“Iconicity consists in retrieving, activating and articulating experience, connecting discursive meaning with the perceptual and palpable. Such material conversion is a kind of reduction or condensation. In such an aesthetic and sensuous compression of meaning, a certain symbolic subtlety is lost, but something of great pragmatic import is gained.”

(Bartmanski & Alexander, 2012; 2)

Without mass mediation of any form there cannot be iconicity of the sort we sense today in certain images of Steve Jobs, Che Guevera or Gandhi. We just need to take a look at the mass mediated images of these people to understand what they carry in the form of “global icons” (fig 5.1). The icons carry their aura. It is something of the person that we find subverted in a cartoonist’s minimalist, distorted depiction of them. From mythologies and coins to posters and Facebook this mass mediation of the image can be anything that conveys this aura in a ‘pure’ state. In his essay “The Sacred Circulation of National Images” Partha Chatterjee looks at the iconic quality that images of historical monuments acquire in school textbooks of 1950s and 60s. He notes how half a century later, this trend disappeared when colour photos took the place of iconic engravings. He derives from this that the proliferation of colour photos
in magazines, cinema and television may have made the iconic pictures seem archaic. However, Chatterjee does not see this change of trend as the culmination of the production of sacred images. He assumes that the sacred images would be produced and circulated by other means (Chatterjee, 2011).

Iconic images may have disappeared from school textbooks as representational idioms. However, they are used in a wide variety of means still by school children to designers to depict not what is already sacralised out there, but a complex mental concept formed of multiple discourses. In the process they do not “sacralise” the image but “reduce” and “condense” experience in order to carry them with ease and connect them with other discourses. Although the sacrality attributed to an aesthetic modeling of cultural discourses had been the feature of religious and cinematic “image-making”, in the most recent of such practices of image-making modern sensibilities such as egalitarianism and altruism produce “earthly” stars or icons. Icons those are easy to ‘handle’ with mind and representation. Several recent studies in the field of icon studies have tried to define icon in a cultural context. One
definition is that “icons are aesthetic/material representations, and also signifiers of the ideationally and affectively intuited signified” (Bartmanski & Alexander, 2010). Another definition of a cultural icon is that it is “a stereotype undergoing icon-work in a cultural context” (Sorensen, 2015; 7).

By taking the icon as one kind of dynamic popular visual culture formation, I argue that the image of the “Divine Mother” we perceive in Mata Amritanandamayi is a ‘stereotype undergoing icon-work in a cultural context.’ In order to do this I explore the cultural context of the Mata acquiring meanings from a variety of affective cultural discourses. I have already shown in the third chapter how through sensorial practices a particular feeling pertaining to the maternal or to put it succinctly, certain ‘mother affect’ is invoked through sensorial engagement in order to be resignified in a new context. This resignification is the process of shaping the image of an ideal woman (worthy of worship) by carrying affective awareness of a mode of being feminine through various discourses that characterize a period at different levels of its social formation. The Mata, who is the representational centre of the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission, appears in the popular culture as the divine mother, the spiritual master and the hugging saint. In the second chapter I have traced, in the hagiographical accounts of Mata Amritanandamayi, the development of the image of the Mata from an idea of the divine mother to a charismatic spiritual leader and finally, into a global humanitarian icon. This chapter will examine in detail the various signifiers that constitute the Mata’s iconicity and the contestations brought to it through counter-discourses and cultural struggles.

People have different reasons to follow the Mata. To some she is a spiritual master, and to some others she is a philanthropist. Many devotees of the Mata believe that she has extraordinary powers especially to bless them with material wellbeing.
Several devotee accounts in magazines and featured articles in newspapers testify the devotees’ miraculous experience of divine mother. There are also accounts of emotional wellbeing experienced in Amma’s presence. I also came across a believer of ‘Vallikkavilamma’ (another name of the Mata) who has not visited the Mata, do not form part of the devotional community and do not even realise that Vallikavilamma is Mata Amritanandamayi, yet chants her name in prayer mistaking her for a traditional female deity. Another category, considers her as one of the many gurus who can give specific advice pertaining to their cultural role. The urban middle-class followers of the Mata are interested in the self-transformation or self-making as a conscious practice to be done in the Mata’s company. For some others the Mata gives space to ‘do something good for the poor’ in the society. In her interviews the Mata says she offers love, what the ‘children’ want from her.

Apart from these, the criticisms in the public sphere also vary in the events they want to problematize. Some critics take issue with the financial dealings of the organisation, some with the power it shares with the governing class, some with the alleged sexual politics of the Ashram; some find its religious character problematic and yet others feel that a lower caste woman does not qualify to become a “spiritual guru.” What do these multiple images of the Mata mean? Does it only indicate the multiple sides of the same entity called the Mata or point to the pluralistic social condition? Or is it that the critics emerge from different political positions? I suggest that all these differences in positions come from the difficulty in locating the phenomenon within any existing social or cultural institution. For the same reason, as an institution in the making Mata faith is at the centre of anxieties within and around the phenomenon as to what it is and what it is meant to be. However, one significant question regarding the phenomenon is if it is a dynamic formation and hence,
malleable to the changing political forces or a closed community claiming its own
differential identity.

