CHAPTER 3
SENSORIALITY AND AFFECT: AESTHETIC FORMATION OF AMMA FAITH

The argument being developed in the larger project of this thesis is that the Amritanandamayi faith phenomenon functions as an aesthetic and discursive formation centered on the icon of Mata Amritanandamayi. The iconicity of Mata Amritanandamayi, I argue, is produced at different levels and different stages, during the period of the formation. By examining the iconicity of Amritanandamayi I intend to show how various ideological discourses articulated within the formation make it a signifier with a complex meaning. I argue that the same complexity of its signified promises the phenomenon a place in popular culture. In other words, the Amritanandamayi phenomenon exists as a popular faith phenomenon by allowing itself to open to multiple ideological articulations. It does this by incorporating the aesthetic and commonsensical elements of the popular faith into its own disciplinary practices and articulations.

There is a historical account of the development of the popular faith. Alternatively, it can also be understood from its engagement in the everyday lives of the people. Faith is primarily an abstraction, a level of signification, whether it is liturgical or popular. Once a certain mode of production determines a certain social formation the contradictions that emerge out of this life-world project themselves as incongruities within the system and seek to interrogate the system. To overcome this and reconcile the contradictions within the life-world an “overview” is offered through which the ideological domain is fixed. This overview or abstraction is offered in such a way that each affective sensibility and commonsensical practice get articulated in it towards a resolution. This articulation is threatened when it
encounters a new economy entering it from outside or pressing upon from above. In
the case of encountering a new mode of production as the economic base, the social
restructures itself by rearticulating the new affects and practices producing
commonsense.

In this chapter, I try to understand the Mata Amritanandamayi phenomenon as a
popular faith formation where rituals and performative acts mobilise an aesthetic
sensibility through ideas such as *bhakti*, *sankalpam*, and *bhavam*. This modern
popular aesthetic formation centres on the icon of Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, or as
her followers call her ‘Amma’. An “aesthetic formation” is what Birgit Meyer
identifies as a broader sphere of community making where “imaginations materialise
through media and become manifest in the public space, generating sensorial
sensibilities and aptitudes that vest these imaginations with a sense of truth” (Meyer,
2009, 6). The Amritanandamayi faith is a religious formation in which Mata
Amritanandamayi mediates certain affective sensibilities of a (mainly Hindu)
population, and different political agents act to articulate the popular devotional
sensibilities of people to political, economic and ideological structures. Further, I will
show this process of articulation within the Amritanandamayi faith formation and the
resulting iconicity of its leader, Mata Amritanandamayi. The process of mediating
affective sensibilities is itself a process of articulation where feelings are mobilised,
emphasised and fixed on objects, emotions, sounds, smells, colours, tastes and rituals
that exist in multiple symbolic realms.
Sensoriality & Affect

A few practices make Mata Amritanandamayi’s devotional engagement unique such as the divine embrace and the Amma doll\(^\text{17}\) worship. Both are practices that have meanings. However, they are also practices, the effects of which do not always necessarily take recourse to meaning as much as feeling. In order to describe the embrace, Amritanandamayi’s devotees talk about the effect of the embrace on their body. They describe the embrace through vocabularies of affective reaction such as tears, laughter, feelings of fulfillment, lightness, silence, peace, ineffability and wonderment. Affect or sensoriality is associated with the uncritical spontaneity of action and are hence generally less valued than logic in a linearly rationalised life-world. However, they are still significant forms of reaction to any stimulus with or without the agency of logic. In a changing political economy, several affects get rearticulated along with discourses, as the structures of power are reconstituted. In this chapter, I focus on the practices of darsanam, embrace, manasapuja\(^\text{18}\), Devi bhavam, bhajan\(^\text{19}\) and Amma doll worship to understand the significance of affect, sensoriality and embodiment in the engagements between Mata Amritanandamayi and her devotees. I suggest that these re-articulations of the affect produce new cultural practices, functional modalities, and propositions in place of traditional ones. This chapter is divided into themes around the aspects of affect, sensoriality and embodiment to understand the various modes of affective interactions generated in this faith culture.

\(^{17}\) Amma doll is a doll made in the form of Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, with stretched out hands that the devotees of the Mata make from unique objects the Mata has used, such as cloth pieces from her saree and rudraksha neck chain. Devotees buy the dolls and worship them.

\(^{18}\) *Manasapuja*, which may be translated as mental worship, is a ritual practice in Mata faith. I explain this later in this chapter.

\(^{19}\) *Bhajans* are devotional songs usually sung during a religious or devotional gathering sometimes accompanied by small instruments such as handheld bells or drums.
Affect is an embodied way of organising and using certain data identified in a stimulus, yet, may remain unarticulated in the cognitive domain. “Ineffability” is a term often used to express the overwhelming nature of an experience that cannot be articulated using existing vocabulary. Ineffable positive or negative body reactions may make a child laugh or cry at the discovery of a new, hence intense, stimulus. Apart from being talked about, an affect is also spontaneously transmitted and reciprocated as a bodily expression. For instance, a smile is received with a smile, aggressive face with a withdrawn or shy expression of face. Most often these emotive expressions are transmitted without actually realising them in thoughts. The spontaneity of such expressions also suggests that they may result from an attempt to mimic one another’s body dynamics and perform that repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the action itself. From this understanding, it follows that a person’s cultural and historical location influences his affective sensibilities just as it influences the discursive structure, in which he finds meaning. However, in a critically rationalised discursive structure certain affective sensibilities continue to sustain as unaccountable contradictions. For instance, the visual or auditory intensity of aggression as expressed using facial muscles and voice varies between discursive structures. Thus we may recognise two statuses of affect, one as prior to meaning-making and the other as historical familiarity with certain embodied style of coding, which may have had a certain meaning in the past that is retained, forgotten or changed in the present. The encoding of affect data such as facial appearance, body size, shape or skin colour is the result of familiarity through affect. These forms of affect may, in context, further instigate meaning production as a strategy towards actively responding to such stimuli within a specific power relation. An affect may
thus carry layers of meaning historically or in a lifetime before it becomes an idea or common sense within a community or to an individual\textsuperscript{20}.

The concept of affect is used here to mean a layer of representation other than the linguistic. According to William Mazarella, affect “implies a way of apprehending social life that does not start with the bounded, intentional subject while at the same time foregrounding embodiment and sensuous life. Affect is not unconscious—it is too corporeally rooted for that. Nor can it be aligned with any conventional conception of culture” (Mazarella, 2009; 291). This distinction is made in a specific context of investigating the significance of encoding images with an affect data that contradicts the discursive narrative it carries. Whereas the denotative meaning of an image or representation is the direct message, it is the connotative meaning that “affects” us. The difference is that the former is clearly articulated and the latter is not in an already articulated state and needs to be interpreted. It is in this process of interpretation that one pushes the limits of affect and produces a narrative. In a rationalised world of critical thinking this interpretative meaning is easily available. Hence in order to affect a change one needs to add one more layer to the representation and this is achieved by complicating the image. For instance, in the popular Hollywood film series X-Men\textsuperscript{21}, it does not take much effort to understand the mythical narrative of contemporary radical politics that the story incorporates at a connotative level. However, if one is content with this easy analysis of the myth, one has fallen into the trap of affect representation. The identities emerging through radical politics are contingent. But their identification with the mutants is problematic

\textsuperscript{20} Here one may note the difference between ‘habit’ and ‘habitus’ that Talal Asad brings to denote the agency derived from an action that is contemplated, rather than one that the body acquires through inertia. Here a habit is more affectively intuited than semiotically mediated.

\textsuperscript{21} X-men is a super-hero comic series which later influenced Hollywood film adaptations by the same name. Like many other animation movies and super hero genres, X-men is popular also because of its political subtext.
in that they tend to fix the former identities forever, at least, aesthetically. The concept of affect is important to my project of understanding the Mata Amritanandamayi phenomenon because, like common sense and usually accompanied by it, affect can also be directed, using rituals, to mobilise people.

