of talking about his guru reminds me of another devotee. In my visit to a small community gathering at a church in Sienna, Italy, I met a woman devotee of Satya Sai Baba. She was most probably in her 60s. She appeared very eager to talk to me when she came to know that my research is about a ‘spiritual guru’. She told me with much excitement that she had a guru in India. She had visited his ashram in India with her son, a few years ago and still practices meditation and some prayers. She came closer to me and in a hushed voice sang two lines of a bhajan and giggled. I tried to read her excitement in the context of the Hare Krishna Movement, Beat generation in the US and Beatles visit to India in the 1968 and the possible ripples of a certain sense of Indian spirituality it might have sent across the post-war youth in the First World. A certain kind of Asian spiritual quest peaked in 1968 and with it a set of questions that tries to make sense of the self and the world. Tredwell, Neal, Chandru, Balu and Venu have
all been part of this wave directly or indirectly. Even in the way the questions were
framed, they had priorities that set them closer to their specific cultural locations. For
instance, the latter three were primarily influenced by a nationalist stream of
spirituality reinvented through Gandhi and Ramakrishna.

As soon as Chandru is introduced to Tredwell, not only does he begin to talk
about his guru but also shows a photograph of her. It seemed as though in those times,
a ‘guru’ was what every Western traveller in Thiruvannamalai was looking for, and
Chandru knew it for sure. Nonetheless, in Tredwell’s description he appeared no less
serious as a spiritual seeker himself. Much before meeting Sudhamani and accepting
her as their guru or Amma, these seekers brought with them certain conceptualisations
of spiritual life and read these ideas into what Sudhamani was doing in her devotional
practices. Later the engagement between these ideas of spirituality brought from
outside by each seeker and the charismatic performative acts of Sudhamani produced
a certain faith community and became an institution. It is at this stage that Mata
Amritanandamayi acquires a charismatic authority.

It is interesting, however, to note that prior to the institutionalization of Mata
faith, the village community saw Sudhamani only as a performer who goes in a trance
and did not treat her always with the reverence that Chandru and his friends deemed
due to her divinity. When Chandru, the young proselytizer met the Western devotees
Neal and Tredwell for the first time in Thiruvannamali, he told them about his guru,
the Ammachi. Ammachi was then only a 26 years old woman who appears in the
‘form’ of Devi and Krishna and had no Ashram. When Tredwell asks him, without an
ashram or acknowledgement by followers how he heard about her or decided that she
is his guru he replies,
Three nights a week people flock to her for healing and blessings when she embodies Krishna and an aspect of the Goddess. She does this at her family shrine. The villagers think she is just an ordinary girl in a trance and has no clue as to her divine nature. Apart from myself, there are five or six other young men from neighbouring villages who revere her as the Divine Mother (Tredwell, no pagination).

Chandru, Balu and his brother Venu were the first to “discover” Sudhamani’s divinity. They used to frequent her house on the three days of bhava, every week until much later, when a small hut was built for prayer and meditation near Amritanandamayi’s ancestral home. The usual bhava act is just a performative moment during which the villagers enjoy seeing their gods embodied, while Sudhamani goes in a trance. Here there is a contradiction in the way the village community and the potential narrators of Sudhamani’s stories perceive the ‘bhava’ act. In Cornell’s description of the ‘bhava’ or trance, comparing it with similar acts by a former Saint brings the validation. Cornell compares Sudhamani’s ecstatic acts with that of Ramana Maharshi and Padre Pio, a Christian monk, in order to find some kind of essential meaning of spirituality from what is common to all these people.

Sudhamani’s own description of her feelings that led to the bhava practice relates it to her visceral feelings and does not attribute any spiritual reason. According to her she feels a certain aloofness from people’s suffering when she takes the Krishna Bhavam. But in the Devi (Divine Mother) Bhavam she feels love and compassion for everyone. When in Devi bhava she holds the devotees tenderly in her embrace and says, “darling, darling, son!” or “darling, darling daughter!” After doing both bhavams for several years Sudhamani decided to do just the Divine Mother bhavam (Cornell, 47). Such emotional exchanges between Sudhamani and the
devotee are almost palpable in the environment as others wait eagerly for their turn to receive an embrace.

