CHAPTER 4
THE MATA FAITH AS A DISCURSIVE FORMATION

In the last chapter I have looked at the aesthetic principles that characterize the Mata Faith in relation to a larger social field of representation in Kerala. This chapter will look into the functional principles that constitute the Mata faith. By functional principles I mean the operations within and outside the discursive field that make the faith operate the way it does. Here I will also address the question frequently asked by the critics of the Mata Faith – how does the Mata faith survive the so-called democratic criticisms or the secular modern critiques of its irrationality? How can an institution such as the Mata Amritanandamayi Ashram obstruct the ideals of democracy by offering an image of a sovereign and still be compromised for so long?

I will first try to explain the nature of these criticisms in the public sphere. The first one emerges from the claim to a rational space for criticism through secularization of religion in public sphere. Talal Asad follows the trajectory of this claim through a genealogy of the idea of ‘critique’. According to him the Western liberal democratic society assumes a “simple distinction” between secular criticism and religious criticism. He says that the modern subject in this context assumes his agency, truth and freedom as a continuing pursuit enabled by the practice of secular criticism (Asad, 2009; 54). Asad argues that even as a genealogist Foucault (Foucault, 1997) did not care to regard the idea of a ‘critique’ in its diversity of styles, uses and objectives, and the complexity of its history. He says that in its original sense the word criticism meant only to make a judgment on particular crises based on “particular virtues” and a “particular way of life” and not on a universal truth (Asad, 48). Through a genealogical analysis of the concept of critique Asad argues, “over the
last few centuries, modern powers have encouraged and used the developing sciences to normalize and regulate social life—and therefore have legitimized a particular kind of disciplinary criticism. That is why, perhaps, critique that is integral to the growth of useful knowledge—and therefore of modern power—is part of a process whose major ligaments have not been effectively reduced to skepticism, a process that is rarely itself the object of effective public critique” (Asad, 53). The second question assumes democratic practice as the result of unmediated individual agency. Here the issue is with the presence of an individual assuming the role of the sovereign in the form of “divine mother” and mediating the agency of a group of individuals.

By giving the nature and context of the assumptions of democracy and secular modern critique I do not aim to close any criticisms from these two points. Rather I try to understand the context in which these specific criticisms emerge in the public sphere and the problems therewith. Also, I will ask what are the other ways to articulate the issues that are foregrounded in the criticisms about the phenomenon. Mainly these criticisms, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter, follow reports or allegations on physical and sexual abuses in the ashram, financial fraud, influencing “weak people” through superstitious beliefs and human gods, unauthentic healing practices, and ‘fakeness’ of the guru. These criticisms in the public sphere are very influential in shaping the Mata faith as a popular cultural phenomenon. The transformation in the nature of the Mata worship that I showed in the chapter two, such as the change in perception of the image of the Mata from “divine mother” to spiritual guru and later to a humanitarian saint is greatly influenced by the discussions that followed these criticisms.

In the second chapter we have seen how a narrative of spirituality accounted for the specific cultural, symbolic, creative and performative practices of Sudhamani
and the lower caste community to which she belongs. Through the hagiographical accounts Sudhamani emerges as the representation of an image of divine mother. The hagiographical interpretation of Sudhamani’s life did not discover Sudhamani’s divinity or spirituality but produced it. In other words, her charismatic performative acts became the object of hagiographical interpretation. In the third chapter I looked at the aesthetic formation of this mother-guru image and showed how an upper caste aesthetic of motherhood renders meaning to this image. It also shows how an affective world of interdependence is created through various embodied practices. In this chapter, first, I will examine the “functional principle”, “use-value” or “genre” of the cultural text of spirituality that finds the object of its discourse in Sudhamani as ‘Amma’.

A genre is usually defined in the context of classifying a literary or film narrative. However, the concept of genre also helps to understand and categorise cultural processes and institutions as discursive texts. According to Anis Bawarshi “genre provides the conditions within which utterances become speech acts” (Bawarshi, 343). In his article “The Genre Function”, Bawarshi subsumes what Foucault calls the “author-function” into what he calls the “genre function”. For Foucault author-function is what maintains the fictive in any literary text (Foucault, 1998; 214). According to Thomas. O. Beebee, genre is the “use-value” of the texts. It is a precondition for the creation and reading of texts, the ideological context in which the text and its participants function and attain cultural value (Beebee, 250). Foucault puts forward both discursive and non-discursive texts as two types of practical formations. However, Laclau and Mouffe reject this distinction on the grounds that they identify every social configuration as meaningful. For Laclau and Mouffe,
The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealist opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of ‘natural phenomena’ or ‘expression of wrath of God’ depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence. (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; 108)

Following from what I have discussed in chapter two, and drawing on Laclau and Mouffe, the primary object of the discursive field around the Mata faith is the materiality of lower-caste life that produces the identity of the labourer as the “unsympathetic, unethical, selfish wealth-monger”. According to this discursive field, the anger, inconsistencies, cold-heartedness and desire of the lower caste worker are the aberrations to be corrected in order to live a spiritual, ethical life. The same narrative, now constructed in the vantage point of motherhood, puts emphasis on the need for a caring, ethical life before equality or justice. Hence, it becomes necessary to understand what this motherhood represents, whether it represents the upper-caste idea of motherhood or the sensibility of a lower-caste mother.

We have seen in chapter two, how prior to the formation of the Mata faith, its primary object, the ‘Amma’ or ‘Mata’ is constructed through a discourse of spirituality. The hagiographical accounts represented Sudhamani as the discovery of the institution of spirituality, a romantic object of love and innocence that is

discovered in the field of the cold, mechanized life of subaltern labourers where it has been ‘ignored’. Even though the texts themselves do not talk about any particular institution or person to have made this discovery, they imply so by frequently comparing Sudhamani to Gandhi, Ramakrishna and the “saints and yogis in ancient India”, and thereby, to a cultural institution of Indian spirituality.

This discourse of spirituality is an archival field constituted by a discursive order of positions occupied by different subjects, objects and concepts. There are other forms of spiritual or mystical lives the charisma of which was constituted by anti-caste revolutionary discourses, such as that of the bhakti saints in northern India. There are also, when one looks into the pre-modern history of Kerala, cultural instances of bhakti or devotion, both performative and literary, those that gave a distinct cultural identity to the region. The discourse of spirituality in Mata Faith is totally silent about these traditions of devotional culture. Neither does it borrow visibly from a modern anti-caste devotional tradition in Kerala. However, when one looks at the lower-caste people’s engagement with the Mata Faith, it is also not possible to rule out the presence of an anti-caste sensibility in them as the secular rhetoric of faith devoid of religion and caste in Mata faith appeals to many of them. It is more or less understood in this context as the imagination of Hindu society as already casteless and a single unity. This interpretative rhetoric or genre of spirituality that produced the Mata Amritanandamayi faith also defines and organizes the consequent social actions in certain ways.