As a cultural formation based on devotion, the Amritanandamayi phenomenon constitutes assembled affects, and affective realms such as emotions, expressions, performative acts, embodied cultural markers from the past and the present, performative context to form a particular affective economy. This chapter then concerns with the practices of darsanam, embrace, devi bhavam, bhajan, manasapuja, and Amma doll worship. Darsanam is one of the ashram’s devotional practices in which most people who visit the ashram, including those who ‘sample’\(^\text{22}\) her, wish to participate. Hence on special occasions such as Amritanandamayi’s birthday, large numbers of people throng in the ashram to take darsanam. Embrace as a part of the practice of darsanam is marked by devotees as an act that distinguishes the Mata. Amritanandamayi is popular as “the hugging saint” in circles outside the Malayalee devotees. The Devi bhavam is another practice that forms part of darsanam. In devi bhavam Mata Amritanandamayi appears in the costume of an Indian goddess, the image of which is already familiar to the people through representations in various paintings\(^\text{23}\), photographs, television serials and cinemas.

\(^{22}\) As I have mentioned in the introduction all the people who come to the Ashram do not become Mata’s devotees forever. Some people who seek a guru for themselves approach her in order to find out if she is right for them. I have used the word “sample” to denote this mode of visiting the Mata.

\(^{23}\) Ravi Varma’s paintings are marked to have begun this trend of depicting the goddess through realistic paintings of women.
**Darsanam**

In the Mata Amritanandamayi faith formation, “darsanam” is a ritual practice where devotees are engaging in direct visual and tactile contact with the Mata.

*Darsanam* happens in a setting where the Mata sits on an open platform escorted by the *brahmacharis* or *brahmacharinis* in the Ashram and devotees to receive the *darsanam* waiting in long lines (fig. 3.1).

Among the collective practices in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission, *darsanam* is the most significant one as it is an opportunity sought after by her followers. An article including an interview with Amritanandamayi that was published in the Malayalam women’s magazine *Vanita* describes *darsanam* as follows,
At 2:30 Darsanam starts. Men and women are waiting in two lines with folded arms. They kneel down when they reach near Amma. They crawl on knees towards Amma. Amma hugs and takes them to her right shoulder. In front of Amma, most of them express an enthusiasm like waves crashing on the shore. Some whimper, some burst into laughter, some others have doubts and complaints. Amma simply smiles. Amma advises, consoles and gives *prasadam*. A sweet, an apple, a small packet of *bhasam*—these are the *prasadam*. Then she opens her arms for the next person. Amma gets up from the *peedha*, where she had been sitting for 6 hours. As she gets up, it sends a wave across the room. Those inmates who were standing till then suddenly fall on the ground with folded hands to show reverence; *sarvatmanasashtanga pranam* (Meera, 2003, translated by the researcher).

This description of the *Darsanam* is by K. R. Meera, one of the most popular young writers in Kerala and also the first among them to win the Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *Aarachar* (Hangwoman). She is also a native of Kollam district in Kerala, where Amritanandamayi has her main ashram. This description of the spectacle of *darsanam* that Meera gives is part of an interview that appeared in *Vanitha*, a popular woman’s magazine in Kerala. What produces the sense of wonder in Meera is not anything divine about Mata Amritanandamayi herself, but the excitement and *bhakti* of the people who have gathered at the Ashram to take *darsan*. It is the same excitement that she tries to portray for her women readers.

*Darsanam* is a popular visual practice, which is understood, in recent academic texts regarding certain essential “conceptual structures that must be defined
by reference to textual sources” (Chatterjee; 2011, 176). That the concept requires textual reference does not indicate that it is an upper caste Hindu practice. In other words, although darsanam may be a popular practice of “devotional gaze”, to say that it is an institution that determines the visual relation between the dominant communities and the marginalised is to ignore a modality of functioning it offers for multiple community formations within a single social formation. Darsanam is a temple ritual of seeing the deity that acquired authenticity through its articulation in the religious texts. However, for lower-caste Hindus the practice of seeing the deity and the belief that they are being seen by the deity often do not get articulated the same way and are associated with the imagination of the all-seeing God. The affective character of gaze when shared with an idol appears to open a channel of imaginary communication. Similar to it is the imaginary mute dialogues shared between a mother and child. It is not rare that someone from the village suddenly feels that they have got god’s darsanam on a Peepal leaf or in the water. There is an expectation in moments of intense emotion that God will make himself present through some means in the material world and deem one’s actions right. It is the individual’s way of reconciling the material with the abstract, and the everyday and the contingent with the universal.

The significance of the practice of darsan is that it is not a unidirectional gaze, rather it invokes the feeling in the seer, of being seen simultaneously. Diana Eck and Lawrence Babb have studied the significance of the practice of Darsanam in Hindu society. Eck describes darsan as ‘sacred perception’ where the deity has an active gaze and the worshippers ‘receive’ their darsan while looking at the deity. She connects the idea of darsan with what she observes as an image-making practice specific to India, especially Hinduism (Eck: 2007, 6). In his article “Glancing: Visual
Interaction in Hinduism” Lawrence Babb takes the concept to claim that by means of *darsan* devotees are enabled to take into themselves, something of the inner virtue of power of the deity (Babb, 1981; 387). Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Madhava Prasad and Ravi Vasudevan recognise the concept as central to Indian visual culture and not just limited to the domain of religion (Rajadhyaksha, 2004; Prasad 1998).

In Kerala, *darsanam* is not a popularly used word in terms of deity worship among the lower caste communities. Instead, the term ‘*thozhuka*’ (fold hands in reverence) is frequently used in popular parlance. The devotees would stand in front of the deity and bend forward with palms folded in reverence while praying in a temple. However, in the context of Mata Amritanandamayi worship the concept has become part of the Ashram terminologies. In this context the concept needs a little elaboration as to what it means for the devotees, both the upper-caste elite/middle-classes and the lower castes.

All the devotees I interviewed seemed very enthusiastic to talk about their first experience of Mata’s *darsanam*. By articulating their direct sensorial participation with the sensuous world of their Amma, they are producing a narrative of life for themselves that anchors on their affective relation with the guru and the world. A retired Director of Agriculture from the *Araya* community said that his experience of Mata’s *darsanam* was enlightening. He said he did not feel anything particular at the moment of the *darsanam*; however, he could in the following days feel that things would fall in place in his life. He had already read Ramana Maharshi and Vivekananda. He felt that after he met Mata he could understand them better, and see them in perspective. He believed that great saints such as the Mata have visions that ordinary people like him cannot have. And that by following their messages one can stay on path in life. Another devotee who ran a local *bhajan* unit for the ashram in
Alappuzha said that he kept Mata’s ‘gurustotram’ with him and believed it could influence his life merely by handling it. He was unemployed and drunken all through his youth, he said, and Mata had changed him for good. He had been given the responsibility of the office of one of the ashram’s bhajan centres and his wife too helped him run the centre by keeping the premises clean. She had complete faith in Amma for the transformation of her husband. Now, she was worried about her daughter who was struggling to live with a drunken husband and wished that she could get her difficult son-in-law to transform himself similarly. The above two narratives of transformation are common among the devotees who have taken Mata’s darsanam. To those who are yet to take the darsanam these narratives are already there and need only to be made theirs.

What happens during darsanam? According to Diana Eck, darsanam or darsan “is a contact between devotee and deity exchanged through the eyes”.

When Hindus stand on tiptoe and crane their necks to see, through the crowd, the image of Lord Krishna, they wish not only to see but to be seen. The gaze of the huge eyes of the image meets that of the worshiper, and that exchange of vision lies at the heart of Hindu worship (Eck, 7).