Sudhamani’s ecstatic acts and the idea of spirituality in the minds of the seekers were two different phenomena having a different reason for their occurrence. To the latter, Sudhamani’s acts carried something that is spontaneous, at the core of human nature, and hence, is true spiritual being. Just as they were in search of this spiritual core in Sudhamani, her spontaneous acts also got a language of spiritual reasoning. However, it is against all forms of institutionalization, including the language of the dominating patriarchal order, which prescribed her roles of a slave.

Fig. 2.2 Screenshot of the webpage representing the Mata’s childhood (Source: amritapuri.org).

**Childhood depicted in biographies**

It was in the 1980s that a biography of Sudhamani was written by M. Ramakrishnan Nair which was translated in 1988. Later Judith Cornell wrote a biography in 2001 collecting stories from the earlier biographies, interviews and other sources. The divinity of Sudhamani is asserted in these biographies as an innate
quality. So, like in the mythological narratives of divine birth Sudhamani’s birth was also depicted in an eventful manner. The ashram website [www.amritapuri.org](http://www.amritapuri.org) offers a short biography of Mata Amritanandamayi illustrated with paintings (fig. 2.2). In the website the story of Amritanandamayi appears in a very simple narrative with illustrations of main events.

Amma was born in a poor fishing village in Kerala, South India, in 1953. Her father sold fish to make a living. Her mother relates that the child wasn’t born crying as babies usually are, but with a beaming smile on her face. She was given the name Sudhamani (Ambrosial Jewel).[12]

This biographical snippet of Amritanandamayi’s “birth” is part of a short hagiography replete with simplistic affective descriptions and illustrations such as in a children’s story. The story emphasizes that Amritanandamayi was unlike the “typical” babies since birth. In many stories of folk origin, there is the hope for a “gifted” child who will transform the community for good or take away the miseries that fall upon the community. Childbirth is also celebrated because it represents a possibility for a better future. In folk traditions death, family, puberty and childbirth are events around which time is conceptualized. It is also assumed that a particular tradition is to be guided through larger changes affecting it from outside, by a wise person (man or woman) who can “read the signs” (perceive those changes) and their effects from the community’s vantage point. In times of such miseries, as it is depicted in many folk tales, the community will look for signs of such divine “avataram”. Mata Amritanandamayi’s hagiography too is replete with such “signs” that were “ignored” by people near her as she was growing up until she was “discovered” by or “realized herself within” a middle-class Hindu institution of spirituality that had already

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acquired national prominence by the latter half of twentieth century. One may find in
the same period, various attempts (biographical, comic, critical and communal) at
caricaturing this national spiritual subject, in writers such as O.V. Vijayan, R. K.
Narayan or Raja Rao. The snippet of biography quoted above is part of a retrospective
narrative constructed from memories, which identifies Amritanandamayi’s original
distinction from a “usual” human child, with the validating reference of her mother.

In the eventful biography of Mata Amritanandamayi written by Judith Cornell,
this is further described in great detail. Cornell’s hagiography of Amritanandamayi is
one of the first two attempts to narrate the story of the phenomenon. Her narrative of
the extraordinary birth of Amritanandamayi begins with the parents’ experiences
while gestating the baby. Amritanandamayi’s parents are said to have had similar and
unusual dreams during this time such as giving birth to Krishna. Cornell narrates
Amritanandamayi’s birth as follows.