The genre plays a role in the constitution of not only the texts but of their contexts, including the identities of those who are represented within them. If this genre refers to an archive, it is not only formed of words or discourses but also a “collateral space” of concepts, with all its sensorial, perceptive and imaginative
complexity (Deleuze, 1986, 5). The words and concepts are distinguished at the level of their receptivity. There are those who tread the path laid by words, and there are others who swim through fluid images, forms, spaces, links, dimensions, orientations, smell, texture and feelings. The latter group embodies the archival world perceived through their senses, feelings and imaginations; they reimagine any social phenomenon through their direct visceral engagement with it. To them, practice is more important than articulation that fixes it as a paradigm. But this archive is not the one from where the dominant spiritual articulation originated. It is the archive created in imagination, or psychically in the unconscious, and retrieved through the body, by those who are actively receiving it. To describe the distinction between the “folk” and the “classical” K. Satchithanandan writes that the articulations and appropriations of folk practices by classical forms fixed them in order to archive and represent them on special occasions (Satchithanandan, 2010; 9).

The Mata faith formation acquires its meaning not only from hagiographical accounts but also from the visceral engagements. In the engagement between Mata Amritanandamayi and the subaltern groups, whose traditions and everyday struggles do not produce the same words, categories or images for understanding what they experience as the “feminine affect” as the theory oriented spiritualist upper caste traditions do, the latter interpret the text to serve their own interests. There is a struggle within the phenomenon between its production as a text and its experience as another by the subaltern groups, a struggle between the “mother principle” and the “feminine affect”. Even at its spread in the global level, this struggle remains as a visibly unresolved tension at the core of the Mata Faith. In this way, I argue, the faith text is a domain in the popular culture that mediates the dominant upper caste-middle class discourse of spirituality and the visceral realm of devotion of the feminine and
both delimit the subjects, objects and concepts of the faith formation. In the popular domain the visceral is usually equated with the subaltern.

When as a discursive formation the Mata faith is upper caste, the subaltern engagement in the form of practice refashions it as an aesthetic formation with a functional value in their lives. How does the subaltern group interpret the Mata faith? How do they make use of the institution’s different welfare programmes? How is Mata faith a discursive formation? How is the lower-caste woman’s self conceptualized in the formation? How is it an iconic formation? I will try to answer some of these questions.

**Knowing and Feeling**

An educated lower caste male devotee of Mata Amritanandamayi, a retired Director of Agriculture, I interviewed about what the ‘Amma’ means to him said he is trying to understand her from the spiritual books. He says great people who have studied human relations in spiritual traditions, and have immense spiritual knowledge and power write those spiritual books. He was reluctant to say what the ‘Amma’ means to him, because he thought it does not matter what he thinks as she is beyond what he could contemplate. He referred to the great spiritual knowledge the ‘Amma’ has attained very early in her life “despite being a lower caste woman”.

A lower class devotee from the same caste expressed strong feelings for ‘Amma’ when I asked him the same question. He said ‘Amma’ is what he feels as present always with him. He also showed me his *Devi Sahasranamavali*, a book of thousand chants qualifying the ‘Amma’, which he carried with him and told me that when he found himself in trouble he held it to reassure himself of her presence. He recommended me to carry one so that gradually I could also experience it. He had no
doubt that I would gradually grow faith in her as I began to experience her. He said that he knew many people who had come as skeptics and later, became ardent devotees. Among the lower caste male and female devotees the emphasis on experience was more than the emphasis on any interpretation already in the books. In the local prayer centre where these two devotees met on every weekend for bhajan and puja, among other members they would lead the bhajan by chanting the prayers over the microphone, taking turns. While one person led the bhajan the others sat behind them repeating the prayer. On certain occasions food would be cooked and served by the women members and eaten together by all members in the courtyard.

Prayer and community lunch act as ways of experiencing the Mata through the involvement in the community. The bhajan centre I used to visit in order to study the functioning of the local organization of the Mata faith and the practices of the devotees, was actively run by a few members of the civil society who already had some standing as “respectable members” of a secular Hindu social sphere. One middle-class couple that frequented the bhajan centre said that the Mata faith is to them a platform to serve the people who need help. They set up a small homeopathy clinic in the bhajan hall compound, run by the wife who was a homeopathy physician, in order to provide free medical service to the devotees who needed it. To this couple service to the needy was a way of worshiping the Mata.

On another occasion during my visit to one of the bhajan centres a lower-caste woman devotee of Amritanandamayi asked if I have got the Amma’s darsanam. When I told her that I hadn’t met the Amma, she consoled me that I will get darsanam when the Amma wishes it. She is a member of one of the many Amritakudumbams across Kerala and has come to the prayer centre along with other members of her group. She said her own busy life with the responsibility of a housewife does not
allow her time to visit the Amma. But she consoles herself thinking that probably it is the Amma’s wish that she takes some more time before receiving darsanam. Other women in the group agree with her on this. Another young female devotee told me that she became the devotee of Amritanandamayi during Tsunami rehabilitation. She herself got financial aid from the Ashram to rebuild her house. The drawing room in her new house exhibits a large framed and garlanded photograph of Mata Amritanandamayi in a puja setting with a lamp and flowers. Now she takes up certain local administrative responsibilities given by the Ashram and helps organize a local Amritakudumbam and Amrita Ayalkootam. Both these women are very actively involved in the seva activities they are doing. The prayer, community meal, cleaning, identifying the needy in their locality to receive aids such as primary medical care, Amrita scholarships and other financial aids, and organizing trips to the Ashram are conducted meticulously with much devotion to the cause.

I also met a reluctant follower of Mata Amritanandamayi, who interestingly, does not like to call himself a devotee. He retired from government service more than a decade ago and belongs to a prominent lower caste community in Kerala. More importantly, he is actively involved with self-help group projects in nature cure life style practices and eco-conservation techniques. He appreciates the humanitarian efforts of Mata Amritanandamayi Trust. Although not a devotee of Mata, he testifies to the positive energy and calm the Ashram offers to its devotees. He says that many people, especially women, who live miserable lives are given solace in the presence of the Mata. However, he says the “unhappy” faces of the women volunteers in the Ashram intrigues him, and prompts him to ask himself what the service they offer would actually mean to them.
Mata Amritanandamayi Mission, NGO and the Civil Society

Mata faith network among the civil society groups has produced several institutions such as the Mata Amritanandamayi Math, Mata Amritanandamayi Mission Trust, and various regional centres run autonomously by associated civil society groups. At the state or transnational administrative level, the Math is addressed variously as an international charitable organisation, a volunteer organisation, a spiritual organisation, a faith organisation and an NGO. In the website of United Nations Economic and Social Council Civil Society Network, Amritanandamayi Math is described as an NGO in special consultative status with the ECOSOC, with an aim “to eliminate poverty through love and compassionate service to fellow human beings. To educate women and children. To provide relief at times of disaster and human suffering. To raise awareness of human values and respect for life. To protect Nature”\(^50\). In India Mata Amritanandamayi Mission Trust, a sister organisation of Mata Amritanandamayi Math, functions along with its other centres to conduct charitable works offering disaster relief, healthcare, education, environmental programmes and scholarships for children and pension for old women.

I have offered here instances of various ways in which Mata faith makes sense to different people. When a certain section of the lower-caste population focuses on transformation and self-making through interactions with the progressivist members of the upper-caste civil society, spiritual books and services to the “poor”, there is another section of subaltern population whose primary aim is to use faith as a vantage point in order to discern the demands of daily material reality, the anchor of which they lack, in their own terms. There is yet another group of subaltern population who,

\(^50\) See CSO-Net http://esango.un.org/irene/?page=viewProfile&type=ngo&nr=2766&section=9
although refrain from actively engaging with the faith, becomes a part of the formation as targets and beneficiaries of its welfare projects.