This form of worship is part of the Brahminic Hindu temple culture, which in Kerala was popularised only after the temple entry proclamation that resulted from dalit and lower-caste struggles for their right to enter temples. Today, darsanam is a familiar terminology within the temple worship culture, yet most commonly expressed as “temple going” or “thozhuka”, both of which are expressions that may represent the practice of being there and taking part rather than inculcating a vision

---

24 Temple entry proclamation in Kerala (1936) followed the Vaikom Satyagraha led by dalits and lower castes allowed them the right to enter temple and use public roads near temples.
offered by the structure. Here the practice of “temple going” in itself becomes the purpose of going to the temple, an insistence on the right to enter the temple.

One dominant site of modernisation of Hinduism begins with an attempt to narrativise the traditional practices in terms of propositions that are apparently egalitarian, secularised, modernised and inclusive. When such propositions are conceived as part of a cultural totality, the significance of each emerges in the darsanic unity of a life-world as the necessary element scaffolding the dominant structure. The agents of this ideological superstructure whose power it ensures demand that the status quo is sustained in order to avoid violence and bring harmony within a homogeneously conceptualised Hindu ‘spiritual’ space. However, the attempt to modernise Hinduism has not only been a project from above. As another site of modernisation there have been movements among the lower castes in Kerala to re-articulate the everyday practices based on the community’s contingent politics and in resistance to the oppressive structures of Hinduism. In some of those sites, the modality of the processes remain the same, where an educated or ‘enlightened’ leader (guru) who envisions the functioning of various elements of the community’s past and the present within the contemporary political domain, discusses the possibilities with the community. They also suggest a contingent political plan within the community in order to engage with the democratic politics of the modern nation-state.

According to Rudolf Arnheim, “the object we see, either in our immediate range of perception or through the medium of photography, is dependent upon who we are and what we recognise from past experience” (Arnheim, 1969; 82). As such, the images of the temple and the gods inside them occupy different perceptual domains within the imaginations of the traditional temple goers in Kerala and the

---

25 “temple going” or ambalathil pokuka and thozhan pokuka are the expressions frequently used to represent the practice of darsanam in popular culture.
modern ones constituted by the lower castes and ‘untouchables’ who were forbidden from entering the temple premises until the early decades of the twentieth century.

While the former still regards the iconic stature of the temples as symbols of Brahminic power and supremacy, the latter understands it as their rightful share of belongingness to the cultural space produced by their labour. This allows for a darsanam that involves a critical distance from the form in which the deity is constituted as an icon- the temple premises, its structure, the myths surrounding the deity, the rituals, the mediation of the Brahmin priest, and most of all the caste hierarchy and practices. Eck notes,

“the central act of Hindu worship, from the point of view of a lay person, is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one’s own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity. Darsanam is sometimes translated as the “auspicious sight” of the divine, and its importance in the Hindu ritual complex reminds us that for Hindus worship is not only a matter of prayers and offerings and the devotional disposition of the heart. Since in the Hindu understanding, the deity is present in the image, the visual apprehension of the image is charged with religious meaning. Beholding the image is an act of worship, and through the eyes one gains the blessing of the divine”. (Eck, 3)

In the Mata Amritanandamayi faith the concept of darsanam is taken from this temple epistemology itself with the incorporation of the element of touch in the form of the divine embrace26. When discussing the relation between sight and touch in Indian religious traditions art historian Stella Kramrich writes,

---

26 Touching the deity’s feet is a part of some temple rituals. This is also practiced by touching the temple steps assuming it touched the deity’s feet. However, in most cases touching the consecrated idol or the Brahmin priest who conducts the puja is considered a taboo.
Seeing according to Indian notions, is a going forth of the sight towards the object. Sight touches it and acquires its form. Touch is the ultimate connection by which the visible yields to be grasped. While the eye touches the object, the vitality that pulsates in it is communicated (Kramrich, 1946; 136).

So as an actual practice darsan involves the recognition of sight, touch and knowing, or to put it in other words, it involves a sensuous way of engaging with the world where one’s body becomes the agent of knowledge.

The Mata’s darsanam is considered unique by her devotees as it claims to offer the devotee ‘happiness’ through a perspective on the world that will enable one to understand and resolve the contradictions in life by recreating oneself. The followers consider this perspective as a sacred, one given by the divine being who has received the real darsanam of the world. The experience of the first darsanam is important for the devotees as it is also the experience of seeing life in a perspective, where the Mata’s simple appearance (with a splendid Hindu ritual space as background), spontaneous advice, simple concepts, narratives of daily life moments, and affective interpellation provide a comfortable vantage point.

The concept of darsanam in the Hindu context is also synonymous with knowing. The messages and advices given by Mata are part of her darsanam. The magazine Mathruvani published by the Amritanandamayi Ashram publications begins with a section on Mata’s messages titled “Ammayude sandesham”\(^{27}\), which is delivered in the form of simple answers to devotees’ questions. The devotees ask about anything in their personal daily life that intrigues them. In one of these Amritanandamayi answers four questions about anger, religion, energy/efficiency and darsanam as follows.

\(^{27}\) Translation: Amma’s message
Question: Does Amma get angry?

Amma: Amma’s mind is not one that turns violent with anger. Don’t we observe from the roadside the people, cars and buses that pass by us? Do we identify ourselves with them in any way? Such are the thoughts and feelings that emerge in our mind. They come and go. They are like the clouds that travel the boundless sky.

It’s only the *bhava* (expression) and *sankalpa* (imagination) of Amma and children here (in my mind). It is that love and belief that leads (me). So, if children commit any careless act, (I) correct them as if giving a “tuition”; for instance, saying no to the child who goes to touch the fire.

Question: What does religion mean to Amma?

Amma: Amma’s religion is love. The ideal religion is the experience that the essence of all is one. It is not that there is only one and the only one God, but that everything is God. Religion is, knowing that nothing other than God exists. That itself is spirituality. But one cannot know the reality of religion through the use of logic and intellect alone. It requires the involvement of the heart. It needs undesiring love, strong belief and self-submission. Intellect alone will create more separatism and conflict. Intellect is like a pair of scissors. It cuts the cloth into pieces. But the heart is like a needle; it stitches up the pieces of cloth and makes it a wearable dress. The reason for today’s problems is to be found in the way religious texts are read according to each one’s intellect. One category is exploited for the selfishness of another.

Question: The Amma who sees (gives *darsanam* to) *bhaktas* since morning continues it till night. How is it possible? Doesn’t Amma feel tired? How is this energy gained?
Amma: The purest and strongest form of energy is love without expectation. It is unlike the charge of a battery that decreases with usage. It is like a constant connection to electricity. There is no lethargy in it. It is not that power is acquired in this state, but one becomes power itself. It is the harmony with universal grace.

Question: Does Amma get God’s darsanam? How does Amma see God?

Amma: Everything is God to Amma. God is everything that one sees, hears, happens and experiences. God is not someone who rules the world from across the sky. It is the grace that fills the inside and outside of everything. God is not a person but ultimate power (Mathruvani, 2012).

These messages from Mata Amritanandamayi appear in Mathruvani in the April 2012 edition. In responding to the questions she makes profuse use of metaphors that deal with the issues of anger, religion, efficiency, and darsanam in the language of commonsensical philosophy. In these messages Mata Amritanandamayi addresses herself as ‘Amma’ and does not use the personal pronouns ‘I’, ‘me’ or ‘my’, thereby indicating her self as completely perceived within a culturally subjective image of the mother. The questions, however address her as a particular subject and seek not the universal truth about anger, religion, ability or God but a subjective analysis from the location of a “poor”, “lower caste”, “innocent”, “honest”, and “loving” woman. The answers, in fact, are not different from what any ‘bhakta’ would give on these topics. What is interesting in this is the way in which a lower caste image of a labouring mother is metonymically represented as the culturally universal image of the Mother. In this way, Amritanandamayi performs as only the everyday reflection of the ideal Mother image and its affect.
Through this performative *bhavam* of the compassionate labouring mother, the liberal concerns about anger, productivity, religious difference and tolerance, and the universality of its vision of God are articulated in simple metaphorical language. The virtuous godmother affect compels the children to embody her vision through Amritanandamayi’s *bhavams* and performative acts.