Amma’s entire birth, on September 27, 1953, was silent, and Damayanti said
she felt almost nothing. When she looked at her newborn girl, Damayanti was
shocked to see that her skin was dark blue. Remembering her last baby who
had not survived the birth, Damayanti was horrified, assuming that since this
baby was silent and blue, that it was also dead. Damayanti began to cry. At
that moment, a woman from a neighbouring house happened to stop at the
door of the Idamannel house. Quickly realizing that Damayanti had just
delivered a child, she hurried to make mother and baby comfortable. After
assuring the shaken mother that the baby was alive and breathing, Damayanti
again looked at the baby’s dark eyes looking directly into hers. The baby
looked back at her with a penetrating gaze and a benevolent smile on her tiny
face. (Cornell, 2001; 10)
This memory of the child’s birth is also an attempt to redefine Sudhamani who, as we will come to know later, has been described as a child neglected on the basis of her ‘ineptness’ to the lower caste, working class family. Her unusual attentiveness to otherwise familiar sights in nature, enthusiastic engagement with her own feelings and frequent fits of epiphany have been narrated as signs of madness for a family which does not tolerate a contemplation of the sensorial at the risk of the immediate functional use of the body in everyday labour. Further Cornell describes the memory of unique appearance of the child as follows:

The child’s legs were locked in a cross-legged position, like the lotus posture used for meditation. Her little thumbs and forefingers touched each tiny hand forming a circle. Neither woman noticed how similar the baby’s hand gestures were to the finger position the yogis use to represent the ego merging with the Higher-self. Instead they both thought she had some kind of skin and bone disease. (Cornell 2001;10)

It is through these biographical narratives that we have any access to what is known as Mata Amritanandamayi’s pooryashram. I mainly use biographies by Judith Cornel and Ramakrishnan Nair, the latter translated by Swami Amritiswaroopananda, to understand the early narratives of the Mata’s “divinity”. The biographies have the narrative of a typical hagiography with stories of miracles, dreams and about the birth of the ‘divine being’. Although not meant as a hagiography, the descriptions of Gail Tredwell’s early experience with finding and joining the group, which later grew into a community of Mata faith, also give some understanding of the development of the “divine mother” image. Cornell writes that at the age of five when Sudhamani joined the school, she exhibited extraordinary intellect and memory, unlike her siblings. Yet, when she was in the fourth grade, she was forced to leave school to help her mother.
According to the narrative one of the reason for this was her “inferior status” in the family on the basis of her dark skin and strange un-childlike behaviour. She was made to do the domestic chores throughout the day and was rebuked by her mother harshly. As she worked, Sudhamani used to chant the name of Lord Krishna. These events in her life are repeated in most biographical accounts with much relevance as though they were tests on her behavior.

Another highlight is her kindness and charity. Stories about untouchable caste people being treated like family, and respectfully called “father”, are given much relevance in the biographical narrative. The following story shows the extent to which Sudhamani is said to have empathized with other people’s sufferings.

One day Sudhamani was walking around the neighbouring houses, gathering vegetable scraps for the cows, when she met a starving family. Moved by their suffering, she returned home and took the one possession of value, a gold bangle belonging to her mother. Running back to the destitute family, she gave them the bangle so that they could sell it and buy food.

When Damayanti and Acchan returned home that evening and discovered that Damayanti’s jewellery was missing, they both had a fit of uncontrolled fury at their daughter’s rebelliousness. Acchan grabbed Sudhamani by the arm, dragged her outside, where he tied her to a tree. In a rage he beat her with a palm frond until blood ran down from her back. (Cornell, 18)

Following this event Sudhamani spends the night in the family shrine crying and praying to Krishna. Probably as a strategy of forgetting the reality, she prays to God that she wants “oneness” with him. She experiences the world as full of sorrow and suffering where people selfishly seek happiness and pleasure. This moment in
Sudhamani’s life as depicted in the biographies points to a crisis she wanted to overcome through hope in a transcendent power that might act upon her. The divine mother image, although precedes the charismatic stage in chronology, is a result of the popular writings and media stories. After returning from the first world tour conducted in 1987, Mata Amritanadamayi’s popularity increased considerably. In Tredwell’s words, “the media began writing her up as a godly woman with healing powers and the ability to bestow blessings” (no pagination)\(^{13}\). Judith Cornel’s biography of Mata Amritanandamayi was first published in 2001. Prior to this there existed one written in Malayalam by Prof. Ramakrishnan Nair and its English translation published by Mata Amritanandamayi Mission Trust in 1988. These biographies offer a narrative of the Mata’s \textit{poorvasramam}, claimed to have been written from the memories of the Mata herself, her parents, siblings, neighbors and friends.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Fig_2_3}
\caption{Fig. 2.3 From “Ammakkoppam Pramukhar” in Janmabhoomi Daily.}
\end{figure}