As we have seen in chapter two, Mata Amritanandamayi begins to represent
the “Divine Mother” during the charismatic stage of the faith. Prior to this she has
been only a girl struggling to conform to the traditional domestic roles. Her inability
to identify with these roles however, led her into crisis, and later into an imaginary
that she creates to discover her subjective agency. This agency that Mata
Amritanandamayi calls the “Divine Mother” is apparently oriented towards selfless
care for the other and this orientation exceeds the limits of family, community or
nationality. I find it very difficult to follow the path of this agency that gets muddled
as the phenomenon acquires fixed qualities of an institution and extends its activities.
And this leads me to assume that the transgressive imaginary that the Mata envisaged
lost itself as the nationalist discourse of the ascetic and the globalist discourse of
altruism appropriated it. At the moment of its emergence this imaginary had the
potential of reconfiguring itself by engaging with the criticisms from the public
sphere. This would have given it a stronger base in the popular culture of Kerala since
its early formation. Instead, the movement refuses to resolve the immediate political
questions it encounters at its subaltern base, and re-establishes its base among the
transnational civil society networks.

In this chapter, first, I will examine the role of icons in the society and how it
has been formed and reformed in the changing economic and discursive contexts
using the example of the ritualized performative art, Theyyattam. Secondly, looking at
the social and political contexts in which Sudhamani’s subjectivity is formed I will
show how she comes out as an icon of recuperated feminine other. Thirdly, I will
examine an iconography used in Mata worship in order to show the way in which the Mata is located in a certain Hindu Pantheon.

Icons are not a novel phenomenon that defines the modern world. They have been there in the pre-modern times too each doing their specific function in the cultural domain. If icons in the pre-modern times were formed and transformed through folk narratives and ritual performances, today they are produced in many different forms of media narratives such as the films, television news stories, books and most effectively in photographs. Icons functioned as monuments of affective memories, carried across ages and locations, deterritorialised through images, songs and stories and reterritorialised as rituals and icons. In the journey between, they gather values and styles, and consolidate the material, discursive, affective and the aesthetic forms of experiences and affinities.

![Theyyam](image_url)

Fig. 5.5 Theyyam.
The Heroes of Theyyattam and the Space of Moral Community

There is usually a particular social context in which an image acquires the status of an icon. Let us look into a folk performative practice in Kerala known as Theyyam and see the social-generic context where a prototype of an icon is shaped. Theyyam is a performative ritual practice in north Malabar region of Kerala traditionally performed by male members of certain caste groups such as Malayan, Vannan and Velan. I have taken Theyyam to understand not the present Mata phenomenon, but the earliest performative acts of the Mata in front of the audience, as god Krishna and Devi. The similarities I find among the two practices are that both use body as a medium for depicting a larger conceptual or affective force that cannot be articulated with that effect. Similarly, they both have after the performance, as another part of the practice, a direct engagement with the audience where they meet the performer and seek advice on matters of everyday life. In Theyyam practice it is called Uriyattu Kalpana. In the Theyyam performance I attended the Theyyam asked my hand to hold and after holding it for a few seconds with closed eyes, it looked at me and asked a few questions regarding my whereabouts and issues I face, made a witty remark on my answers, and gave some advice. He asked in a coarse tone as follows “Mmm…Evidunna? …Theyyathinu thekkennum vadakkennum onnumilla…Entha Padikkuva?.. Atho Joliyundo? Theyyathodenthenthenkilum vishamam bodhippikkanundo?” It was very ritualistic and the performer seemed very detached and authoritative. Before becoming the Mata, after appearing in Devi bhava or Krishna bhava Sudhamani also used to meet the devotees individually. However, the similarities between the two practices end there.

According to Rajesh Komath who has done an extensive research on Theyyam, the ritual practice of Theyyam means many things to different people. He is
a Theyyam performer himself and narrates the shifting nature of Theyyam influenced by the changes in socio-economic contexts of rural Kerala. In the earliest traditional context of its emergence, however, Theyyam marked a space of contestation between the hierarchies of caste. Komath identifies cherujanmam, the sacred map of the dancing caste, as a contested space in the modern context where the ritual status of Theyyam is put in question by socio-religious reform movements and the communist movement of the late nineteenth century (Komath, 2013; 279)\textsuperscript{61}. What is interesting about Theyyam in this context is the reason of its emergence as a social genre. Dilip Menon writes about this socio-cultural context where separate spaces or spheres of existence were marked for different castes through an emphasis on ‘distance’ that each should keep from the upper castes. He observes that Theyyam “enshrined” the trangressive acts of members of lower castes who broke these limitations \textsuperscript{62}(Menon, 1993; 190). For instance if a lower caste man fell in love with the daughter of his landlord, or conducted himself in an arrogant way he is crossing the space that is allowed to his caste according to the hierarchy and inviting punishment from the Nairs. Menon writes that the Theyyattam as a performative practice “sought to create a moral community through the establishment of a sense of limits” to the upper castes who exercised limitless sovereignty over the lower castes. The Theyyams deified victims of such caste violence and “created a collective imagination of what was just and unjust”. According to Menon, “the moral community was the space within which conflicting discourses were arbitrated”\textsuperscript{(Menon, 1993; 190)}.