In relation to the description of the latter two groups it is apt to note the critical statement made by another popular “saint” in Kerala, Swami Sandeep Chaithanya that Amritanandamayi Matt is functioning like a *samandara bharanakoodam* or a parallel state. His argument, made in the context of the Tsunami aftermath that caused a large number of people in the coastal belt to lose their houses, was that when the NGOs assisted the government by offering their share of financial assistance, Amritanandamayi took the role of the welfare state by constructing houses for the people. In the point of view of the state Amritanandamayi ashram registered as a trust that functions as an NGO. However, this claim may be extended further by means of describing the functional modality of the Ashram and not just the event of constructing houses for the people.

In an article on the relation between the NGOs and politics in India Rob Jenkins notes that generally any discussion of the NGO is subsumed within the larger discourse of “civil society”, an idea “strangely incapable of standing freely on its own” (Jenkins, 2010; 409). Like the idea of civil society in India, NGOs are conceptually located within multiple dichotomies and are hence defined in opposition to any number of things that they are not. Thus,

“They are not political parties; they are not social movements; they are not labour unions; they are not even, according to some critics, agents of popular struggle at all. Indeed, apart from its status as an entity distinct from the government, existing within a realm of associational freedom, the Indian NGO’s defining characteristic is its *constitutional inability to engage in*
politics—except, it would seem, as an unwitting tool of larger forces (Jenkins, 2010; 410).

However despite all this, NGOs have played a major role in India’s politics. The mere fact that members of the political parties, social movements, labour unions have sought to define themselves in opposition to them has invested them with political significance.

To understand the location of civil society in India in relation to other social and political formations I draw on the framework Partha Chatterjee formulated. In his book *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections of Popular Politics in Most of the World*, Partha Chatterjee introduces the notion of political society in order to understand the “recent form of entanglement of elite and subaltern politics” where the “democratic process in India has come a long way” since the nationalist political mobilisations in colonial period “in bringing under its influence the lives of subaltern classes” (Chatterjee, 2004; 39). Chatterjee gives two conditions that facilitated the distinct form political society has taken on since the 1980s. These are (1) the pastoral functions of the government and (2),

“widening of the arena of political mobilisation, prompted by electoral considerations and often only for electoral ends, from formally organized structures such as political parties with well-ordered internal constitutions and coherent doctrines and programs, to loose and often transient mobilisations, building on communication structures that would not be ordinarily recognized as political (for instance religious assemblies or cultural festivals or more curiously even associations of cinema fans, as in some of the southern Indian states).” (Chatterjee, 47)
He also notes that as a consequence of this tendency the middle-class groups lament that “politics has been taken over by mobs and criminals” and the mission of the modernizing state to transform a backward society is abandoned.

In Maya Warrier’s book on guru faith in Mata Amritanandamayi Mission, she investigates the major strength group of Mata Amritanandamayi faith formation, its urban middle class agents (Warrier, 2005). According to Warrier, foremost among the several factors that instigate this group’s commitment to Mata Faith is the need for a guru in order to guide them through the complex terrain of modern life. Hence, she says, the choice of a guru is a crucial event for the urban middle-class devotee. She mentions several factors that contribute to their identification of the right guru. The devotees she interacted with have the opinion that looking at several characteristics of the guru, they will intuitively understand if she is a true or fake guru. According to Warrier Mata Amritanandamayi is accepted as their guru mainly for a few characteristics such as the “intimacy of embrace”, “egalitarianism”, “selflessness”, “openness” and even the Mata’s “self-deprecatory” tone in speech (Warrier, 2005). However, my interviewees responded in different ways.

The first characteristic is the intimacy of the Mata’s embrace. Maya Warrier discovers that the upper-caste urban middle class devotees of Mata Amritanandamayi find “the guru’s perceived efficacy or otherwise in solving their immediate problems”, the crucial factor to look for in their choice of a guru (Warrier, 67). These devotees find embrace as a unique experience for the effects it has on the recipient. One of the devotees explains to her that the gurus have a scientific principle guiding them and by meditating on their favorite deities they enlarge their aura or field of electromagnetic rays. The gurus keep distance because the aura may diminish if others touch them. Warrier quotes the devotee who says if one closely observes the
Mata one will notice that her whole body vibrates and she radiates unlimited aura. This devotee believes that Mata Amritanandamayi can burn all the “karmic burden” or prarabda of the devotee with just a touch.

Interestingly, none of the lower class from lower castes devotees I interviewed expressed this belief as marking their interest in Mata Amritanandamayi. To many of the lower-class members of this group Amritanandamayi is a human-god, by which they mean that she provides them with financial aid, which they seek most in their daily lives. An Araya community member who lives in Purakkad among a community of people whose chief livelihood is fishing told me that the villagers were introduced to the Mata faith after the tsunami hit their village in 2004. The Ashram built houses for the villagers including her family after the huge destruction caused by the waves. She remembers that for months after the water withdrew, the place was unfit for occupation, because of the unhygienic conditions caused by the sedimented carcass of fish and other animals, and the polluted seawater collected in trenches and canals breeding mosquitoes and flies. Mata’s long-term disaster relief programmes also provided healthcare to many who fell sick after the tragedy. During the Tsunami aftermath along with the disaster relief programmes the villagers were encouraged to get together in any one of their houses and collectively engage in prayer to show their gratitude to the Mata. Most of the people were interested in the bhajan groups only until the financial support existed. Some students and old members in the village still go to visit the Ashram in order to collect their pension, when a collective trip to the Ashram is organised by the main bhajan centre in the area during the Mata’s birthday. Prior to the Mata Amritanandamayi Ashram, an institution called Global Vision used to offer scholarships to students in the area.
Another factor that Warrier points out as constituting the devotees’ choice of the Mata as their guru is her austerity and selflessness. By this Warrier’s informants mean that Mata does not demand donations or seek power or authority over her devotees. Besides, they find the evidence for Mata’s altruism in long hours of darsan sessions where she embraces devotees regardless of her tiring body. Warrier writes that this indicates to the devotees, “the self-sacrificing mother caring only about her children and paying no heed to her own needs for rest and quiet” (Warrier, 2005; 69). Mata’s biography also claims the authenticity of this self-less attitude by narrating stories from her childhood where she feeds the poor and hungry, heals the sick and do this forgetting completely about her status or well-being.

When I asked a female devotee what made her sustain the faith in Mata she told me “we just believe that she hears our prayers. Someone should hear it, shouldn’t they? When she is admired by so many, there may be some power within her. And she helped us when we were in need.” When I asked her if she thinks Mata’s service is selfless she laughs and says “Amma is a sanyasini since childhood. And she is a lower caste woman. She does not own anything. She has rich bhaktas who make donations to her and she distributes them to the poor”. Another devotee told that it is a mother’s attitude to a child who is ignorant of the ways of the world. According to her the ‘Amma’ is modest because she has to slowly remove the child’s ignorance without hurting its pride.