\(^{13}\) From the chapter sixteen of \textit{Holy Hell: A memoir of faith, devotion and pure madness} by Gail Tredwell.
Popularity

The fact that Mata Amritanandamayi, as a woman saint travelled across to the so-called rational worlds and gained followers there became one major reason for her publicity and later increased popularity among the upper-caste middle-classes and those in power. Those who considered saintliness as a learned identity and saw the lower classes’ devotionalism as meaningless or fake, now tried to understand the Mata as part of a different discourse of bhakti.

In 1997, Janmabhoomi Daily issued a Mata Amritanandamayi birthday special edition with full-length article on her along with photographs featuring many popular figures the poet Kunjunni ‘Mash’ titled “Ammakkoppam Pramukhar” (fig. 2.3). The article is an endorsement of Mata Amritanandamayi’s divinity and has various expositions under the rubrics avataradutyam (intention of the incarnation), dhyanathinte sakthi (the power of meditation), Jnanabhandakaram (figure of wisdom), maranathinte kala (the art of dying) and Bharata parambaryathinte thanima (the essence of the tradition of Bharatam). The article begins by accusing the communists for not recognizing the “mahatmas from Sri Krishna Bhagawan to Mata Amritanandamayi Devi” and criticizing poet Balachandran Chullikkad for expressing his devotion to the Mata. The above article that appears during the early phase of the Ashram does two things. It tries to appropriate the acts and speeches of the Mata into an existing liberal framework of the Hindu middle-class in Kerala. It also brings out the clashes between two political groups in understanding and representing the phenomenon. Although the Ashram did not acknowledge its allegiance to any
particular party, it is usually the members of RSS and BJP who invoke the narrative of the “great Bharata ascetic tradition” in response to allegations. However, the discourse of *seva* and asceticism that gained strength during the nationalist struggle against colonialism, through Congress leadership is the dominant mode of articulation within the Ashram. But this is not the only discourse one encounters in the representations of the Mata. The following characteristics form the focus of many reports, stories and testimonials that appear in the news papers.

**Humility**

One of the factors that added to the charisma of the Mata is her humility. This is also an attitude pushed during the nationalist struggle and modeled on Mahatma Gandhi’s image and ethic as a modest person. There are several testimonials that acknowledge the Mata’s “egolessness”. Most testimonials in the newspapers and magazines highlighted this nature of the Mata’s character. The inauguration special supplement of *Janmabhoomi* Daily had an article by a devotee named Kunjunni who says many times he denied the opportunity of seeing the ‘Amma’ as he thought a saint should not go only to rich people’s houses to give *darsan*. But when he saw her much later, she was sitting on the floor and eating cooked potatoes from a small plate. He says that “*bhavam*” of ‘Amma’ is still in his mind. Here as a lower caste woman Mata Amritanandamayi is following her own cultural ways and roles. But seeing it from a middle-class man’s perspective it appears like an ideal form of a woman. What a complete loss of ego signifies for a lower caste woman is submission to the will of the man and the society. Although, as an ideal “egolessness” is not usually preferred

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among lower caste cultures, wherever the pressures of caste, religious and class power act upon female subjectivity, it continuously suppress the ego.

**Romantic ethic**

In the 46th birthday supplement of Mata Amritanandmayi issued by Mathrubhumi daily on 27th September 1999, among others popular figures in Kerala such as the lyricist and director Sreekumaran Thampi and poet cum playwright Kavalam Narayana Panicker writes about their experience of the ‘Amma’. In his article titled “Amma- Ee noottandile Upanishad” Sreekumaran Thampi writes,