Here, the moral community maintains an autonomy that occupies the position between the upper castes and lower castes. It traverses the space of senses and


affinities between the lower caste communities and makes a moral assertion the basis of its judgment of an act of caste violence. In this process the dancer embodies the spirit of the victim of caste violence that speak through him and thereby makes the victim a hero or an icon of a moral message against caste violence. The performer is not significant here, as he is only a mediator. What is significant is the icon of justice. An example of such an icon is Kathivanoor Viran. Dilip Menon perceives *Theyyattam* as one of the strategies by which a living space is created by the dominated through which they attempt to stave off the exercise of arbitrary authority by those in power. But he also mentions the conflict innate to such a space in the popular culture, “if *theyyattam* is a ‘discourse as act’, in that ideas are rendered tangible in performance, attempts are simultaneously being made to recast the discourse in terms favorable to hierarchy” (Menon, 1993; 210).

Here we come back to the question of icon from the context of a ritualised performative act called *Theyyam*, which is “discourse as act” where “ideas are rendered tangible in performance”. *Theyyam* is a deity in that it is embodying a counter-discourse, concerning retribution and justice, slicing through an already existing discursive field of caste sovereignty. Spirits of Kathivannur Veeran and Palantayi Kannan are those who carry this discourse as heroes or as I have mentioned earlier, the prototypes of the icon. I have called them prototypes in order to distinguish them from the contemporary icons the nature and density of which have increased with the new media capable of disseminating them any far across the world to absorb meaning from any number of discourses and still be recognised for each. My intention of describing the function of icon in *Theyyam* is to understand in comparison with an existing traditional performative genre, the function of mother image embodied by Mata Amritanandamayi. In both cases what is carried across
through the icon is an “affectively intuited signified”. However, when in the Theyyam it is the sense of retribution against injustice perpetrated by the upper castes produce the affinities between members of the lower castes, and in the Mata faith it is the strong affects invoked by the image of one’s mother that produces a feeling of commonness among people. Throughout its history what Theyyam signifies remains unchanged. However, in Mata faith with the influence of an upper caste, urban middle class community, media and travel, the mother image Mata Amritanandamayi embodies acquires layers of meaning. In the earliest performances of Mata Amritanandamayi in Krishna bhava and Devi bhava the discourse was plainly religious and devotional. Later, after she claims to have identified with the divine mother, Mata Amritanandamayi is embodying a stereotypical idea of motherhood throughout her life. The Mata’s iconicity consists in the icon-work this stereotype of motherhood undergoes as she passes through different discursive regimes.

A similar fate is manifest in the iconicity of Ramakrishna in West Bengal too. In his article “‘Kaliyuga’, ‘Chakri’ and ‘Bhakti’: Ramakrishna and His Times” Sumit Sarkar examines the interaction between Ramakrishna Paramahansa, a rustic brahman with little knowledge of English, had no formal schooling and detested rationalistic argument and book knowledge, and his Calcutta bhadralok disciples as described in the book Kathamrita. Sarkar finds this engagement as “a paradox of 19th century Bengal” shaped by colonial encounter. Ramakrishna has become such an icon in Bengal that “an average middle or lower middle class Hindu household in Bengal can be expected to have a portrait of Ramakrishna somewhere” (Sarkar, 1992; 1543). The present knowledge about Ramakrishna is available only through the writings and representations by his bhadralok disciples. Even in the case of the Mata, who is present in our contemporary world and who seems accessible to us, any knowledge
about her reaches us through the middle-class representations of her and the experience and expressions of her devotees’ bhakti. Like Ramakrishna, the Mata also reaches us through the gaze of upper-caste middle-class. According to Sarkar, Ramakrishna attracted bhadralok through his ‘Otherness’ that is constructed partially by the same bhadralok and the appropriation taken up enthusiastically by an urban group troubled with a sense of alienation from roots (Sarkar, 1544).

