

The Mother Goddess in Kerala: Discursive Struggles and Contested Signifiers in a Popular Faith Phenomenon

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Abstract

Mata Amritanandamayi faith is a popular faith phenomenon that began in Kerala, South India during the late 1970s. Over the years, Mata faith has undergone changes informed by and in response to the debates and discussions in the Kerala public sphere, and the sensibilities of an expanding middle-class. The central character of the phenomenon, devotion of and in the godly figure Mata Amritanandamayi remained the same, although the faith practices became intense and widespread in the turn of the century. However, the image it represents acquired cultural signification of a mother over the years through various biographies, anecdotes, testimonies and visual practices. I argue that the central character of the Mata faith is the iconisation of a certain image of mother already represented through cinema, literature and other journalistic media as the ideal mother. This devotee-mother, I argue, personifies the image of a virtuous mother in the perception of the dominant upper-caste traditions in Kerala.

Keywords: popular culture, faith, icon, representation, Kerala

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Introduction

India is popular across the world for what is known as its cultures of spirituality. Many practices such as yoga, meditation and satsang are followed abroad, meticulously in various non-traditional contexts. Also, many gurus have emerged in the last fifty years in India, many of them, having several transnational bases and huge followership. Among these Satya Sai Baba, Mata Amritanandamayi, Amma Karunamayi, Baba Ramdev, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Asharam Bapu are some of the most popular. Looking at these gurus from a global perspective might lead one to imagine all of them as another instance of evangelical practice, which has been already manifested in Christianity in the US and parts of South Asia.

However, such an imagination is very spontaneous. The meaning of so-called spirituality at the global level is significantly different from the meanings that produce it at the local level. Many minor histories, sensibilities, struggles and power relations are involved in the formation of some of these spiritual organisations in their place of emergence. They are popular abroad as a deterritorialised entity, and reterritorialised regionally in negotiation with local political setting. By understanding the point of emergence of the ‘gurus’ one I wish to see its specific location within the local configuration of sensibilities and meanings.

Earlier studies of such phenomena within the nation use the frameworks of ‘social movement’, ‘syncretism’ and ‘cultural translation’, or ‘practices of modern self-making’ (Srinivas, 2008; Srinivas, 2010). My study focuses on the phenomenon of Mata Amritanandamayi spirituality in Kerala. Mata Amritanandamayi is the leader of the spiritual organisation named Mata Amritanandamayi Math. Unlike its influence in other parts of the country or across the world, the Mata Amritanandamayi phenomenon claims a space in Kerala’s popular culture mainly through its Malayalam TV channel, the special features on the Mata in popular newspapers, the bhajan communities and neighbourhood gatherings such as *Amritakudumbam* and *Amrita Ayalkoottam*, the local accounts of the Mata’s divinity and the relatively small followership of women from lower castes and classes. In order to understand the cultural struggles that go into the shaping of it, I examine the Mata faith as a popular cultural formation.

Stuart Hall defines popular culture as “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 area 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).

Context

Conceptualising a phenomenon as cultural text enables the genre identification and through it, the intention of the author. According to David Morgan a text “is something written, published, stored, read silently or aloud, purchased and shared, traded, and displayed. It is cited, edited, rewritten, compared with other texts and taught” (Morgan, 2005; 89) As a cultural text the Mata Amritanandamayi phenomenon occupies a multidimensional sphere comprised of such aspects of a

spiritual event as its organisation, architecture, objects, performative practices, travels, technologies, mediations and subjects. *Mata Amritanandamayi Math* is a spiritual institution (*atmeeya stapanam*) of a particular social genre. Social genres are located in the cultural practices, discourses and sensibilities that mark a period for a community, and arise from exigencies.

The biographies of Mata Amritanandamayi portrays the childhood of the Mata from accounts of her relatives, teachers, parents, friends and neighbours, and also from the stories the Mata tells of her early life. Those stories mark a period of crisis in her life when she was taken out of school and put to work in the households of relatives (Cornell, 2002, 17). They also speak of the abusive treatment from parents young Sudhamani (the Mata's childhood name) suffered and her transgressive acts such as stealing money from home to help the poor, feeding hungry neighbours and mingling with the untouchable castes (Cornell, 18).

To locate these transgressive acts of Sudhamani as a lower caste woman I look at the historical changes that mark the period in which she began to identify herself within the socio-cultural domain that constituted her life world.

Nationalism, Democracy and Spirituality

Mata Amritanandamayi was born into a lower caste family of fishermen community on 27 September 1953, Kollam district in Kerala. She grew up as Sudhamani, in one of the most eventful times of the national history that witnessed various kinds of mobilisations of the subaltern groups. The period was one of intense nationalist and democratic fervor marked by many characteristics of state formation, such as reform movements, ideological clashes between communities and classes, identity assertions and strategic experiments in governance.

As a linguistic region, Kerala had been consciously forming its boundaries by developing a literary culture and linguistic identity distinct from the neighbouring regions, since the pre-modern times. In an attempt to create a separate identity, Sanskrit texts were given commentary in what is called a new language they tried to establish- *Manipravalam*. In opposition to this was another movement known as the "*pattu*" form made from the local metrical styles. Both forms were practices that merged different elements from local folk performative genres and sanskritic text. This shows that since the pre-modern times mixing of the folk and the classical formed the dominant method of inventing new genres for a national/regional identity of the largely Malayalam speaking territorial group. (K. Satchitanandan, 2010; Freeman, 2003).