I hear the most beautiful poem of solace when Amma embraces me and whispers “ponnu mone” (precious son). How did this wonder happen? Why does it feel like the Amma is touching my soul when she touches me? That is how I understand the soul is brahma. Amma reminds me of the suktas ‘I am Brahma’, ‘thou are that’ ‘what we call the soul is brahmam’ all the time. This is the power that binds Amma and me. The Upanishads are the darsanasamhitas that enlightened saints (bramajnanikalaya risheendranmar) secretly advised to the disciples who sit close to them. Amma is not only making her children sit close to her but also embrace and kiss them on their forehead. Console them saying that Amma will ‘imagine the brahma’ for them. Amma sings kirtans blissfully in their company. Lifts the torch of truth that everything is Agni, by symbolically representing it in the vilakkupuja. Even when I write this short article I am ruled by the proud state of ‘I’. I escape from this ‘I’ only during those few seconds I spent with Amma? I become a son, a child in front of Amma who is younger to me. What a
wonder! Chandogyopanishad says that only the seed of soul can overcome melancholy. Amma’s touch removes my sadness at least during those few moments.

Amma does not show any tricks. Does not offer any material status. Amma is not just a saint—she is the music of solace. One day a person of high status in society comes to visit Shirdi Sai Baba, with his consorts. A dog also entered inside along with the group. When the man tried to shoo away the dog, Baba asked him to come along with the dog. Baba announced that the chaithanyam (grace) in both human beings and dogs are the same.

Many people come to the Amma’s sannidhi. Amma has the discriminatory knowledge; still, she does not show any difference to anyone. She is like the Thirichenthooor sea that receives both the teertha that flows from lord Muruka’s idol and the dirty water that comes from the drainage. Amma is the living Upanishad of this century. Adi Shankara calls river Ganga, ‘poornabrahma swaroope’. I will press my face of Amma’s lap and call her ‘poornabrahmaswaroopinee’. ” (Thampi, 11)

I have quoted this endorsement by Sreekumaran Thampi at length because I find most of the points mentioned here by him are common in subsequent writings by other devotees. The sensuous evocation of the feeling of mother through a narrative of an extraordinary experience with her as in the first sentence of the account elevates an ordinary person into an image of the “good mother” as an ideal. Along with this can be read the recent issues regarding a statement made by K.J. Jesudas criticizing women wearing tight clothes such as jeans. The image of “good mother” in the unconscious thus contributes to the shaping of her in other women’s bodies. Thus the “good mother” conceptualised in Mata Amritanandamayi becomes a “controlling
Assuming oneself as the son of the “divine mother” Thampi wishes to give up his ego state “I”. However, unlike the mother whose being is defined by this “egoless” state, he cannot completely do away with it. He is egoless only in the presence of the Amma.

**Work ethic and seva**

Apart from the attribution of maternal kindness as ideal, another image that attaches to the divine mother is her incessant will to care for the child. Kavalam Narayanapaniker writes about the significance of Vallikkavilamma’s messages in a world in which ‘love’ loses its status. In his article “Amritapuriyile snehalbhutham” (The Wonder of Love in Amritapuri) says that she encourages us to have compassion for all beings in the world. “Each Amrita institution has taken up the sacred task of building a society that values duty and responsibility. Amrita Ashram is sacralised by the Vedanta education, which reminds us of the Upanishad period, it offers to the youth who come as seekers of truth. When Amma speaks with a clear perspective on the deep relationship human beings have towards nature one can hear the eco of the cultures of Vedas and Upanishads.” (Paniker, 11). He then continues to praise her for the educational institutions that give students not only modern education but also teaches cultural values, the pension schemes for marginalised, for the twenty-five thousand houses built and donated to the houseless in five years, old age home, orphanages, hospitals for cancer patients, etc.

Another article from the print media talks about the seva activities ashram conducted among different sections of the poor. A description of the seva activities that appeared in the newspaper is that the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission “took up all the health matters pertaining to more than 20 families in the Harijan colony in
Pathanamthitta and taking care of the ill. Along with this the Mission became an exemplary by teaching the people of the colony spiritual culture”

The *seva* ethic is part of many discourses. In common parlance “to do someone’s *seva*” has a derogatory sense, which comes from the feeling that someone undermines one when one does his *seva*. However, in the liberal discourses no word has acquired so much charisma as *seva* (in the Western context, the word charity). In his article “Concept of ‘Seva’ and ‘Sevak’ in the Freedom Movement”, R. Srivatsan argues that *seva* helped to consolidate the caste-hegemony of Congress during the growth phase of the freedom. According to Srivatsan, the concept of *seva* helped the enterprising capitalist to acquire and maintain an ontic disposition without the need for a revolutionary transformation (Srivatsan, 2006; 427). That is, the upper-caste middle class who now shares the public space with all categories of people could connect with them through the concept of *seva* and still maintain their feeling of relative superiority. Gradually, *seva* became an expression of a disposition of this eliteness. *Seva* stands here as a dividing line between the privileged and the underprivileged and does not serve to build a community as it intends to do in its original sense.