The third factor that Maya Warrier identifies as contributing to the faith in Mata Amritanandamayi is her “approachability” and “openness in her demeanour”. To the urban middle-class devotee “the way in which she interacts with devotee listens to their woes and address their problems, is such as to make them feel comfortable in her presence” (Warrier, 70). Warrier herself testifies to this experience
of “simplicity” through an anecdote of her own interaction with the Mata. When anything like approachability is highlighted as a distinct aspect of a person, it should be in comparison to others who are not approachable. Here it seems that Warrier’s informants are comparing Mata’s openness with those gurus who are not so. However, the subaltern devotees I interviewed did not mention Mata’s approachability as a distinct characteristic. This may not be because they did not find Mata approachable, rather, they may not have found anything extraordinary about her simplicity and openness. For many devotees from this group Mata’s manners seemed more like that of the elder women in their own family, who would engage in spiritual discourse with their grandchildren. One of them said it would have surprised them if Mata had an authoritative attitude towards them. He says although she does not sound very pleasing all the time, even her criticisms show care and concern.

Warrier says that simplicity of Mata’s discourse has both gained and lost her devotees. Most of her devotees find the direct and emotionally charged discourse of the Mata palatable. The non-devotees find the same “overly childish and simplistic” and they prefer more sophisticated discourses of gurus like Chinmayananda. Even among the lower castes many are interested in the conversational nature of Mata’s discourses concerning the spiritual management of everyday life. However, for them this is not a primary reason to follow her. Such discourses are not hard to find in their own families. Moreover, post anti-caste reform movements in the early 20th century Kerala, the lower castes were addressed by community leaders in the language that derives its meaning from their daily affairs. However, as a leader of such an influential status, they believe, her advices can make impact on their lives if followed properly. The middle-class devotees among the lower castes are attracted to her primarily because of the humanitarian activities she organizes for the poor.
Another factor that appeals to the urban middleclass devotees of the Mata interviewed by Warrier is the “self-deprecatory” tone in which she talks about herself. This group understands self-deprecation as a virtue and Mata is extraordinary to them because she presents a humble image without undermining her divinity. Some lowercaste/dalit women devotees I interviewed had the same self-deprecatory tone in their voice when they talk about their lives. When I asked one young woman devotee of Mata Amritanandamayi about this, she says, it is probably because they struggle much in their lives and that makes them humble. However, I felt this self-deprecation in language is bound to the material conditions in which they actualise themselves, not as agents of their lives, but as service providers. In short, they did not seem to be fully liberated by the idea of maternal love that puts limits on their agency. Outside this subjectivity many of them find no possibility of a dignified life either. Hence, they use the subjective agency embodied in maternal love.

Another quality of the Mata that make her urban middleclass devotees choose her over a number of other gurus is what Warrier calls as her “egalitarianism”. She gives instances of how this egalitarianism is understood by the urban middle class devotees she interviewed, in terms of religion, caste and class and how important it is for them. Firstly, she says they find it important that their guru “does not discriminate between people of diverse religious faiths and backgrounds but welcomes them all equally to their fold” (Warrier, 76). The story of Mata healing Datan, a “poor low-caste leper” is an exemplary event showing the Mata’s egalitarianism. On her questions about caste some considered it irrelevant in their everyday lives, one person said she reacted violently to caste beliefs and another devotee said he would look for caste as a criterion in choice of a suitable groom for his daughter because he believed “these things take time to change” (Warrier, 77). When I asked one lower caste
devotee about the egalitarianism in the Ashram she said everybody in the ashram keeps a loving smile on their face when they assist the devotees. When they go to collect your pension or scholarship, they are already a part of large group of people from several places. The volunteers give them mat and send them to the bhajan hall to spend the night before the birthday programmes. The next day they will be grouped according to their identity card number. Inside the compound of the ashram they are unable to identify with one another as a community, rather identifies oneself in the relationship of patronage. Another devotee said the majority of the people in the Ashram are upper castes. When I asked about the presence of any sort of caste or religious discrimination in the ashram he said there is no such discrimination at least at the level of interaction. He said that people offer their service in a very self-conscious and careful manner and make sure they do not offend a poor devotee. To this he added that the poor is concerned about his hunger, so he may not want to meditate, read or conduct himself until he gets food.

For most of the dalit-lower caste devotees that I met, none of these factors were their reason to choose the Mata. For many of them it was not even a choice of the guru that they deemed important to their life. Here egalitarianism is mainly understood as a moral attitude to some ontological quality of humanity as equal. There is no question of systemic violence or oppression. Rather the questions that are asked mainly concerns with how to conduct oneself in a safe manner. When the question politics asks is who gets what and why, here the question seems to be how I will secretly guard my privileges without facing threat. In this way the acts of intimacy, simplicity, approachability, egalitarianism, altruism and lack of display as moral attitudes aesthetically discharged hinder political need for social vigilance and comparison.
These characteristics that make the urban middle class devotees to choose the Mata as their guru shows that what this category of people expects from a lower caste associate is their humility, simplicity and compassion. Mata appears as an ideal associate in this regard as she personifies the urban middle classes’ expectation of a lower caste ‘acquaintance’. Now, is there a problem in expecting the lower caste to be tolerant and humble? Is Mata idealized as a guru? Or is she represented as an idealized image of a lower caste woman associate who could bring a bond between the classes equally beneficial to each? Or is the representation not just Mata, but the guilt/benevolence of the liberal middle-class that is capable of worshiping a lower caste woman and thereby “correcting the wrongs of the past”? The Mata faith can be understood as a platform parallel to the political where there is a certain gesture of extending friendship and love from the upper castes. It can be refuted that the ways in which this friendship makes a demand of tolerance and humility from the lower castes, are ignorant of their right to dignity and justice. Thus the modern Hindu self-formation of the predominantly upper-caste urban middle class is founded on producing an institutional other.

In the Mata faith, what do the young ascetics think they are doing? Maya Warrier expounds the path of the renouncer in the Mata faith as follows.

For those of the Mata’s disciples who are formally initiated into ascetic life in the Mata’s ashram in Kerala, their spiritual quest entails renouncing their worldly life, and embarking on self denial. The majority of individuals (men and women) who choose to become disciples of the Mata and enter her ashram as ascetic renouncers are young people in their late teens or early twenties. Many come from middle-class families and evidently led comfortable lives prior to their entry into the Mata’s ashram. The young ascetic I came to know
claimed to have been deeply inspired by the ideal of spiritual seeking. They see their lives as dedicated to the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment, and their every action and every thought is, ideally, geared towards this all-consuming spiritual endeavor. The spiritual quest is conceptualized as a progressive burning up of karmic burden (prarabda) accumulated over this and past lives, and requires that the aspirant desist from all thoughts and actions in the present that could contribute to a further accumulation of karmic burden in the future.