Social Movements in Kerala

The anti-caste social reform movements in Kerala were largely indigenous in origin, and began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Charismatic lower caste leaders such as Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Vagbhatananda, Pandit K. P. Karuppan, Poikayil Kumara Guru, Sahodaran Ayyappan were revolutionaries who fought against the caste system and oppressive norms imposed by the dominant castes. Although, many of these reforms took to faith as a premise upon which self-knowledge and assertions of dignity were conceptualised and practiced, and people were mobilised, they were

mainly lower caste conceptualisations that stood in resistance to the upper caste culture.

Although Mata faith does not share the discursive field created by these early movements, it tries to mobilise a syncretic domain. This syncretic domain subsumes under a dominant Hindu discourse, the faith oriented aesthetic sensibilities of early lower caste movements. However, the discourse of resistance to the caste order that formed the politics of the social movements is ignored by this syncretic practice. Hence, many signifiers that the faith text uses in order to address the particular characteristic of lower caste devotional self do not share the meaning they have among the subaltern groups.

Argument

In this context of cultural struggles I look at the implications of two signifiers “spiritual guru” and “divine mother” that Mata faith text uses to represent its central figure, Mata Amritanandamayi, and their contested nature. A spiritual guru or master is generally understood as a visionary who perceives the schema of individuals, beliefs, sensibilities and practices within a community of which he/she is part and can give advices on how to conduct oneself in time of crisis based on his imaginative reasoning. Since this means the guru has to envision the community with all its individual elements he or she is expected to possess an egoless perspective with regard to the community. In other words, his/her ego is taken to be that of the common identity of community and not an individual ego.

However, egolessness is also a weakness, an impasse when it is acquired as a result of oppression or subjugation of the ego by another individual or group. What it indicates here is a continuing threat against the sovereign self the oppressed desires to achieve. In this case egolessness is required to curb individual desires and drives that would threaten the oppressor and incur his/her anger or hatred.

What this situation leaves for the oppressed is a meditative interior, a strong sense of the virtual, and a performing body that engages with the outside world, all of which may together make a schema of truth in order to create imaginaries for change.

Not only are the dalit and lower caste women two of the most oppressed category of the country, they are also the culturally marginalised other. When the image of spiritual woman and divine mother is represented by a lower caste woman the question that emerges is if this image is her choice or the nature of her oppressed subjectivity. If it is the former, it should be easier for Amritanandamayi to come out in public to speak on her behalf. Instead, in many interviews the Mata denies her agency by saying that she is what her “children” wants from her.

In the traditional ritualistic performances of the spiritual or the divine, the performer remains in the so-called “spirit” consciousness only during the performance. But Mata Amritanandamayi’s representation of the image of “divine mother” is a life-long performance. This means she embodies the essence of the idea of mother as it is described or perceived by her devotees or as she addresses them, “children”.

Many criticisms in the public sphere by subaltern groups also show how motherhood cannot be essentialised as the spiritual nature of woman. J Devika surveys the contestations to the traditional idea of motherhood historically, in Kerala by various women writers. She says that these contestations show that the idea of motherhood is not ahistorical (Devika, 2010).

As we see in Mata Amritanandamayi's biographies the crisis she faces as a child is the crisis of a lower caste woman subjectivised by capitalist patriarchy and "new brahminic values imposed upon the lower caste woman" (Devika, 2013; 82). Here, the asexualised labouring body of the lower caste woman is sustained for its productivity and controlled within the caste and gender limits through such images as the *bhakta* and mother. However, as some of these biographical accounts show the Mata's family did not approve of these images first and were afraid that the expressively affective practices of their daughter might get them alienated from the rest of the community to whom such practices may appear as symptoms of madness (Cornell, 2002; 32).

The image of mother as a spiritual being was not part of the lower caste culture they belonged to. Instead, what existed was mothering as a material practice of nurturing the children until they are capable of caring for themselves. The inner spiritual realm of motherhood is the construct of the nationalist discourse that locates the spiritual as the domain where the essential difference between the East and West rests (Chatterjee, 49).

In the writings by various devotees, Western and native, we get different descriptions of the divine mother. When the western devotee comes in search of the mystic woman in the orientalist narratives, the native devotees seek the ideal spiritual woman in the nationalist discourses who is the comforting nurturer as opposed to the man who is the child ever in need of care (Chatterjee, 69).

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In her article “Mammies, Matriarchs and Other Controlling Images” Patricia Hill Collins talk about the objectification of black women as the other (Collins, 2000). She writes that the images of mammies and matriarchs were used as controlling images of black women. Although, historically dalit and lower caste women were not treated as mothers, caste practices made their dark “asexual” labouring body an object of shame and contempt (Rowena, 2012). This produces the continuing stigma of dalit and lower caste women’s bodies in contemporary times too. In this context ascribing the spiritual meaning of motherhood to a lower caste woman and her being worshiped for the characteristics of selflessness and seva serve as controlling images that sustains the earlier caste discourses on her body.

To conclude, I argue that the image of divine mother represented by Mata Amritanandamayi is a contested signifier in popular culture. It is the nature of her subjectivity as an oppressed lower caste woman and not an ideal image of empowered woman. By representing a lower caste woman as spiritual and embodying universal motherhood, on one hand the institution patronises what is in fact the oppressed subjectivity of lower caste women and on the other, it projects the oppressive sensibilities of self-sacrifice and devotion as ideal qualities in a lower caste woman.

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