When the iconicity of both Ramakrishna and Mata Amritanandamayi stems from similar context of ‘Othering’, the only difference here is that produced by their contrasting subjectivities. Whereas Ramakrishna was a brahmin man from a traditional village, Mata Amritanandamayi is a lower caste woman from a fisherfolk’s family in a coastal village. A Brahmin man in a traditional village is his own agent of power. His practice of asceticism is a self-conscious agential attempt at denial or renunciation. It is from his conscious effort to recuperate his autonomy that Ramakrishna represses his ego. However, as Mata Amritanandamayi’s biographies show, even as a child she was constantly denied any expression of ego by others who claim the authority to shape her. She desired to be loved, loved to be with people who appreciate her and finds pleasure in managing a community around her. Contrary to this, Ramakrishna despised crowds gathering outside his house to visit him (Sarkar, 1544). He preferred seclusion although he too attempted to win over bhadralok devotees. Ramakrishna practiced autonomy of self through controlling his body and sexuality whereas Mata Amritanandamayi practiced autonomy by reclaiming the sensoriality through embodied engagements with the other. As these differences show Ramakrishna and Amritanandamayi are contrasting subjectivities even as they seem similar in the way the middle-class groups represents them.
**Icon-work in popular culture**

Different groups carry out the icon-work as a struggle for a space in the popular culture. In order to do the icon-work an affective or aesthetic idea is brought in touch with various discourses prevalent in the society through a signifying body, that conceptualises itself with reference to the affective external relations. This particular formation of the icon gives it two levels of existence – one at the affective, aesthetic level which could be called its surface and another much more deeper level of constitution conditioned by various discourses within the society (Alexander, 2008). In the previous chapters I have discussed the ways in which the Mata faith is constituted as an aesthetic and discursive formation. In this chapter I will look at the cultural context in which the images and signifiers are located and contested.

Thereby, I want to suggest that as an icon the Mata is located in the domain of struggle between various imaginaries. Till now, in the present chapter, I introduced the significance of studying iconicity to understand the nodes of a new mythology in making. I have also shown how in a folk performative genre an affectively intuited idea of retribution is embodied by a performer through the image of a victim of caste violence. Now I will look at the context in which Sudhamani embodied an affectively intuited image of ‘maternal feminine’.

**Autonomy, Women and Motherhood in Kerala**

In folk mythologies and mystical context the concepts of “mother god”, “great mother” or “divine mother” is often an idea derived from the reproductive and nurturing roles of nature. This image of nature as a primal space that is forever there to come back to is transferred upon the woman as an enduring signified. In pre-modern societies this image stood to represent the power of the feminine. In his book
Amma daivavum samskaravum, P. Soman claims that matriliney is the basis of many lower caste cultures in Kerala. He argues that the mother gods in Kerala are remnants of the amman worship that existed here before the conquest of Buddhism, Jainism, tantric religions and Vishnava and Shiva traditions. In the agrarian folk traditions too the worship of kavilamma was deemed important. Such traditions have offered many symbolic meanings that remain even today in the repressed unconscious of the society.

But this significance given to the feminine did not exhaust the actual material conditions of women in Kerala. In her book Kulastreeyum Chandappennnum Undayathengine? J. Devika writes that the cultural importance given to the ideas of motherhood and matriliney in traditional Kerala did not directly translate into freedom or even better living conditions for women. She argues that every caste had rules determined to keep their women in control. Women were supposed to submit themselves to their husband’s power after marriage (Devika, 2010). According to J. Devika unlike the idea prevalent today, that the upper caste women had more freedom than lower caste women, the Brahmin and Shudra women were subjected to strict rules and heavy domestic work.

Partha Chatterjee talks about the women’s question in India in the context of a nationalist discourse of materialist/ spiritualist distinction that condensed into a powerful ideology of the inner and the outer. In this conceptualisation of the society the inner realm of mind needed to be protected from the outer realm of politics and otherness that condition people.

According to Jenny Rowena, when discourses of modernity are placed within this distinction between the inner and the outer, as do the feminist readings and Partha

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63 Soman, P. Ammadaivavum Samskaravum, Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Bhasha Institute, 2011.
Chatterjee, it enables to talk about the problems of the upper caste women only. She says that the Savarna feminist discourses in Kerala emerge through the analysis of discourses around the social reform movements in the end of 19th century and the consequent changes in legislation. She argues that the agency of this feminist articulation is that of a woman who is uplifted to a middle-class status from matrilineal system through patriliny. In this articulation, Rowena claims, the historical process of gendering is argued as producing a homogenous category of women devoid of their caste specificities (Rowena, 2011).

By arguing against such constructions Rowena poses the following questions. “Why did the discourse of ‘family woman’ emerge through the modernist discourses in Kerala? How did these new discourses look at those women who were outside this historical process of gendering? Did this imagination of ‘family woman’ that ignored a majority of women in Kerala emerge only in favour of patriarchy?” (Rowena, 2011; 22). She also asks if those feminists who read the women only within this imagination is not trying to ignore a large number of women from their readings by connecting the image of ‘family woman’ with the status of modern woman (Rowena, 22).