In the context of the Mata faith formation, I argue, the relation made between the elite and subaltern population is the functional basis of the institution. In other words, the institution of “spirituality” as seen in Mata faith formation derives its functionality from an already existing cultural relation/tension between the propertied elite governing class and the popular legitimacy of communitarian politics, “which was embedded in the conception of Indian democracy from the very beginning” (Chatterjee, 49). The institution of spirituality in India, in the form of Mata faith formation thus claims to act toward the resolution of tension between these two classes by taking up the project of “modernizing” the “unreformed popular culture” outside the legal institutions of state. At its core the Mata faith formation is founded on this material domain of actual political interaction between the classes. It is the active form many political discourses in Indian democracy attain in practice, necessitated by this relation between the classes that Rajarshi Dasgupta terms “ascetic modality” or self-refashioning. According to him, the self “deeply ascetic and decidedly secular, but not too distant from the theological” “founded on relentless work that is rigorous and strict” is the exemplary lifestyle the mainstream communist parties perceive the members must embody (Dasgupta, 2014, 73). This ascetic self-
fashioning, although shared by almost all political discourses as a common language, is not the same across different and opposing political fractions. Dasgupta describes this scenario as follows,

Despite important distinctions over the ideological terrain, we might say there is a common language game being played out insofar as the ‘style’ of politics is concerned among, for example, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) pracharak, the Gandhian activist and the communist ascetic. The fundamentalists and liberals can similarly present their own set of political ascetics. Admittedly there are serious differences between their respective style of asceticism – some have parliamentary fantasies, some are technological savvy, some are severely monastic, some are feted by big business houses. (Dasgupta, 73)

My interest here is to understand if there is any difference between the self-fashioning in subaltern groups and the agents of the civil society, the two categories the relation of which I already showed as constituting the core of Mata faith. Gopal Guru says that the idea of democracy in the nationalist imagination in India apparently offered the context for two different sets of language. They are the “language of self-pride and national pride representing nationalist elites, and the language of self-esteem and self-respect that different marginalized groups deployed for the articulation of their normative aspiration” 51 (Guru, 2011; 100). According to Gopal Guru there are two intersecting notions of self-esteem in Indian nationalist imagination.

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One nurtured by those who were of the socially privileged elite but who felt humiliated on account of denial of self-rule within colonial configuration of power, and a second pursued by Dalits in opposition to the local configuration of power (Brahminism and Capitalism) that involve Dalit humiliation. (Guru, 2011; 100)

He adds to this, another important way in which Dalit response to nationalism differs from the mainstream notion of nationalism. The register of collective pride of self-rule or “freedom from colonial configuration of power” offers the emotional power to mainstream nationalist imagination whereas the Dalits in resistance to the “local configuration of power” put swabhiman or self-respect before pride of the nation. The dalit and lower-caste individual imagined, as a subject and an agent are two modes of conducting one’s being. As a subject of humiliation and othering she constantly finds herself in a position to reconstruct her will power amidst the threats to her integrity, in order to carry out everyday responsibilities. Here as an agent of one’s own will, the meaning of life is purposely oriented towards completing limited goals and responsibilities, and, if part of a community, pursuing a shared vision, in order to achieve self-respect. To those who have not travelled through the institutions of national pride, it may be still possible to imagine a self that is not taught by those to repress the latter on behalf of the former. However, in schools and such institutions, beginning from primary classes national pride is taught, as that constitute every individual self. And when come across humiliating caste experiences one wonders if one’s identity is a mark of the ever-lagging imagination of the “proud nation.”

Gopal Guru claims that when the nationalist discourse prioritises the idea of ‘duty’, the dalit discourse emphases the idea of ‘rights’. In the relationship that any civil society group makes with the subaltern groups, through an ascetic modality, it
inevitably produces an operational hierarchy between these two groups. In this relationship not only does the latter find themself less agential in their involvement with the activities but their particular issues are disabled from producing a common identity. Here the questions of rights and justice are suppressed on behalf of the idea of care. Many subaltern devotees who connect with Mata faith as recipients of aids do not continue to stay in faith for long. This shows not only that the social contexts available to the uppercaste civil society and the subaltern groups to constitute their selves are different but also that there is clearly differences between the way the two groups imagine self-fashioning. When, the former imagines it by constructing an institutional other, the latter construct their self through resistance against the institutional norms.

Talal Asad makes a distinction between democratic sensibility as an ethos and democracy as the political system of a state. He says the former “involves the desire for mutual care, distress at the infliction of pain and indignity, concern for the truth more than for immutable subjective rights, the ability to listen and not merely to tell, and the willingness to evaluate behaviour without being judgmental toward others; it tends towards greater inclusivity” (Asad, 2012;pp). As the political system of a state, he says, democracy is zealously guarding its sovereignty. In everyday life these two meanings of democracy do not act separately and the choice is not made between them. Instead, the choice is made between contexts that allow for a possibility by use of one or the other meaning of democracy.

The idea of care can be understood in terms of the Oedipal stage in Freud’s description of an individual’s psychosexual development. For instance, if it were a mother’s continuing selfless care what makes the male child survive the sovereign who challenges him, then the choice the male child makes here is not between the
mother and the sovereign, but between the contexts in which he would choose one or
the other. Because he needs at once, a share of the sovereign power (before the threat
is completely destroyed) and the care of the mother to rejuvenate himself after he
succumbs to the threat. Here the meaning of care is preparation to resist power and
attain individual sovereignty. Whereas the mother as an institutional other is available
as a care resource to the male child, in case of the female child it is the outright denial
of her institutional confinement that empowers her to face the threat against her
sovereignty. In order to do this she destabilizes the viability of truth in a given
institutional frame. But the threat of this denial or destabilization is usually contained
within an imaginary of paternal or conjugal love. It is within the possibility of this
imaginary that truth attains value for the girl child or married woman. Her insistence
on truth and romance also points to the contingency of this imaginary.

There are two ways of imagining the possibility of unity of people in a
community or an institution such as family. On the one hand the formation of a
community needs a framework for a group of people for organizing in perspective the
objects, practices, images and beliefs that marks a period historically. That is, it needs
to take into account the material, aesthetic and discursive resources that form its
habitus, within which its possibility of creative transformation rests. On the other
hand, it also takes into account the memory of its past, its tradition in conceptualizing
itself against that which negates its formation and thereby threatens its productive
transformation. It is the creative orchestration of the sensible such as the objects,
practices, images and beliefs that gives meaning to the formation from within. And
the memory of the tradition helps to delimit the conceptual territory of the community
across historical periods. The ascetic modality is not political, neither is it democratic.
However, if at all the ascetic modality of politics makes use of the idea of care, it may not be in this sense. The ascetic modality or ascetic self-fashioning is a way of conducting the self with reference to a proud nation. The underlying idea is an ethics of care that enables the elite nationalist civil society to reach out to the other, and in the process resolve their self-identity. However, in this mode the ethic of care as a tutored sensibility effectively produces a moral feeling of benevolence, and thereby, overlooks the assertions of rights and justice. It demands respect and gratitude from the recipient of benevolence. Besides, it also takes recourse to an all-encompassing hegemonic quasi-religious narrative of an enlightened spiritual self in whose care the subaltern seekers of self-knowledge subsist. The ascetic as a modality of politics uncritically constructs hegemonic political discourses on the basis of the everyday meanings of care. This reinforces and sustains the hierarchical power relations between the elite civil society and the subaltern groups. An ethic of care as the mother principle and ascetic modality as a form of the political together makes the institution of Mata faith.

The above two forms of care are different from that mentioned by Talal Asad as constituting democratic sensibility as an ethos. ‘A desire for mutual care’ emerges from a condition of equality that sustains in individuals the power of agency. When the systemic nature of inequality rests in the zealous guarding of traditional institutions and wealth, and execution of hegemonic knowledge, the idea of mutual care cannot emerge out of nowhere. It takes its force from the pre-modern relations of power vested in the caste identity. Hence, the activities of the Mata faith carrying this idea of care only try to reinforce the hierarchies that drive the social relations of power. It does not encourage dialogue between classes or relate to local caste communities that try to overcome poverty and emancipate themselves. Instead it
destabilises their political identity through the universalized interpellation of all as children of the great mother.