**Metaphors for understanding**

Paul Ricoeur calls metaphor the trope of resemblance *par excellence* (Ricoeur, 1977; 205). Metaphors in everyday context are used to validate the truth of a statement. They imply the existence of a common pattern between two unrelated statements, events or things. Mata Amritanandamayi’s rhetoric uses metaphors to bring out the validity of a proposition or situation. It helps the common listener to

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understand things easily, and convincingly. Metaphors usually bring out the similarity between an abstract idea and a concrete object in order to fix the idea within a visual schema. The urban middle-class in India seems to have been attracted to this language of the “mediator” gurus. Ramakrishna Paramahansa also used analogies and metaphors to represent different phenomena through language that made him popular among the middle-classes in Calcutta.

Some articles appearing in the newspapers provide metaphors to understand the Mata’s divine presence as a reality. On 21 September 2003, the special supplement celebrating the 50th birthday of Mata Amritanandamayi in Varandya Kaumudi took up the questions Mathrubhavam and divinity of Mata Amritanandamayi. It tells a story to conceptualise the “why here and why now?” of Amritanandamayi’s birth. According to this Japanese folk story, time is conceptualised as a huge clock and the pendulum represents the scale and nature of sensitivity within the world at each point in time. When the pendulum strikes right, the world becomes compassionless: people become selfish, proud and greedy, and Asura forces will dominate. When the pendulum strikes left, the world will become a peaceful place under the compassionate force of the maternal spirit. The article claims that the pendulum is moving towards Mata Amritanandamayi now. For the question, if the Mata is a god, it says, “whoever is Mata Amritanandamayi, one thing is sure, there are people in one twenty-five countries who worships ‘Amma’ like God” (Shasthavattom, 2003).16

Here the typical reader of this story would find through the analogies of time, clock and world’s sensitivity as a framework where the question of Mata Amritanandamayi’s emergence at a particular point in time is answered. The story

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16 Article by a devotee Chandrashekharan Shastavattom in Varandya Kaumudi, 21, September 2003.
conveys more than just the plain statement that “Mata Amritanandamayi is here, now because God sent her to spread compassion”, that would have otherwise led him to question it.

**Tolerance of the Mother**

The print media articles also represent the Mata as a symbol of tolerance. And a devotee explains this tolerance as follows: “On Amma’s right cheek there is a black mark. It is the mark of love and motherhood. Of all the people in the world the sole owner of this mark of kindness is Mata Amritanandamayi Devi” (Shasthavattom, 2003). Here is another metaphor of “good mother” or the mother who selflessly cares for the child. The black mark on the mother’s face signifies the unconditional love for the child and hence lovable as a mark of sacrificial “good mother”.

These articles that came in print media are responses to a worldwide popularity of the Mata Amritanandamayi phenomenon. There are other popular figures in Kerala such as actor/star Mohanlal, poet and film lyricist Yusufali Kechery, playback singers such as Krishnachandran, K.S. Chitra, Manjari, Gayatri, actress Divya Unni who as devotees of the Mata, writes their individual experiences with her in dailies and popular magazines. Through the engagement with these influential individuals and their narratives about it a certain ‘aura’ is shared between them in the popular culture. This aura signifies a certain aesthetic perception of the world that is represented through these figures and the characters they made alive on screen and in the collective unconscious.