*Roopam, Bhavam and Sankalpam*

In response to the question about anger, Amritanandamayi says that she stands for the *bhavam* and *sankalpam* of mother and children. To understand what this *bhavam* or *sankalpam* means one needs to only take a look at any of the innumerable photographs of Mata Amritanandamayi in various *bhavas*. The interview article titled *Ammayude Sandesam* is accompanied by a photograph of Amritanandamayi on the same page (fig 3.2).

Fig. 3.2 The interview article “Ammayude Sandesham” appeared with the Mata’s photograph in the background, in the magazine Mathruvani (Source: Mathruvani, April 2012).

---

28 *Bhavam* is a Malayalam word with Sanskrit roots and means the expression one adopts in a particular context.

29 Translation: “Ammayum makkalum enna bhavavum sankalpavum anivide”.

30 “Ammayude Sandesam” Mathruvani April, 2012.
The photograph of Mata accompanying the interview is to be understood as making meaning in itself by the historically derived affects. The image shows Amritanandamayi with a kind looking, smiling face and palms folded as if in prayer. There is sandalwood paste and vermillion on her forehead, symbolising bhakti, and rudraksha beads, symbolising renunciation. The white stone nose ornament that adorns her face may seem out of place since it, by creating an appealing glaze on the nose, is primarily a symbol of a woman’s sexual attractiveness. However, there is a story about this ornament familiar to many devotees in the Ashram. According to this story, the nose ornament was a gift from a patti (old woman) who came from Madras to visit Mata. She had lost her diamond earrings years ago in the Sauparnika river while taking bath right before she was about to take Mookambika Devi’s darsanam at the temple, after her wedding. She vowed to Mookambika Devi that she would offer her a nose ornament if she got her earrings back. She went back to the river and searched again, and found her diamond earrings. Years later, she visited Mata Amritanandamayi. As soon as the patti came near her, Mata Amritanandamayi asked about the nose ornament that was promised to her. Patti gave her the nose ornament, believing that Amritanandamayi was Mookambika Devi and along with her daughter and grandchild became an ashram member31. With this narrative from the ashram in circulation, the nose ornament represented the Mata’s ‘divine’ all-knowing power instead of her sexuality. This narrative also induces a ‘bhakti’ that is located in the fear the story conveys, that Amritanandamayi is watching over the readers (and viewers of this image). As one of the photographs shows, the nose ornament is also represented as a play object that elicits the curiosity and interest of the innocent child.

31 A version of the story is published in the Malayalam women’s magazine Vanita in the issue September 15-30, 2003.
The Amma in Cinema

Interestingly, the ‘roopam’ and ‘bhavam’ of the mother image represented in Mata Amritanandamayi is contradictory in terms of a certain convention of representing this image. The word ‘roopam’ translates into form. However, by being a perception it is not a pure a priori formulation of data as pure fact. The roopam of Amritanandamayi is a formulation influenced by historical and cultural ideas about the lower-castes. I will explain how an image of lower caste woman appears natural as the dominant perception of it ‘looks back at us’ through various representations. A cinematic representation is an apt venue to understand this perception, as it is also one of the most popular. Amritanandamayi’s face is not a unique one in Kerala, although a detailed search in Malayalam cinema for representations of ideal women, mother or renunciate would not issue anyone that is similar to her in appearance. Those middle-aged female representations that are similar in appearance to Amritanandamayi do not come in the role of a mother, but mostly as lower caste women, maids or vendors.

Two actors representing such an image in Malayalam cinema are that of Kulappulli Leela\(^{32}\) and Santhakumari\(^{33}\). But the image of Kaviyoor Ponnamma is marked as motherliness by her frequent appearances in films as a mother, and mostly as upper-caste Hindu. There are many similarities between the bhava of a mother that appears on both Kaviyoor Ponnamma and Amritanandamayi and drastic differences between those of the latter category (fig.3.3). The soft smile, curvy round face with the big round mark of sandalwood paste and red vermillion on the forehead, the half grey hair parted in the middle made into a bun, the white saree, heaviness of the body and Krishna bhakti are some of the similarities that mark these representations. Besides, in

\(^{32}\) Some of the Malayalam movies in which Kulappulli Leela performed the character of mother are Kasihooriman (2003), Pulivaal Kalyanam (2003), Thanthonni (2010), and Amen (2013).

\(^{33}\) Shanthakumari performed the character of ‘other’ mother in Veendum Chila Veettukaryangal (1999) and Manasinakkare (2003).
films, Kaviyoor Ponnamma has often represented the mother of the hero enacted by superstar Mohanlal, who has been a devotee of Amritanandamayi since his childhood. In an interview with John Brittas, Mohanlal talks about the depth of his relationship with Amritanandamayi whom he says he loves like his own mother.

![Kaviyoor Ponnamma in motherly expression](source: Balan, 2015).

Fig. 3.3 Kaviyoor Ponnamma in motherly expression (Source: Balan, 2015).

Mohanlal’s open faith towards Mata Amritanandamayi which he reveals through his blog, interviews, and speeches in the Ashram creates linkages between the different bhavas he has enacted as the mischievous though loving, responsible son, and Mata Amritanandamayi’s bhavas of motherliness as love and mercy, thereby fixing the meanings of the subjects, mother and son, and their relations. These bhavas are already familiar to the Hindu public through the popular iconographies of the god Krishna and his mother Yasoda. The songs such as “Kainiraye venna tharam...” and

---

34 “Mohanlal Calls Amma a Real Angel” Times of India, 9 June 2014. Also see the speech Mohanlal gave on Amritavarsham 56 in youtube “Mohanlal’s words of wisdom on Amma, Amritanandamayi”. Web. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Auwz7h343dE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Auwz7h343dE).
“Unnikkanna vayo...” depict Mohanlal as the loving son and Kaviyoor Ponnamma enacting motherly love often in the context of a Nair household arguably, with a nostalgic link to Nair matriliny or a reference to the issues emerging from the decline of joint matrilineal families\textsuperscript{35}. These songs are part of popular Malayalam films \textit{Baba Kalyani} (2006) and \textit{Kakkakuyil} (2001) where Mohanlal’s character is not the real son of that of Kaviyoor Ponnamma but is in a similar relationship. Here the bhavams of mother and son are separated from the actual biological relationship of mother and son, thereby universalising this image.

Thus the image or bhavam of mother that Mata Amritanandamayi and Kaviyoor Ponnamma represent is not only a fixed image derived from the cultural discourse of upper-caste/class communities established through these films, but it also gets its religious validation from the mythological mother-son images of Krishnan and Yasoda or the devotee relation, \textit{Bhakta Meera}. In the representations of dalit, lower caste households the mother is either represented as loud-mouthed, cursing and greedy or simply dissatisfied with the men at home\textsuperscript{36}. The relationship between the mother and son is almost always conflicted. The problem in this conflicted relationship is mostly identified in films as alcoholism, careless upbringing, bad company, dishonesty or treachery and ‘innate’ wickedness, and never as the existing conditions of inequality within which the characters are subjectivised. Conversely, if the son is depicted as good and tolerant of oppression, the mother is represented as greedy, selfish, treacherous and unloving.

\textsuperscript{35} These songs are part of the popular Malayalam movies “Baba Kalyani” and “Kakkakuyil” where Mohanlal and Kaviyoor Ponnamma are paired in a son-mother relation.

\textsuperscript{36} Films such as \textit{Veendum chila veettukaryangal}, \textit{Venkalam}, among others deal with the lower caste families imagined this way.
In many popular film representations of the mother-son relationship in an upper-caste household the son is always already good (sometimes misunderstood owing to his sacrificial silence to keep the family’s dignity\(^{37}\)), and he deviates from the ideal moral actions only in situations under which his goodness is tested. The conflict in the narrative is resolved when the son’s innocence is recognised by the mother. In representing the lower caste household, the son is always already represented as fraud or stupid. The mother’s role is to mourn, blame, or curse the “insensitive and irresponsible” son and be apologetic towards the ‘righteous’ society that ‘tolerates’ the son regardless of his hostility. The images of the virtuous mother are the same in both representations; it is that of the kind upper-caste mother.