My interest in these discussions lies in understanding the gendered context of emergence of Mata Amritanandamayi in Kerala. Why is it that Sudhamani did not share a social reality into which women in her community, including her mother were apparently fully integrated? Reading against this historical context Sudhamani’s transgressive acts seem to have had a function of revolt that the other women in her family65 and community, especially the old women, admired. It seems to me that through her ecstatic acts Sudhamani was not only trying to construct an autonomous self while valuing the traditional authority but also representing a radical change in

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65 As her biography says Sudhamani had an intimate relationship with her grandmother, even though the relationship with her mother was conflictual, at first.
some of the habitual practices within the community. I feel the kind of autonomy
Sudhamani was trying to achieve in this context was not outside the traditional
authority of family but within it. Her intense devotionalism (meditation, trance, etc.),
ecstatic acts (singing bhajans and dancing in the beach) and interaction with the
society (listening to people’s stories in the neighbourhood, sharing food and money
with them, consoling children and elders etc.), as depicted in her biographies, show
her attempt to mediate both the inner ‘spiritual’ world and the outer world of
materiality. I also feel that the significance of ‘bhavam’ lies in this act of mediation.

From the beginning the company of guru seekers who discovered in
Sudhamani their guru or Amma were interested in practices of ethical–self formation
such as fasting, yoga and seva. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter it is this
discovery itself that articulates Sudhamani’s acts as “spiritual”. However, because of
the nature of spirituality they brought with them had ingrained in it an aversion of the
poor and lower caste ways of life, the way in which they imagined the new self had
as its other the habits of the community where they discovered Sudhamani. In this
way the sovereign gaze under which Sudhamani’s autonomy and self-formation
began to be actualised were not her own but of the larger Hindu spiritual discourse,
the seekers brought with themselves. I assume it is for the same reason that the
hagiographies of Sudhamani construct her as an extraordinary figure, the “Amma”
who not only stands out from the rest of the community, but also possess a heart of
all-embracing love as opposed to her parents. This also explains why still many
discourses are striving to ‘hijack’ Mata Amritanandamayi or impose their sovereignty
over the integration the Mata makes possible through her image of the ‘maternal

66 I have in mind here the various occasions Gail Tredwell mentions in her memoir with a sense of
disdain, such as the lice picking among women in the community, dirty bra the Mata wears and the
jokes they make of the Mata’s father. Also, in the biographical accounts given by Judith Cornel and
others, the Mata’s family and the community are depicted as the ‘other’ who has to be transformed.
feminine’. Or why, as Paul Zacharia puts it “A. K. Antony to A.K. Anybody—every opportunist whom you can name—began to kow-tow” (Zacharia, 2006).

**Celebrities, Stars, Poets, Singers and the Mata**

Another way in which the Mata’s image is filled with meaning is through the representations of her relations with celebrities such as singers, writers, film actors and other such popular figures. They appear in photographs along with the Mata, participate in programmes organised by the Ashram on special days. They give testimonials in news papers and magazines. They share their aura with the Mata. The following are some of the testimonials from popular figures in Kerala.

To me Amma is always a sea of love. When I climb each step of my success, my love for Amma is growing with it. I cannot put into words what Amma’s consoling love offers me in every moment of my life…I still remember that experience of going to meet Amma for the first time in Vallikavu in an evening, with my uncle. Fourty years ago when I reach Amma’s little house there were no large crowd there as we see now. After the first meeting I came to her several times. Within that period Amma’s fame crossed the oceans.

(Mohanlal, Actor67; 2013, 26)

“I met Mata Amritanandamayi, a few years ago, very unexpectedly…On seeing us Amma turned to me and said: “I have listened to your song in Madras, son”

“Which song did you hear, Amma?”

I politely conveyed to Amma that I have written thousands of songs. Amma replied with a smile.

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67 Mathrubhumi Amma Supplement 2013.
“The song Rama Janakee jane; that song has great bhavam”

As I came closer Amma embraced me with extreme compassion.

I wondered how the Amma, who has never seen me before, understood that I am the Yousufali Kechery who wrote Janakee jane. She whispered while patting on my back: “Amma kutti, Amma kutti”. Since then I am her son and she, my mother.”

(Yousufali Kechery, film lyricist, producer and director)\(^{68}\)

It was two years back in Madras that I see Amma first. I was taken to her by singer Krishnachandran. I wanted to share with her my sorrow of childlessness. I couldn’t say anything when Amma held me in embrace. I fell into tears. I felt light at heart when she whispered into my ears “mole”.

(K. S. Chitra, Playback singer)

I do not listen to Amma’s bhajan with my ears. It impresses in mind, even if I close my ears and eyes. In fact, I am experiencing that voice and not listening. Amma’s voice enters the devotee’s heart in the intense mood of bhakti. When Amma sings we shall close our eyes. That voice will fall like rain, into the minds that it transforms.

(Pandit Ramesh Narayan, classical music composer and music producer)\(^{69}\)

The greatness of that Amma in Kollam is not her knowledge, wisdom, erudition, or eloquence, but it is her offer of the milk of love. It is the loving embrace of motherhood; that is what makes Amritanantamayi universal. What she asks from us is the warmth of unity. That is why our forefathers called out

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\(^{68}\) Ibid pp. 32
\(^{69}\) Ibid pp. 36
for the victory of bharat mata. It is the essence of an extraordinary culture.