**Seva**

Apart from the need for a guru the urban middle class is interested in the Mata because the institution values *seva* as its duty. The idea of *seva* as we hear in Mata faith is mainly the conceptual contribution of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Gopal Guru writes how seva functions as a moral category in Gandhian discourse. He expounds this in the context of the problem of caste and the resistance to it conceptualized by Ambedkar and Gandhi. In his article “Archaeology of Untouchability” Guru argues for an archaeological method in the understanding of caste. He says that Ambedkar’s approach to annihilate caste begins with a “pruning of its branches”, i.e., various untouchability practices. He says Ambedkar does this through an archeological method. Contrary to Ambedkar whose solution to caste and untouchability lies in politics, Gandhi’s idea of a casteless society begins and ends with the moral.

Gandhi chooses the moral route, which does not centrally take on the essence of untouchability, i.e., caste. In the Gandhian moral framework of action against untouchability, the contestation, if any, does not encircle the essence of caste but its existence – untouchability. This shift of focus from essence to existence invokes naturally a moral response rather than political one. Seva (service) as the moral category in Gandhian discourse on untouchability makes sense in the context of this shift. Seva as a moral category, does not seek to attack the roots of the problem, instead it chooses to prune its rough edges. In Gandhi it is pruning rather than uprooting, while in Ambedkar, the
reverse is the case. Although Gandhi looks less interested in establishing the link between untouchability and its essence (caste), it has to be acknowledged that his moral category seva looks certainly radical when compared to Vedantic thinking, which rules out resolution of untouchability through material and corporeal touch. (Guru, 2009; 54)

As Guru says the essence of caste or subalternity is secured within a superficial act of concealing its existence through seva or any such moral act that presupposes class/caste patronage. Concerning the essence of caste, the process of self-making through moral acts such as seva, the upper castes, or to use Warrier’s terminology the urban middle-class, re-invokes a category that has been serving it for generations bound to acknowledge its self-authenticated power of divine/epistemological mediation.

In Mata faith “the spiritual quest is conceptualized as a progressive burning up of karmic burden (prarabda). The term prarabda appears commonly in everyday speech especially when cursing one’s responsibilities to others that produce an impasse in a solitary search for truth, pleasure or power. But here, in Mata faith text it means “burden accumulated from negative actions of the past”. The idea of prarabda is closely linked with the modality of relative identification formed between the upper-caste and the subaltern groups. At the same time it also comes in conflict with the reality of relative identification. Here I argue that the idea is insufficient to form an identification and hence it should be reconceptualised. Firstly, it is not the self-critical recognition of the negative deeds of the past that is formulated in the idea of prarabda. Rather it is the idea of prarabda itself that creates a certain way of understanding the impasse in a collective endeavor. In this sense, prarabda is what situates one in a certain historical tradition. One may or may not choose to remain in
this community depending upon whether its responsibility demands subjugation or empower the individual subject. What matters here is a relationship of trust and love, a commitment for mutual care within a condition of presumed equality of intelligence. In order to identify within a particular tradition or community, one looks out for the images and beliefs the community identifies with. To understand this point of formation of the ethos of community I will take recourse to Ranciere’s idea of the ‘distribution of sensible.’ According to Ranciere, the distribution of sensible is the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution (Ranciere, 2004; 12).

What the individual identifies and collects through his interactions with the community are the self-evident facts of sense perception distributed in spaces, time and forms of activity where the members share something in common. The idea of prarabda is the moment of recognizing the location where the individual becomes a subject of some sort. It is a necessary identification in terms of maintaining the stability and integrity of the subject. Hence, as a political act, it becomes necessary for the individual to mobilize all the elements of one’s subjectivity along with their other subjects. As the urban middle classes in an ascetic relation like to think prarabda is

not a burden of the past, but it is their only possibility in the present towards the integrity of their subjectivities. In Mata faith, seva is an act of mobilizing the colonial subjects as agents of the nation. The rituals and aesthetic practices in Mata faith also help to mobilise various elements into one single institution. However, this is done in a secure space, a kind of heterotopia, which the elite civil society hosts.

Here the relation between this group and the subalterns are not maintained as in an organic community. Instead it is another domain, that of popular culture, where the ideas of the civil society aim to transform the ideas and practices of the subaltern group and reconstitute the cultural and political relations between them towards the “containment of popular democracy” (Hall, 2005; 66). It involves the active insertion of dalit and working class sensibilities into a new kind of popular aesthetics. This is not done overtly as a project of cultural pedagogy. But it uses a strategy of hegemony where the spiritual ethos it transfers is represented as already existing, though unrecognised, in the “depth” of subaltern lives.

Maunam or Silence

The Mata Amritanandamayi Ashram faced many issues such as allegations of murder in the ashram, sexual allegations, public land occupation and public furor against tax fraud. The latest of these is the autobiography of one of Mata Amritanandamayi’s first devotees and constant companion for fifteen years, Gail Tredwell. In response to all of these allegations the ashram maintained silence. In her book on the Satya Sai Baba movement, Tulasi Sreenivas talks about the scandal and secrecy in such empires of faith. The Sai religious movement construed as an empire; Srinivas says “empires and scandals are linked dialectically as the expansion impulse of empire feeds the secrecy that leads to scandal” (Srinivas, 2010; 235). Quoting
Victor Turner, she claims that a “scandal is a typical ‘social drama’ in which a limited area of transparency in the otherwise opaque surface of uneventful social life emerges” (Srinivas, 235). Tulasi Srinivas considers the silence of the religious organisation as maintenance of secrecy and something that protects the organisation from the “brittle nodes where intellectual congress occurs for the node is where two or more morals meet” (Srinivas, 235). She is looking at the Sai Baba organisation from the perspective of its upper caste, middle-class devotees who as a way of defending their “cultural intimacy” “negotiate their loyalties at the nexus of conflicting supranational, national, and local sovereignties and identities” as Sai subjects (Srinivas, 235).

However, my interest still lies in understanding the Mata faith formation as a popular cultural formation. Popular culture is understood here as a domain of struggle between classes. As Stuart Hall puts it,

Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture –already fully formed –might be simply ‘expressed’. But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted (Hall, 2005; 71).

Taking cue of this approach to understand the faith phenomenon I like to address it as a popular faith formation. This enables me to look into the phenomenon not just as an institution but also a field constituted internally by certain beliefs and sensibilities, and delimited by few others. This makes the formation a domain of constant flux and locates at its centre the engagement between on the one hand, the
Mata and the subjects of faith and on the other, the ideological discourse of Mata faith and the subaltern politics.

As Srinivas mentioned in the case of Sai Baba movement, at the institutional level the Mata too remained silent about many allegations against the Ashram. Whereas Srinivas approaches it as a question of ‘secrecy’ I look at the issue as one of ‘silence’. There was no serious attention on the latest allegations made by Gail Tredwell in the mainstream media, apart from reporting the commotion it created in the public sphere. However, the 24X7 news channel run by the People TV offered some detailed reports and debates. One of these debates by a self-appointed defender of “Hindu culture” Rahul Eswar argued, on behalf of Mata Amritanandamayi Math that Ashram is silent about the issue because it is the nature of a muni (Saint) to maintain maunam (silence). In my interview with one of his opponents in the debates Sudheesh Sudhakaran, who is also a writer in Narada news, he said that this response could mask any allegation against the Ashram. According to him the Ashram’s idea is that the political left and religious fundamentalists who want to devastate Hinduism make these allegations and ignoring them by silence is their way to deal with it.