However the representations differ in their \textit{bhavams} in accordance with the sons they have. It is the different natures of the sons that affect the mothers’ reactions. In the film \textit{Thanthonni} (2010) two kinds of mother images are juxtaposed with that of their sons. The hero enacted by Prithviraj Sukumaran is from a rich Syrian Christian family and his friend Suraj Venjaramud is from a lower-class family. The film introduces these locations through the first few scenes. The hero’s widowed mother is sitting in front of a large photograph of her dead husband and is worried about her son, the hero, who is a rogue according to other family members. The mother still has faith in his ‘goodness’. In contrast, the lower-class friend, enacted by Suraj, is introduced through scenes where he wakes up reluctantly, late in the morning and commands his mother to bring him tea. The mother is introduced through her language and voice as she shouts in spiteful language, cursing the son for being

\(^{37}\) The blockbuster films in Malayalam such as \textit{Bharatham}(1991), \textit{Balettan}(2003), \textit{Thenmavin Kombathu}(1994), \textit{Madambi}(2008), \textit{Kireedam}(1989) among many other less popular ones have employed this formula of mother-son relationship.
The son responds, “Ammayanathre, Amma!” implying that she doesn’t behave like a mother. With the son made thus, in such movies the mother emerges as his consequential shadow. If the materiality of the mother links to pregnancy, nursing and mothering, in its discursive form, motherhood is idealized in the acts of mothering, soft-spoken, smiling, submissive, devotional, sympathetic, forgiving, silent, uncritical, tolerant and occupying the private space of the family. Partly, Mata Amritanandamayi’s iconicity is constituted by this affective image of the mother that is located in the domain of upper caste discursive practices. As a venerated representation of this bhavam her image is incapable of including the bhavams of the working class mother whose subjectivity is oriented towards multiple realms of existence; as a labourer, a person who engages in everyday social life, one who encounters men outside the family, one who executes domestic chores and affairs such as managing the income and other familial relationships. The bhavam of a mother image thus constituted is often represented by actors such as KPAC Lalitha and Sukumari in popular Malayalam movies. However, they have not achieved the status of a popular mother icon as did Kaviyoor Ponnamma. The image of the popular mother in the bhavam of Kaviyoor Ponnamma and the efficiency of the mothers, represented by KPAC Lalitha and Sukumari and signified in their daily chores and practices make this modern mother icon in its upper-caste Hindu aesthetic of devi, that of Mata Amritanandamayi Devi.

However, beyond this ‘performative’ bhavam as certain images and videos of the Ashram functions show, the Mata also has a life inside the ashram where she engages in domestic service. She decides the events to be conducted, travels to make, places to visit, people to help, charity work, the building of new institutions, and,

---

38 Translation: “Says she is mother!”
time, people and finances to invest and manage. Her ‘egoless’ concern for the others whom she calls ‘children’ has transformed into several charitable institutions, hospitals, schools, colleges and orphanages\(^{39}\). She conducts meetings with her closest group of *brahmacharis*\(^{40}\) and other groups involved and discuss with them the issues to be addressed and the work to be done. During construction work or other events she joins the inmates to help with the job.

Even those who criticise Mata Amritanandamayi as a “fake guru” or for “faking motherhood” consume this hegemonic image of the ideal mother. Many who criticize Mata Amritanandamayi for being worshipped do so because they feel she is not suited to represent the image of the ideal mother that is in their minds. What need to be resisted or subverted to upset the aesthetic discursive constitution of the icon here are the images it represents (signified) itself and the agents of this representation, and not the person upon whom it is projected. However, in individual lives, this image of the mother is so idolised that its representation outside feels just right. The Amma (as a sign) and Amritanandamayi’s form (signifier) is developed in the minds of her followers through her gaze, smile, costume, bodily gestures, language, discourse, and the context in which she ‘appears’. These form the unarticulated mental resources that convey the affective content hidden even as it is represented continually. The multiple imagination of a mother available in reality produces complexities in the representation. The person has a *roopam* with caste identifications, and culturally imbibed *bhavams*. However, its representation as an image in the public sphere raises questions about the agency and nature of this representation.

---

\(^{39}\) Interview with devotees, 2014. See the Youtube video “Darsanam the embrace Sri Mata Amritanandamayi”, Web: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJHHHeYG_b4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJHHHeYG_b4)

\(^{40}\) A *brahmachari* is an ascetic who practices celibacy.
Photographs and Bhavams

There is a growing profusion of photographic images of Mata in the Mata Amritanandamayi faith practice, produced by both the Ashram and her devotees. The photographs, produced by the Ashram create a story or narrative of the bhavams of the mother icon. Unlike the photographs of similar spiritual gurus such as Satya Sai Baba, or Meher Baba that people worship, Mata Amritanandamayi’s images construct a language of bhavams through the detailed selective representation of her various soft facial expressions in multiple realistic occasions. There seems to be a performative screen upon which all her appearances in public life are captured, manipulated and represented. The photographs produced from the Ashram give the feeling that the camera walks with her in real life. She ‘appears’ for the devotees in various bhavams. There are photographs of her cooking, swimming, chatting, consoling, hugging, shedding tears for others, wiping tears of others, feeding the elephant, pampering the dog, performing puja, in a state of trance, meditating, grim, laughing and smiling in various bhavams. These bhavams work towards producing a discursive aesthetic within which the virtuous Amma image is sustained. Such photographs appear mainly in Ashram publications and the Ashram’s official websites amma.org, amritapuri.org and also in the form of banners and posters during special occasions. There are also the moving visuals of Amritanandamayi on television accompanied by a narrative or a bhajan.

One of the books the Ashram bookstore sells Being With Amma: A Collection of Photos and Sayings is a small album with Amritanandamayi’s postcard size photos with messages printed overleaf. The photographs capture emotional expressions on Amritanandamayi’s face and performative acts on various occasions of her staged public appearances. I suggest that these representations try to capture not Mata
Amritanandamayi, but the feelings she and her devotees share, the engagements between them, the ‘mute’ nature of her affective bond with the others. When they are looked at in this way they reveal the affective dimension of engagements between the Mata and her devotees. However, it does not also mean that this affect that is unrepresentable in many ways, except through the medium of images (such as film or photograph) is not influenced by power relations in the society.

Fig. 3.4 A child touching the Mata’s nose stud (Source: Being With Amma: A Collection of Photos and Sayings).
Fig. 3.5 The Mata cooking Dosa (Source: Album Being With Amma: A Collection of Photos and Sayings).

Fig. 3.6 The Mata cutting joins the devotees for cooking (Source: Album Being With Amma: A Collection of Photos and Sayings).
Fig. 3.7 The Mata bathing the elephant (Source: *Being With Amma: A Collection of Photos and Sayings*).

Fig. 3.8 The Mata having a fun time in the river with the devotees (Source: Album *Being With Amma: A Collection of Photos and Sayings*).
In the photograph (fig. 3.4), Amritanandamayi is smiling at a child, very likely, held in her arms and the child is curiously touching her nose ornament. The sight of this soft touch of the child on Amritanandamayi’s nose ornament frames a playful moment in the mother-child relationship, thereby invoking the aesthetic of a particular moment in mothering where the mother allows the child to explore and learn the tactile recognition of her body through affective responses. It is also a moment when the mother permits what is culturally recognised as a child’s ‘mischief’.

In the next photograph (fig. 3.5), she is making dosas in front of her female devotees who eagerly look at her performing the cooking. While Amritanandamayi’s face seems determined as she makes the dosa, the young women devotees in the background have kind, shy and obliging expressions on their faces. They are all, possibly Ashram brahmacharinis and other inmates, wearing clothes and ornaments
similar to Amritanandamayi’s. The photograph (fig. 3.6) that follows it captures a light moment of fun while Amritanandamayi along with other female devotees prepares vegetables for cooking. This frames a typical kitchen scene from a joint family or at the occasion of a marriage where women work together, chattering and joking. It also brings to mind an occasion such as the celebration of *chathayam* (birthday celebration of Narayana Guru) in Kerala, where the village women gather to prepare the food to be served during the community meal. In another photo (fig. 3.7) she is washing an elephant calf.