(Late. V. R. Krishna Iyer; Supreme Court Judge)\textsuperscript{70}

I have never met a warmer person than ma in my life. Even an agnostic like me was trying to hold back my tears.

(Khuswant Singh, Writer)\textsuperscript{71}

These testimonials\textsuperscript{72} are taken from Mathrubhumi Amma Supplement 2013 and India Today. Such testimonials appear regularly in special editions such as the Mata Amritanandamayi birthday supplement, or promotional editions. Poems, sketches and other accounts of experience of the Mata’s darsan too will accompany these. By sharing their space with the Mata or by acknowledging their devotion for the Mata, these figures also come to the public sphere as a ‘common man’. They also get a chance to reach across to a public through a community that shares some common sentiments with them. On the part of the Mata’s iconicity, this relation with the popular artists gives her authenticity and her aura expands.

Another interesting characteristic of this relation is a sharing of one’s personal problems, which as celebrities these individuals cannot talk about. When they talk about the problems they had and how with the Mata’s company or advice they overcame them, they not only put themselves along with other devotees but also encourage the readers and audience to have faith in the Mata. Thereby, they also invite a community to empathize with them.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid pp.30
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid pp. 28
\textsuperscript{72} The researcher translated all the testimonials except that by Khuswant Singh.
Mata’s Images at Home and in Public Places

Another factor that contributes to the iconicity of the Mata is the way her photographs are circulated, ritualized, exhibited, and used by the devotees. Many devotees keep a large photograph of the Mata in the drawing room of their house. With the Mata’s photograph thus exhibited the family is introduced to the new visitor through the Mata. Some photos are framed and garlanded; some are just fixed on the wall with adhesive, along with other pictures of deities. Some devotees like to keep the framed photograph in a sacred place such as the puja room. Her iconography also appears in calendars, pens, paperweights and other objects that the devotees use while studying or working in the office.

Fig. 5.6 Defining the Home: The Family Deity
Fig. 5.7 The Mata Among the Drawing Room Deities

Fig. 5.8 The Mata and her ‘lotus feet’ in puja room.
Fig. 5.9 The Mata in puja room
Fig. 5.10 The Amma on calendar

Fig. 5.11 Creative Iconography: Gurus on study table
Fig. 5.12 Photograph of the Mata in an auto-rickshaw

Fig. 5.13 Photograph of the Mata in an auto-rickshaw
Fig. 5.14 Acknowledgement Poster: Poster placed by devotees in public space.

Fig. 5.15 Painting of the Mata in a Bhajan Hall
Fig. 5.16 Wooden panel showing an iconography ‘blessed’ by the Mata

The Iconography of Gurus

The above photograph (fig. 5.16) is taken from a bhajan centre of Mata Amritanandmayi Math in Alappuzha. Apart from the large photograph of the Mata, there is also a large oval frame that carries small round photographs of four gods and
three individuals along with that of Mata Amritanandamayi on top. The gods are Shiva, Sri Krishna, Sri Rama and Ganesh. And the individuals are Hindu religious reformers from different periods—Narayana Guru on the left, Chattambi Swamikal on the right and Shankaracharya on the bottom of the panel. This frame carries an iconography that seems to have some meaning to the Math. When I asked a devotee who is also responsible for the managerial functions in the particular centre, as to why the Mata is represented along with these select gods and people he said it is according to the Mata’s wish that they chose these. When they made the plan for the panel, there were more photographs of gods. But the Mata chose these photos. He thinks the Mata would have had something in mind when she selected these images. When I insisted, he told the meaning he makes of it is that Mata is also one of the gurus like the rest of them.

Many images are conspicuously absent from the panel. There is no image of any goddess—Laxmi, Sarawathi, Parvathi or Kali. The gods are pan-Indian deities and ‘gurus’ are specific to Kerala. Narayana Guru and Chattambi Swamikal were socio-religious reformers in the early twentieth century. Adi Shankara was a sage who attempted to revive Hinduism by consolidating the teachings of Vedanta, and went out to preach Hinduism across India.

The Iconic Aura and Power

In his article “Icons of the Reformist Period and Reformed Icons of the Present” Sujith Parayil analyses the contemporary practices of iconisation of socio-religious reform leaders of Kerala of the late 19th and early 20th centuries to understand “the visual vocabularies, forms, conventions and circulative meanings of popular visual culture practices”(Parayil, 2007). In one section he examines the changes in the images of Sri Narayana Guru over the years. He finds that after the
introduction of colour printing technologies the images of Narayana Guru acquired iconic quality to it. Following this finding he surveys the way in which the iconic images of Guru are used by people and made sense of. Drawing from his findings he argues, “instead of understanding the subtlety of meaning of their lives and teachings, the identification of an image (of Narayana Guru and other reformers of 20th century) as an icon displaces the meanings that the icons create along with their histories” (Parayil, 2007). Parayil is making a distinction between two kinds of icons here—one, formed by the embodied meaning of the reformist leaders, and the other, formed by the meaning constructed through photographic techniques and new circulatory modes.