According to Eswar, silence is a quality of virtue and the munis are virtuous because they do not make a din, they rather patiently wait for the “groundless din” to subside. Whatever, the “real” meaning or ideology of the muni, I would like to find the possibility for political intervention into Mata faith formation that this silence unchecked by the ruling elite still leaves out. This possibility is already being utilized as several criticisms from the public sphere show. However, by understanding the ways in which the faith formation functions I hope to make clear the structure in

53 See the Youtube video “News Night about Amritanandamayi”, a discussion presented by India Vision television after the publication of Gail Tredwell’s book Holy Hell. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnhiiD9-57M.
which it produces this possibility. This will also answer why the modern secular criticisms in public sphere could not apparently unsettle the constitution of Mata faith, significantly.

In the earlier chapters I have shown how the Mata faith phenomenon had different phases of its existence, as a cultural phenomenon where the Mata is recognized as a divine force, as an institution and later as an icon. If we let us for an instance assume the Mata faith as an aesthetic discursive formation rather than an organisation or an institution already having an established ideology, then we arrive at a cultural phenomenon that has the potential to be shaped by the debates and discussions from the public sphere. In the next section I will discuss some of these debates, issues and events in the public sphere formed around the Mata Amritanandamayi faith.

**Mata faith: Issues, Debates and Discussions in Public Sphere**

There have been criticisms, discussions and debates in public sphere around many events and issues in the Mata faith practice. I will discuss here three books that gather some of the significant forms of criticisms on the Mata and the faith formation. They are “*Mata Amritanandamayi Divyakathakalum Yatharthayavum*” (Mata Amritanandamayi: Divine stories and Reality) by Sreeni Pattathanam, “*Amritanandamayiyum Malayalikalude apakarshakathayum*” (Amritanandamayi and Sense of Inferiority of Malayalees) by J.Reghu and *Amrithanandamayi: The Secret Agent of Sanghparivar*, which is a collection of criticisms against Mata Amritanandamayi edited by K.E.N. These books are published by Mythri publishers, Thiruvananthapuram, an initiative by a rationalist group in Kerala.
The first book concerns itself mainly with the discourses of miracles and divinity in Mata faith and attempts to prove “rationally” the reality of Mata Amritanandamayi’s claims of divinity and miracles. I will discuss some of the issues Pattathanam foregrounds in the book and claims within the faith discourse that he challenges. First, he challenges the claim of brahminical intellectual lineage that faith discourse claims for Mata’s family. He also analyses her arguments against science and rationality to argue that the Mata has no knowledge in either. The major portion of the book is dedicated to debunking the claims of miracles in hagiographical accounts through ‘rational logic’. Through interviews with neighbors and people in the Ashram’s locality Pattathanam tries to prove that Mata Amritanandamayi’s predictions have gone wrong in various instances. He offers explanations from doctors to prove that the healing stories in the hagiography are false. Psychiatrists and doctors cited to demystify the claims of divine visions made by the Mata, argue that these may be the effect of LSD or Schizophrenia. Besides these attempts to unmask the “reality” behind Mata Amritanandamayi, Pattathanam also alleges that an embrace is an act done for sexual pleasure. According to him young men visited the Mata in earlier days only to experience the sexual pleasure in an embrace.

Apart from these he discusses a series of unnatural deaths happened in the Ashram and its premises. Though rationalists and public interest groups gave complaints none of them were proved against Ashram in the investigation done by police authorities. These groups deem the investigations have been compromised and they still continue to pressurize the authorities to reinvestigate the cases. In his book Pattathanam produces newspaper reports, copies of complaints given to legal authorities and notices issued by rationalist groups in protest. He also points out that
whenever there arises a criticism against the Mata or her Ashram, the Ashram authorities respond using violent means.

In the second book edited by a popular Leftist intellectual in Kerala, K.E.N, there is a collection of critical essays by popular critics in Kerala such as U. Kalanathan, Mukundan C. Menon, J. Rajashekharan Nair, and Abraham. T. Kovoor. In his foreword K.E.N. argues that the spirituality of Mata Amritanandamayi is a commercialized spirituality where bhakti is marketed as business and commodity. U. Kalanathan discusses the Mata Amritanandamayi organisation as a spiritual industry functioning with the support of foreign money. He writes that there is unaccountable flow of foreign money through religious NGOs such as the Mata Amritanandmayi Mission, World Vision and Gospel of Asia\(^5^4\). Mukundan C. Menon talks about the attacks in the Ashram. The first incident is an attack by a man named Pavithran, an RSS activist and inmate of the ashram. The second, police arrest of a Sri Lankan lady devotee and inmate Richuve Sebastian “for creating problems with the Ashram.” He also talks about the death of a French lady Caroline Abitbole in the ashram.

According to the Ashram all three of them were mentally deranged. Menon also points out that following the death there had been public discussions on the presence of a large number of mentally deranged devotees in the Ashram\(^5^5\). J.Rajashekharan Nair’s article criticises the Mata Amritanandamayi Ashram for functioning like a business enterprise headed by business managers. He claims that Amritanandamayi today chairs a business empire worth over Rs.2000 crore. Investments are made in hospitals, education and in the IT sectors, which fetch maximum revenue in Kerala. He points out that in 1998-99 Amritanandamayi Mission was the second largest recipient of foreign fund in India with the amount crossing $11.5 million and in

another two years the Ashram received over Rs.150 crores. He alleges that the Sangh Parivar has great influence in the affairs of the Ashram.

Another interesting essay included in this little book is a list of “miracles” recommended to the so-called godmen to perform as a challenge to prove their godliness. This list is made by a person named Abraham T. Kovoor56 in 1963 who declares an award of 1 Lakh Sri Lankan rupees to those who can perform them. He challenges the “godmen” to read the serial number of a sealed up currency note, to produce an exact replica of currency note, to materialise from nothing an object he asks, or to levitate in the air by yogic power among other things57 to prove their godliness.

A third book by J. Reghu is theoretically informed, yet gives a simple and straightforward judgment of the phenomenon. Reghu problematizes a series of matters in Mata Amritanandamayi phenomenon. At the outset of his essay Reghu remarks that the Mata Amritanandamayi faith is a postmodern religion. He writes that even though the age of enlightenment and modernity was also an age of withdrawal of mystics, postmodernity witnesses the high noon of hugging saints, sidhas, yogatantropic acharyas and meditation gurus (Reghu, 2014; 7). Secondly, he points out the economic domain within which such phenomena are located. According to him the “spiritual capital” of Mata Amritanandamayi, Sai Baba, Ravi Shankar and Baba Ramdev are not the renunciation of traditional saints, but they establish themselves through the global dispersion of an “economic-business network” (Reghu, 9). Thirdly, he problematizes the embodied engagements between the Mata and her devotees by arguing that it shows a childish desire for refuge in the maternal body. He argues that existential “dread” cannot be resolved through material means because it demands

57 For a complete list of the challenges, see Appendix E.
protection from the society. According to Reghu, it is in the denial of the social produced through anguish that religiosity establishes itself. Fourthly, he argues that charity, the one factor that distinguishes the spiritual entrepreneurship of the Mata from other enterprises, is the reason for its success. He claims that by projecting charity as its goal the Mata Amritanandamayi Ashram hides economic and other forms of exploitations in its various institutions.