In the next photograph (fig. 3.8) Amritanandamayi is playful in the river with other young women. The women are wearing a petticoat over their clothes when they swim in the water. The last photograph (fig. 3.9) shows a nostalgic rural setting where Amritanandamayi is cooking in the open under a tree, while young women join her. These photographs produce a romantic narrative of a certain everydayness of motherhood associated with domestic life and chores. They also create a narrative of the Ashram life of Mata Amritanandamayi Devi highlighting her various *bhavams* of motherhood.

**Bhavams and Affect**

These photographs form a narrative that seeks to constitute a certain assemblage of the elements that form a mental image of the mother in the backdrop of familiar feelings about nature. In romanticism the nature and mother are perceived with affection where the feelings and emotions generated by certain moods and scenes in nature such as the clouds, dew or raindrops on leaves, snow-filled woods, and flowers in wind invoke a feeling of satisfaction associated with comfort and care. Through their poetry and other forms of literature the Romantics tried to describe this
feeling which many of them call bliss⁴¹. In Kerala too the romantic poets give a vivid sensual portrayal of nature in the form of a woman. In psychoanalytic terms this kind of satiety is observed as linked to a primal feeling of oblivion that the child enjoys in its sleep after being fed by the mother. As Freud observes,

> When children fall asleep after being sated at the breast, they show an expression of blissful satisfaction, which will be repeated later in life after the experience of a sexual orgasm⁴².

Freud’s conceptualisation that the early mother-infant is narcissistic and incestuous may not be agreeable and are critiqued by many feminists (Chodorow, 1978; Ross, 1995). However, the significance of the mother-child bonding in developing a sensible world for the child cannot be discarded either. Although at a symbolic level the child learns to dissociate from the affective, sensible world through its engagement with the language, its social life constantly demands an affective engagement with it. In order to resist or control this demand, the symbolic world prepares to constitute the epistemological setting in each society. Here the visual and sensorial is perceived as mental images and concepts that connect with and sustain the knowledge systems and through that, the power structures in society. It may be helpful to remember the ideas of “language games” by Wittgenstein and the “power-knowledge” relationship by Foucault in this context to understand how conceptualisations about a particular visual or sensorial data are subsumed within the power structures of the society and culture. For instance, within cultures what means by the ‘touch’ of a mother is often distinguished from other kinds of touch, friendly or erotic. The same or similar physical sensations are given meaning in an already

---

⁴¹ For instance in Book II of The Prelude Wordsworth ponders on the mother-infant connection. See the lines beginning from “ Bless’d the infant babe,/ blest the Babe/ Nurs’d in his mother’s arms, the Babe who sleeps/Upon his mother’s breast.”

existing symbolic context that categorise the sensual data. When one identifies (mostly unconsciously) oneself within a particular “language game” or “power/knowledge”, one is subjectivised within this schema of conceptualisation.

A way of being in the world that gives importance to the affective and embodied dimensions of engagement with it, values interdependence as a mode of political existence. Here, the significance of political articulation is not undermined but, equipped with another dimension of being and engagement. However, affect and embodiment are also products of power relations.

**Real identification or fantasies?**

In his study on the cine-politics in south-India Madhava Prasad is concerned with the transformation of the imaginary identification of the fans to their stars, into virtual political institutions. He mentions the previous studies in the area of fandom focuses on the former, “the imaginary identifications through which individual fans supplement their lives with meaning or seek avenues of pleasure (such as a sense of community or forbidden fantasies) that they are deprived of in real life” (Prasad, 2014; 18). He says such studies try to understand the reason of this identification in ‘intra-psychic’ or “affective dimension of social existence” (ibid, 19). Unlike the relation between the fan and the star in the context of cinema where it is based on the imaginary identification or fantasies, I suggest that the Mata-devotee relation is one where women as subjects of patriarchy are encouraged to make symbolic identification with the divine mother represented by Mata Amritanandamayi. The following description of photographs tells the affective and embodied nature of engagement between the Mata and her female devotees. The *roopam, bhavam* and *sankalpam* the women acquire from Amritanandamayi’s embodiment which they
perceive as the Amma is the body aesthetic Mata Amritanandamayi acquired from her lower caste *habitus*. According to Pierre Bourdieu, *habitus* is a result of dispositions that are shaped by past events and structures, shape current events and structures, …a product of history, produces individual and collective practices —more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time more reliable than all formal rules and explicit norms (Bourdieu, 1990; 279).

Talal Asad expands on this notion to emphasise the significance of agency in *habitus*. He employs the term *habitus* “to refer to the predisposition of the body, to its traditional sensibilities” (Scott, 2006; 289). According to him, “there’s a crucial difference between habit as the disposition the body acquires through repetition and inertia, through the generally unconscious and uncontrollable circuits of energy, emotion, feeling and *habitus*, that aspect of a tradition in which specific virtues are defined and the attempt is made to cultivate and enact them” (Scott, 289). To him corporeality is closely linked with *habitus*.

As the biographies of Mata Amritanandamayi shows although as Sudhamani, she grew up in the traditional community of fishermen, during a particular period in her life she actively tries to liberate herself from what she felt like a cultural ‘habit’ that does not appreciate her difference and hence leads to her own oppression. However, the persona she develops as Mata Amritanandamayi identifying herself with the idea of ‘divine mother’ cannot be conceived as fully self-conscious construction either. It is especially so because the discourse of spirituality that the Ashram as an institution constitutes is often scriptural and liturgical in nature.
The images of Mata Amritanandamayi in the photographs described above narrativise an image of a woman, in various familiar household settings in the everyday rural life in Kerala. Here the Mata plays with the child, cooks, spends a happy time with other young women in a rural backdrop, washes the elephant cub and frolics in the water with other women. All these images offer a feeling of leisure, an unthreatening visual schema to the viewer that enables a certain calm scopic engagement with the object. This scopic pleasure is asserted to associate the affective relation to a maternal body or to an essentialised notion of a woman when it is enacted by someone like Mata Amritanandamayi who identifies herself closely within this system of knowledge.

Fig. 3.10  A scene from the Malayalam movie *Kasthooriman* where the character played by Kulappulli Leela is aggressive. (Source: Millenium Cinemas YouTube channel).
Calm women and the white saree

In these photographs all the women who accompany Mata Amritanandamayi as her consorts (perhaps, as daughters) wear white sarees. The non-ideal is however represented as wearing dirty and shabby white clothes (see fig. 3.10 and fig. 3.11). White stands as a symbol of purity and transparence. It provides a bright context for an object to be perceived. It also induces a calming affect in the context in which it is perceived. It is also to be noted that in an early mother-child relation white is the colour that frequently appears in the background. When white colour is associated with the idea of mother, it reproduces the ideas of purity, serenity and innocence that are frequently attributed as essential to the nature of a mother.
Leisure and Service

The photographs (fig. 3.5, fig. 3.6 and fig. 3.8) show the Mata spending happy time with some young women. The women gather around her as though they are observing her moods, ways and moves, and learning from her how to conduct oneself in speech and act. They engage in what seems to be small talk, or in light moments of everyday learning. They chuckle when she does, or when she makes a humorous remark. They assist her, work along with her, watch her doing her domestic service cheerfully and with care. They absorb the feelings she passes onto her work.

Rustic scenery, kitchen and the backyard

Most of these photographs show Mata Amritanandamayi against the backdrop of a rustic scene or a domestic one. She is depicted as engaging in those occupations that are traditionally done by women. In one photograph she is cooking in the shade of a tree using a small hearth constructed temporarily with rock pieces. In another she is making dosa on a large stove and yet another photo shows her cutting vegetables in the kitchen. In all these an obliging company of young women clad in white sarees observe and imitate her acts. In one photograph she is bathing the elephant calf that belongs to the Ashram.