The meanings embodied by the leaders are their own teachings. How ever the constructed meaning is that of their charisma, a representation of their popularity through various photographic ‘camouflages’.

Fig. 5.17
When we look at the iconicity of Mata Amritanandamayi, we find that this process of production of a divine figure through iconic representations is reversed. The Mata did not emerge as a social reformer or even spiritual master. Rather her emergence was made possible through a process of institutionalization that relied mostly on representing her “appearance” through writings, music and images. More than her teachings or her charity works what distinguished the Mata form the other charismatic figures is the significance given to her appearance, voice and speech. Here the emphasis is on humility, accessibility, and compassion. And as she herself has mentioned it, the emphasis is on the “bhavam” and “sankalpam” of a mother. It is the enlarged color pictures (fig. 5.17) of the Mata that we see along with the devotees or those that popular magazines supplement. The high-definition camera makes this possible now. The picture shows the marks and wrinkles on her face, the modest
adornments, the grey hair, the gap between the front teeth, and the glow in her eyes. It makes her feel very close to us. She is almost palpable in the image. It conveys the feeling of presence. The devotee is invited to perceive the Mata with the intimacy it thus creates. When the photograph bares the minutest details of her everyday, the devotee’s mind condenses her appearance and actions as an iconic image. And this iconic image differs from the haloed representation of the reformist leaders. The iconic representation takes the form of a doodle of a mother-child image (fig. 5.18) and not of Mata Amritanandamayi Devi. Even if the images of Mata Amritanandmayi with halo and other creative camouflages exist, they exist as creative works, not as a representation to be consumed.
CONCLUSION

Every reading is an interpretation. The phenomena stand outside the reading. But every reading also seeks to fix the meaning of the phenomena and institutionalize it using power. What constitutes a given discourse on a phenomenon is the power that institutionalizes it. Thus in the identification and interpretation of the ec-static acts of Sudhamani, the archive of dominant Hindu spirituality comes handy to a group of “guru seekers” wanting to be ascetics in the socio-political climate of the latter half of twentieth century. Prior to this appropriation, Sudhamani is said to have lived a childhood devoid of love. In her early teens Sudhamani started to look after her younger siblings, help her mother with domestic chores and work for relatives. As she says in many interviews the loneliness she felt in the absence of love led her to find solace in devotion. The expressive devotional experience drew the attention and interest of other people, especially those who are familiar with the imagery of similar expressions in stories of mystics. She was asked to perform for a religious audience. Within a short period she became popular as an ardent devotee of the god Krishna. People began to visit her when she performs as god, for an experience of devotion and seek advice in matters of life. During this period, a group of young men in search of spiritual enlightenment visits her. They identify their guru in her and give meaning to her acts inspired by the spiritual learning they acquired in the company of seekers from Ashrams in other parts of India, such as the Ramakrishna Math. In their company Sudhamani identifies herself as the ‘divine mother’, takes the name Mata Amritanandamayi and establishes an Ashram to practice spirituality. The Ashram develops its discourse, spreads them as messages, attracts more people, builds other institutions and expands its reach across different parts of the world. Mata
Amritanandamayi now called by her devotees as ‘Amma’ emerges as an icon of maternal love.

In this dissertation my aim was to show how the Mata Amritanandamayi phenomenon exist and evolve as a popular faith formation. By the term popular faith formation, I mean a faith formation located in popular culture. Here popular faith culture is conceptualised as a domain of struggle between the dominant traditions of faith and the subaltern devotional sensibilities. Instead of calling it a ‘faith community’ I call it a faith formation because I want to suggest the open and dynamic nature of the phenomenon.

Born as a lower caste woman in 1953 in India, a country defined by among other things, hierarchies of religion, caste and gender, Mata Amritanandamayi is now a world-renowned humanitarian icon in the image of ‘mother’. To some she is the divine mother; to some others she is an advisor or a spiritual master, yet others see her as the hugging saint from Kerala. The Mata’s spiritual journey began as a young girl who performs the “bhavam” of the deities Krishna and Devi during the ritual recitation of Bhagavatam in the neighbourhood. Later, she embodies the Devi (Divine Mother) bhavam as she finds it makes her feel compassionate towards the world. The representations of Mata Amritanandamayi through biographies, photographs, accounts of devotee experiences, documentaries and television produced the mother icon we see today as the Mata Amritanandamayi Devi.

In the beginning of this dissertation I was concerned with the questions about the nature of Mata Amritanandamayi phenomenon and the emergence of the Mata as a mother icon through representations in the popular culture. In the second chapter I have tried to understand how over time the nature of engagement with the Mata and her followers changed. These changes were reflected in the changing perception of
the Mata. New meanings were given to the Mata as an image of maternal love and care. This chapter shows the transformation of the Mata from a young girl who performs at a neighborhood devotional space to a global icon of ‘maternal love’.