Along with such representations in the media, the image or “bhava” of motherhood or the maternal attitude that Mata Amritanandamayi represents is abstracted from its contingent contextual meaning to a universal essence. The mother
image adopted by a particular young woman, from a particular community, in a particular context, for a particular purpose is universalized or to use the Deleuzian term “deterritorialised” as a Spiritual Master (who is the divine mother). Again the particular feature of this spiritual master for which she is distinguished even when deterritorialised is her hug. The hug, that has been just a part of the darsan in the local practices, now acquires a distinctive value in her global practices as—“embracing the world”. When the mother essence she represents is reterritorialised she becomes the charity icon, the hugging saint. The photograph of a poster given in the beginning of this chapter has these three images of Mata Amritanandamayi represented in it—the Divine Mother, the Spiritual Master and the Hugging Saint.

The Icon

The iconic stage refers to that period in the Mata Faith where after acquiring the divine qualities and charismatic authority, Mata Amritanandamayi emerges as a popular figure representing certain popular sensibilities and identities. At an aesthetic level, as an icon, Mata Amritanandamayi is constituted by her appearance and performative acts. At a deeper semantic-functional level she represents different discourses to different people. At this stage within the text, she is already a charismatic figure, the divine mother incarnates and a spiritual guru. In the iconic stage Mata Amritanandamayi is a mass mediated image of certain kind of motherliness and female spirituality. The Ashram’s own publication department, television channel, and websites facilitate this mass mediation of Mata Amritanandamayi’s image. Apart from these, some of the mainstream press media such as Janmabhoomi, Mathrubhoomi and The Week occasionally devote special editions to acknowledge her cultural relevance and humanitarian initiatives. She
appears in the popular imagination as representing not spirituality in the traditional
sense of the term, but one that is deeply connected to the material world through
senses. In this material outlook of spirituality, growth becomes an idea that is not
connected to an uncontrolled desire for consumption, but the inner development of the
individual through interdependence and community building. In her hagiography
Amritanandamayi represents this kind of individual growth from a lower caste village
girl to a global spiritual leader.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the formation of the three main representative
images of the Mata—the divine mother, the spiritual master and the hugging saint. I
categorized these images according to the period in which they were formed and the
discourses that transformed each. The divine mother image began as a performative
practice of Devi Bhava that conducted for a devotional audience for duration of less
than an hour. At first, this temporary “bhava” did not define Sudhamani. However,
gradually in the company of the earliest spiritual seekers she identified more with her
spiritual self in the form of “divine mother”. Later, with the Ashram being built, and
consorts became more learned in spirituality as a discipline, Mata Amritanandamayi
became the charismatic spiritual master. At this stage, Sudhamani becomes Mata
Amritanandamayi and the devotional performative space is institutionalized as a
spiritual ashram. As the Ashram spreads its wings abroad, it receives more media
attention. The discussions in the print media about people’s experiences of the Mata
in return created a popular discursive space where Mata Amritanandmayi shapes
herself as an icon. In this stage the faith enterprise flourishes across institutions and
geographies establishes itself a trust, builds educational institutions, hospital and
worship centres called *Brahmastanam* temples across the country. At present, besides being a divine figure to some and charismatic authority to yet others, Amritanandamayi is also an icon that represents certain imaginaries and sensibilities in the popular culture that are defended and contested in this domain.

In the production of this hagiographical narrative of Amritanandamayi’s life, the specific discourse of spirituality foregrounds the primary issues with which it is trying to deal. Firstly, there is the problem it identifies, of unethicality and coldness of mundane lower caste life. Secondly, there is the suggestion of the dark, ignorant interiors of the community life where the divine in the form of love resides waiting to be discovered unto itself. Thirdly, asceticism as an individualizing process that bridges the gap between the dominant and subaltern lives. Amritanandamayi is worshiped for her expression of “love” that transcends these primary issues of the subaltern community life. Through this chapter I have also explained how Sudhamani’s charisma as a performer of religious events and miracles, that in the early days brought together the women in the village community, is later attributed the narrative of spirituality from another discursive order when it is institutionalized as an ashram. The third phase of the phenomenon is characterised by Mata Amritanandamayi’s global reach and influence. The media, Mata’s spiritual tours, tourist attraction of a certain discourse of eastern spirituality and the humanitarian concerns of the international civil society enable this.