I selected these three books because they are small inexpensive books, of fifty to sixty pages, written in simple language for a popular critical readership. Most of them are essays written in the context of a particular event or issue. According to the publisher, they are intended to be read by anyone including the common people, just as they read newspaper. Academics and non-academics, specialists and non-specialist in a field, also write them with relevance to contemporary issues and empirical details. When mainstream media refrain from representing the discussions and debates in the public sphere or delving into locating the systemic power of the Mata faith phenomenon, such books seek to offer more empirical evidences and continuing analysis of the issues within the phenomenon. The relevance of these books to the study of the Mata faith formation lies in their ability to construct multiple counter-discourses and popularise them for a critical appreciation of the phenomenon. These along with other critical responses from the public and the popular intellectuals who I mention below, also produce a critical space of discourses that delimit the Mata faith formation. This critical space fractures the discourses of an all-embracing harmonious space of love and compassion that the Mata faith community envisages for the world.

Apart from these Swami Sandeep Chaithanya, Paul Zachariah, Sukumar Azhikode, M. Mukunthan and others have criticised the Mata Amritanandamayi phenomenon for yielding easily to the RSS sway and hiding the sources of their huge
income. Following the allegations in the memoir written by Gail Tredwell, poet O. N.V Kurup, journalists B. R. P Bhaskar, Sasikumar and Zacharia, writer Sarah Joseph and Swami Sandeep Chaitanya, among others spoke against the silence of both the Ashram and the state authorities. Although till 1998 Zachariah favoured Amritanandamayi for not following the Hindu fascist ideology, he says later that the Mata gradually began speaking the language of Viswa Hindu Parishad. In two articles published in 2006 and 2007 in Tehelka, Zacharia makes several arguments against the enterprise of Mata Amritanandamayi. In the article “Two Saints in India’s Spiritual Bazar” Zakariah remarks that Sri Sri Ravishankar who had a good amount of influence among the guru seekers in Kerala, faired little in this land compared to Mata Amritanandamayi. He says that the latter’s success depends on the magical power of hug and well-planned investment in institutions.

Ravishankar lost out also because he had neither big real estate, nor hospitals, medical and engineering colleges. Amritanandamayi’s handlers had equipped her with high-power institution, through which big favours could be distributed to people who mattered. Say, the payment for a medical seat is 40 lakh. You charge only ten from a Marxist leader’s offspring. Or perhaps nothing from an editor’s progeny. (Zacharia, 2006)

Here Zacharia mentions the power Mata Amritanandamayi’s “handlers” acquired through investments in institutions and civil society networks. He criticises the politicians for perceiving the community as a vote-bank—“A.K Antony to A. K. Nobody—every opportunist whom you can name—began to kow-tow” (Zacharia, 2006). He also says that both the Mata and Ravishankar are ‘Sangh Parivar pets’.

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In another article that came in 2007 Zacharia gives a more detailed observation as to why people accepted Mata Amritanandamayi. He says that from 50s to 70s Kerala was more progressive, secular and rationalist than it is today, and people looked forward to a democratic revolution led by the Left.

Sai Baba was the only godman who made some inroads once in a while. But the 90s saw Kerala’s most startling somersault into a black hole of crude bhakti, superstition and blind ritual, cutting across all religions. Religion suddenly emerged as a money-machine. Amritanandamayi was the right person at the right time. Owners of unknown backyard deities were hiring MBAS in marketing, and shooting up into the multimillion category. One could say that three things forced Kerala into being the regressive religious madhouse it is today. One, the collapse of civil society and of the economic and social dream of the common man under the UDF and LDF coalitions. Two, active promotion of religiosity and caste by politicians for their own ends. Three, ruthless day-to-day promotion of superstition and religiosity by the media for its own ends. (Zacharia, 2007)

Zacharia’s observations of the popular faith phenomena and identification of those who follow the Mata faith as “foolish Malayalis” may come from the point of view of a detached social critic and public intellectual. And he may be right to point out that the secular, rationalist and so-called progressive Kerala envisioned by the Left of 50s to 70s has created a public sphere where such criticisms of the religious to emerge. This public sphere allowed only a disembodied rational voice to emerge as political. To the disembodied rational thinker the emergence of the “religious” or to be more specific, the affective and the sensorial marks the end of rationality. While

59 In the same article quoted above Zacharia says, “ Foolish malayalis just marvel at and admire her wealth as they do that of corrupt politicians” (Zacharia, 2007).
Zacharia’s arguments against the power and influence the institution wields against a democratic practice is right, he cannot dismiss the large number of people who follow the faith as foolish either. However, as I have argued in the earlier chapters, in order to understand the demands made by people through their embodied being, one needs to understand the politics of aesthetics. What Zacharia and other rationalist articulations fail to understand is the political within the embodied being of people. And it is this inability of the ‘rationalists’ and the Left to take into account the affective interdependent being of people that allows a space for the right wing articulations to “hijack” religious figures such as Mata Amritanandamayi.

Now let me come back to the two questions I posed at the outset of the chapter. I have already answered the first one as to why the secular, rational criticisms could not deter people from engaging with the aesthetic world of the Mata. The second question is about the Mata herself, or more specifically the image of autonomous maternal feminine. “How can an institution such as the Mata Amritanandamayi Ashram obstruct the ideals of democracy by projecting the image of a sovereign and still be compromised for so long?” Let us try to understand what the critic means by this question. The question presumes that individual sovereignty is a precondition for democratic practice. And the practice of appointing a ‘sovereign’ in order to control and dictate a moral and social order for a large community of people is undemocratic in this sense. However, when looking at the peculiar case of popular sovereignty in India we see that it is constituted by multiple “fragmented sovereignties” (Hansen, 2005). According to Blom Hansen, “the configurations of authority and sovereignty in colonial India make it evident why the incipient Indian nationalism saw the nation as...

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60 According to Zacharia, the communalist fascist groups take over the Ashrams and venues of Mata Amritanandamayi in order to use them to mark their political agenda (see the interview “Matam, Marxism, Media” in Sambhashanangal by Zacharia, 2011). Elsewhere he has also used the word “hijack” to denote the Sangh Parivar’s mode of using the Mata Amritanandamayi faith (Krishnakumar, 2002).
lodged in what Chatterjee has called “the inside”, family, language and community” (Hansen, 2005; 178). Here the image of maternal love as a new imaginary can be represented only through a body that is inarguably “egoless” and hence indiscreetly embraces all kinds of patronage. On the one hand the Mata ‘was’ a lower caste Araya woman living a life of hardship in a poor family. On the other hand, she is now one of the most influential women in Kerala (if not the most influential) who heads a global enterprise run by the powerful members of Kerala’s Hindu upper caste civil society. As we have seen in the biographical accounts of the Mata, the young girl Sudhamani strived to attain autonomy in a society, which she found oppressive, through transgressive acts. These involved disobeying her father, brother and others who perceived her acts as sign of madness. To this extent, I argue, she was creatively imagining a world outside the habitual world of tradition. Later, following the routinisation of her charisma, the institution acquires power and authority.