These photographs act as triggers of a trace from a romantic past. William Connolly defines a ‘trace’ as “a memory fragment that does not take the form of an explicit recollection”. He adds that, because it is both fast in its arrival and fragmentary in its shape, it cannot be recollected in itself, even after psychoanalysis, although it can be interpreted through psychoanalysis. It becomes however, marked by affective intensity once triggered by an appropriate event. It can thus be powerful in its efficacy
in the present, even if not determinant enough to become a clear memory of the past. (Connolly, 2002; 120,1)

Devi Bhavam

Devi Bhavam is a performative act done by Mata Amritanandamayi during the darsan. About the devi bhavam Amritanandamayi says, “As noble aspirations clearly manifested themselves in my mind, the Divine Mother, with bright, gentle hands, caressed my head. With bowed head, I told mother that my life is dedicated to Her” (Puri, 1988; 105). According to the biography each of Sudhamani’s manifestations revealed a different quality of divinity. “In the mood of Krishna (Krishna Bhava), she said she felt no sense of either compassion or lack of compassion for anyone. She experienced a form of meditative aloofness from people’s sufferings. However, in the mood of divine mother she felt compassion for every living being. During the Devi Bhavas she held devotees tenderly in her arms and whispered in their ears” (Cornell, 2001; 47).

After a few days Amritanandamayi decides to do only Devi Bhava. During Devi Bhava she appears wearing a silk saree with a glittering border and adorning herself with a crown, jewelry and garland. She sits on a chair covered with a silk cloth. Someone, usually an ashram Brahmachari or Brahmacharini will do the puja for the devi. Although Devi Bhava is very important to all devotees, those who live abroad find it very auspicious.

These bhavams are narrativised to achieve not only a universalised image of ‘Amma’ but an image of the ideal woman too. The ‘Amma’ thus becomes that ideal bhavam of the virtuous woman towards the ‘hero’ or the man, the son. The acts of the

43 For a description of the experience of Devi Bhava by a devotee, see Appendix A.
hero-son are to be understood, cared for and not to be resisted. Any violation of the woman’s identity or body by the hero-son is to be ignored as mischief and forgiven by the virtuous mother-woman. The sign ‘Amma’ becomes an icon when an image successfully consolidates and popularises selected forms, meanings and feelings associated with the signifier. Mata Amritanandamayi as ‘Amma’ performs this image in popular culture and iconifies the meanings and feelings attributed to her form.

**Embrace: Feeling and Spectacle**

Embrace is one of the practices that makes *darsanam* in the Mata Amritanandamayi faith unique. It introduces the element of immanence, proximity, tactility and interaction into the idea of the divine and practices of worship. This is unlike the traditional temple practices of Hindu worship where the deity is an idol, which is worshipped by the priest, whose body cannot be touched as it is sacred in mediating the deity, and the deity’s grace shared among the devotees in the form of *prasadam*. Such traditional dalit and lower caste practices of worship as the Velichappadu Thullal, Thira and Theyyattam are performative acts done in the image of God. In such practices the performer is believed to be a representation of the deity and in a state of trance; the performer interacts with the devotees making predictions, giving advice and blessings directly and through touch. However, after the performance, the performers go back to live their daily life persona. Unlike this, Mata Amritanandamayi embodies the ideal mother image in *roopam* (form), *bhavam* (expression) and *sankalpam* (imagination), not just during a performative occasion, but throughout her public life. In this way, by narcissistically becoming one with the image itself, she closes the gap between the ‘image’ and the object of representation.
The old *bhajan* hall in Vallikkavu ashram can occupy only a relatively small gathering of 100-200 people. This is used now only rarely and when there are less devotees for *darsan*. On the far end of the hall is a small recess with huge doors that slide apart revealing an alcove where the Mata sits while giving *darsan* (fig. 3.1) and conducting *bhajan*. Several photographs of the Mata and goddesses adorn the hall. The room also has a balcony where devotees sit during the *darsan*. The Mata leaves her room and climbs down the stairs to a large group of devotees standing on either side of her way to the hall. She stretches her arms and allows others to touch her. The devotees also attempt to be seen by her, to be smiled at and to touch her. She walks fast towards the *bhajan* hall and enters it. There too all the devotees who have been waiting for her to welcome her. She comes and sits either in the alcove or on one side of the hall chats with those who sits close to her, gives or takes a gift, and then
addresses the whole and meditate. Everyone who is eagerly looking at the Mata until now will close their eyes in meditation.

Embrace gives the feeling of mother’s caring touch accompanied by the smell of *agarbathis* (incense sticks) and flowers, sounds of *bhajan*, taste of the apple or sweets given as *prasadam*. It accompanies the smooth *bhavams* of mother and complements the affectionate interpellation “*Amma-Kuttan*”, “*makkale*” or “*molooty*”\(^\text{44}\). The devotees wait for a long time in queue to experience this embrace. The *darsan* on a normal day in the ashram begins as early as 2:00 in the morning.

Fig. 3.13 The Mata singing *Bhajan* in Vallikkavu Ashram (Source: amritapuri.org).

\(^{44}\text{Affectionate invocation of children by elders, especially parents.}\)
Fig. 3.14  Bhajan

Fig. 3.15 The Mata in an ecstatic mood during Bhajan (Source: The New Indian Express).
The Mata sits there for hours at a stretch giving darsan and offering consolation. Some devotees weep, some tell their problems. The Mata listens to them for sometime and then embraces, some times offers a solution or consolation.

_Bhajan_

Bhajans are one of the most popular and magnificent events in the Mata faith. It is part of the various occasions and is conducted either with a small group along the beach or as a well-organised event in a bhajan hall or huge decorated auditoriums thronged with people (fig. 3.12).

During the yatra the various bhajan groups or ashram centres across the country and abroad organises bhajans. The stage on which bhajan is conducted is usually decorated with shimmering clothes, photographs of the Mata or pictures of gods, and flowers. Usually Swami Amritaswarupananthapuri accompanies the Mata on stage along with other brahmacharis, brahmacharinis and some devotees to sing along with her. During the bhajans Amma sings into a microphone to the large audience who sing along. While singing the Mata closes her eyes and as if feels with the song, throws up her hands while singing in an ecstatic manner. The devotees join the chorus. The bhajans are also available as CDs and downloadable MP3 files. Many of these bhajans are written by the Amma.

_Manasapuja_

Manasapuja is another practice where all the processes of a normal puja are imagined in mind. It is what the devotees consider very special and revolutionary. It is so conceptualised that the devotees can do it at home or wherever one wishes to clear one’s mind. Manasapuja is also conducted as a mass puja at Amritapuri ashram. The
Mata leads the puja with the instructions. Some devotees tried to narrate to me the steps in *manasapuja* in a summarized way. But I found the one in the Ashram’s website more resourceful for my purpose. On the website of the Mata the instruction is given as follows\(^45\).

Sit in a comfortable asana (posture) and try to feel a deep peace filling your being. Breathe slowly, deeply, consciously for 2-3 minutes. Chant Aum three times with eyes closed. While chanting, imagine taking Aum from the navel upwards to Sahasrara; also imagine the bad mental dispositions and bad thoughts within us flowing out.

Then while praying “Amma, Amma” with devotion, love and tearful longing, imagine that the Divine Mother is standing before you, smiling and looking at you compassionately. For a minute enjoy Mother’s exquisite beauty, visualizing every part of Her divine form. Prostrate at Mother’s Lotus Feet, feeling the touch of your forehead on Her Holy Feet. Pray to Her, “O Mother, I take refuge in You. You are the only lasting Truth and support for me. You alone can give me real peace and joy. Never forsake me, never leave me!”

Then visualize the resplendent form of Devi on the inside of your palms. Rays of compassion from Devi’s eyes envelop you. Rub your face and from face to downwards with the palms. Feel that a divine energy is permeating you, and feel all misfortunes, all inauspiciousness being driven away.