There are three main signifiers with which Mata Amritanandamayi is represented in the popular culture. These are the divine mother, spiritual master and the hugging saint. They represent three different images of the Mata, such as the divine, charismatic and the iconic. The devotees and followers choose the image that suits them. I argue that these three images emerge in three periods and in three discursive contexts. A personal attitude of selfless care for the other developed as a result of the caste and gender oppression becomes the representative image of maternal love.

In the third chapter I focused on the affective dimension of engagement between Mata Amritanandamayi and her devotees. Here I discussed the various practices within the Mata faith community such as the darsan, embrace, bhajan, and manasapuja to bring out the sensorial nature of engagement between the Mata and her devotees. I also analysed the devotee experiences that appeared in popular magazines and newspapers, to show how this experience is articulated in order to produce a community marked by its affective relations with the Mata. I tried to argue that the image of mother is fixed in the minds of the devotees, not only through a spiritual discourse but also through actual reproduction of experiences that replicate the intimacy of sensorial engagement between the child and the mother. Hence, at this level of engagement the Mata faith is an aesthetic formation.

In the fourth chapter I examined the Mata faith as a discursive formation. Here I tried to identify the different objects, concepts, forms and themes of discourse within the Mata Amritanandamayi faith formation. Through an analysis of these, I argue that as a discursive formation Mata Amritanandamayi faith subscribes to an existing
archive of Hindu spirituality as it was rediscovered at the time of colonial nationalist struggles. The discursive field that constituted the earlier stage of the phenomenon, which I call the divine stage, was derived from the devotional practices developed following an anti-caste social imaginary formed in the late 19th century. Later, it got appropriated into a stream of nationalist spirituality with emphases on seva and syncretic practice. This institutionalized form of spirituality travels abroad through its network of civil society groups. All these happen within the first decade of the formation. Throughout its course, the Mata faith as a formation is also shaped by the allegations and criticisms from the public sphere. Some of these criticisms were ignored, some were answered and yet others were denied. However, they are still significant ways in which the faith discourse and its visible practices transform in response to these criticisms.

As a popular faith formation the Mata faith is a domain of struggle, primarily between different systems of belief that emerge from different historical practices, and different modes of being in the world. The spiritual discourses in Ashram publications try to narrate personal experiences with explication from Upanishadic and other Hindu scriptural resources. But, the embodied engagements between the Mata and the devotees through rituals oriented towards imagination and sensoriality is a domain of practice that stands independent of these explications. On the one hand there is the dominant spiritual discourse and on the other hand there is the empirical discourse of immanence. Even though, there is an attempt to give explanation to the latter by the former, the two still remain manifestly different within the formation. The practices such as embrace and darsan evoke strong feelings in the devotees. These feelings connect groups of devotees together mediated by the embodied presence of the Mata.
Through the discourses within and around the Mata faith formation an idea of a mother emerges as a gendered subject. With the exception of a few women, as the examples I have given suggest, the producers of these discourses are mainly, men. Even most criticisms in the public sphere are from men. Hence the mother image that the Mata carries may be understood as shaped by various male oriented discourses within and outside the formation. Most of these discourses favoring motherhood are clichés and have no reference to any historical or material aspects that make different kinds of motherhoods to exist. In one chapter of her book, *Kulastreeyum Chandappennnum Undayathenga*, J. Devika talks about changing ideas of motherhood, through a literary survey of early women’s writings in Kerala. She points out that the traditional ideas of motherhood and mothering have been contested by upper caste women as the traditional roles of these women changed, with education, work, and engagement in public sphere. Even in the changing contexts of the material socio-economic conditions the traditional roles of mothering and motherhood for most women, especially those from the lower castes and dalit communities who are late to emerge in the public sphere, remain unchanged. Some of the early sources that Devika cites concerns with upper caste women seeking possibility of a social role for their maternal subjectivity. For instance, the works of K. Saraswathiyamma that she cites in this context, questions the limitation of possibilities, imposed upon women by framing them within what is understood as “feminine qualities”, such as tolerance, compassion and patience. Another woman writer who questions what she considers, as the “mechanization of motherhood” is Lalithambika Antharjanam. Antharjanam contested the idea that motherhood is confined to the practice of nurturing. She argued that the process of giving birth to a child itself is transformative at many levels to the individual. She claims that this
process of mothering unites all women regardless of caste, class or religion. She disputes the idea that motherhood and public life are not complementary and argues that a public life that ignores motherhood and a motherhood that ignore the public life are incomplete. It is in this context that an idea of universal mother is established in through the ‘Amma’ icon uncritically in a space that has also seen such counter-discourses to it. I argue through this dissertation that the potential of ‘Amma’ icon in the domain of popular culture is of a recuperative maternal.