Throughout this puja, continuously repeat with your lips, but without making any sound, “Amma, Amma, Amma, leave me not, forsake me not”.

Imagine now that you are bathing Mother. As you pour water on Mother’s head, watch the water flow down over each part of Her from until it reaches

---

\(^{45}\) Refer to the Appendix B for full instruction.
Her Lotus Feet. Then do ablutions with milk, ghee, honey, sandal paste, rose water, etc. With each item enjoy the beauty of Her form. Through offering these materials, you are offering your own purified mind to Mother
(Amritapuri.org).

The *manasa puja* is a very important event in the Mata faith. As the instruction for *manasa puja* shows it is focused on the practice of *sankalpam*. As mentioned earlier the Mata defines her as the *roopam*, *bhavam* and *sankalpam* of Motherhood. In *manasa puja* this *sankalpam* of Motherhood is worshiped and the worship is enacted in imagination, through words that are to be translated into images. It is the reversal of the usual practice of communication where images in mind get translated into words. Here through this practice the Mata creates certain aesthetic effect on the words. With no sight to distract and just the words of the Mata to instruct, the words pass through the mind carrying the affect of each experience described in the instruction.

Let us take a look at the text and examine what kinds of affects are created using the narrative of instruction[^5]. The first instruction urges the devotee to focus on the inner world of mind or consciousness and close the outer world of senses. The consciousness is then cleared of any thought that disturbs or is considered ‘bad’ by the devotee. In this way a feeling of calm and pleasure is arrived at through an embodied practice of detachment from the presence of senses. The second instruction provides the devotee with a picture to imagine, a picture that is laden with intense emotions and sensual memories. Words such as “tearful longing”, “love”, “compassion”, “refuge”, “peace” and “joy” create an image of the ‘Divine Mother’, an image that does not get articulated as an idea, but remains in the mind as a feeling.

[^5]: For the full text of the instruction refer to appendix A.
A devotee writes: “One just needs the feeling of Amma in the mind; her gaze, touch, the rhythm of movement—these are enough. This makes her a mother. This is how she becomes the mother in the minds of lakhs of people” (Das, 2013). Pujas such as the *manasapuja, guru paduka puja, bhagavati seva puja*, and *sarvaiswarya puja* create such an aesthetic community.

**Amma Doll**

The demand for Amma doll comes from this aesthetic connection developed through the affective imagination of the “divine mother” or the ‘Amma’ by the devotee. It offers the feeling of presence in the absence of Amma. Amma doll is not very popular among the devotees in Kerala. Its consumers are mostly the Western devotees or the devotees who stay abroad. The Amma doll is a product of Mata Amritanandmayi Math, handmade by the disciples. They are just one among the many products sold by the ashram mainly to the followers, such as spiritual books, magazines, videos, DVDs and photographs of Amma. However, they are different from this particular product, the Amma doll, in that the latter is a reproduction of what Amma stands for in Amma’s form, the loving/healing embrace. The dolls are made in the form of offering an embrace—with stretched out arms. They are available in various sizes.

In the website called *ammashop* that sells Amma dolls, a certain description of the product is given as follows:

“Handmade with many items used or blessed by Amma and ornamented with many beads, each of these adorable creations wears a white dress and a saree in the original style of Amma’s clothing. Your Amma doll is ornamented with red sandalwood beads on the wrists and
neck. The neck *mala* also has a *rudraksha* bead that Amma has blessed as the Guru bead. You might say each is a work of art, but more than that they are work of love- Amma’s love. Although it’s not easy to fulfill the demand of Amma dolls, we have seen over and over again that the dolls will always come to the devotee when the time is right…just like Amma. Here is what a devotee told us about her Amma doll. “These little “Angels” are Mother’s gift of love and healing to all who are open to their blessings. Sometimes I take her off the top of my bedroom bookshelf and meditate with her in my lap (bliss). Other times, I need only to gaze at her form to feel her with me and loving me. Sometimes, I need a hug from her and that same feeling of all-accepting love and softness is there. It is as if she is my little piece of Mother.”—A devotee and, just so you know, the dolls need not be brought to Mother to be blessed- when they are delivered to you they are already blessed and imbued with Amma’s divine energy. However, if you wish you can still always take the doll to Mother for more blessings!” (Amma shop)

This description clearly mentions the appearance of the *amma* doll and its significance for the disciple. The doll wears “red sandalwood beads on the neck and the wrist”, a *rudraksha* and a white *saree* “in the original style of *Amma*’s clothing”. Here the doll is a replication of the Amma’s image. It is not only the image that is replicated but also the uniqueness – “handmade with items used or blessed by Amma”. Amma with her offer of “love” and “healing hug” may appear to become a consumable product and the disciples who are embraced, the consumers of this

---

Seeds of a tree used as rosary beads during prayer, or worn as necklace and wristband by ascetics.
particular form of “spirituality of life”. The Amma doll is popular among devotees from abroad who visits the ashram. In the first part of my fieldwork, when I talked to the local followers of Amma about the doll, they seemed surprised to know that there is such a product as Amma doll. Some even denied the possibility of a doll in the form of Amma produced in the ashram because they thought it sacrilegious. To some who followed just her ‘teachings’ or ‘messages’ and also appreciated her humanitarian activities, the Amma doll is a ‘meaningless’ object. Others who found no problem with the idea of a doll in the image of Amma, when asked if they would consider buying one, answered in negative since they feel that they can meet the Mata whenever they want, in her ashram.

However, many stories of experience with Amma doll that are shared across the internet by the Mata’s devotees seem to show a different stand on the practice of buying and possessing an amma doll. One of the stories48 which appear in the website indiadivine.org goes thus:

“After viewing the Amma doll pages that have recently been added on the amritapuri.org site, I feel like sharing my Amma doll experience. I had wanted an Amma doll for a long time, but always came up with some excuse for not buying one. Doll in hand, I awaited Amma’s darshan. Amma might not see too many grown men bringing dolls for blessing, but without having to ask “your doll?” she knew it was a special gift for myself. She tilak’ed the doll- and me too! I don’t recall Amma ever sticking kumkum paste on my forehead before. Since the doll received Amma’s blessings, it’s not easy to let go of her. She is sitting on my lap as I work on my computer. I sleep with her,

48 I have given only excerpts from the devotee’s narrative. See Appendix C for the full narrative.
and reach for her when I wake up. I talk to her and hug her as if this doll is Amma herself. The doll is not only soft and nurturing to cuddle but fills the longing for Amma’s darshan during the long wait between her tours. It’s like a murti of the Divine Mother. But while most murtis are made of hard metal or stone, this is very warm, fuzzy, huggable, snuggable murti. And now other devotees ask me if they could hold my doll. (Keval, 2001)

In this narrative of experience one finds the individual, a male devotee of “Mata Amritanandamayi who likes to keep the Amma doll with him even while he works on his computer. To him the presence of the doll substitutes to some extent the presence of the ‘Amma’. It helps him anticipate her material presence. This is the only way he says; he can wait till the next time he meets the ‘Amma’. For the devotee the material presence or the experience of the Amma’ is important and to wait until the next time without a tangible, experience of her seems miserable to him. To the devotee the ‘Amma’ is an idea that is associated with presence, embrace and touch. The experience of Amma does not require transcendence. This is reinforced by the fact that in her absence Amma’s presence is experienced through the doll.

In this chapter I try to understand the Mata Amritanandamayi phenomenon as a popular faith formation where rituals and performative acts mobilise an aesthetic sensibility through ideas such as bhakti, sankalpam, and bhavam. I have suggested through ashram reports, photographs, magazines and videos that the engagement between Mata Amritanandamayi and her devotees are narrated in the language of affect. This language, in turn, establishes a meaning to the feelings the devotees experience in their engagement with the ‘Amma’. It is this meaning of affective interdependence that makes the Mata faith popular. However, even as this meaning is
established through visuality and performative acts, the image of the Mata is different for each devotee.