

# DEVOTION TO A GODDESS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

DR MAYA WARRIER

## Introduction

Revering human beings as holy and divine entities is a fairly commonplace phenomenon in Hindu India. In the Hindu scheme of things, divinity can manifest itself in different forms, in different places, at different times. Hindus commonly attribute divine powers to stones, rocks, rivers and mountains; certain kinds of birds and animals are often understood to possess sacred qualities; and occasionally human beings too fit into the category of that which is considered sacred, divine and therefore worthy of worship and veneration.

This paper deals with one such divinised individual in contemporary India. Her name is Mata Amritanandamayi, which, according to her biography, means Mother of Immortal Bliss. She is popularly known as Amma, Ammachi, or Mata, all of which mean mother. In the rest of this paper I shall refer to her as the Mata. Devotees describe her as an avatar-guru, a guru, spiritual guide or teacher, who is also an incarnation, avatar, of god. My attempt here is to analyse the concept of the avatar-guru, a relatively recent phenomenon in popular Hinduism. I do this using two more conventional Hindu categories, firstly, that of the *sannyasi* or renouncer, and secondly, that of the avatar or divine incarnation. The avatar-guru, I argue here, represents an interesting amalgamation of these two categories, and successfully resolves a crucial contradiction in the role of the renouncer in Hindu traditions. After analysing the phenomenon of the avatar-guru, I go on to explore the miraculous experiences that devotees of the Mata claim to have had after entering her fold.

My research on Mata Amritanandamayi is based on an extended period of fieldwork in India and in London among followers of this avatar-guru. I should perhaps clarify at the outset that I conducted this research very much as an outsider to the belief system I encountered in the field. I was at no point inclined towards becoming a devotee of the Mata myself. As an outsider my research had its limitations since I could only seek to understand, never directly undergo, many of the experiences my informants spoke to me about. Equally however, it had important strengths as well, since as an outsider I took very little for granted but sought to question and probe every aspect of the devotional world that I encountered.

Before I expand on the main themes which I will cover in this paper, let me start by first introducing you briefly to Mata Amritanandamayi.

## About the Mata

Mata Amritanandamayi was born in 1953 to a poor family of fisher-folk in a tiny fishing village in Kerala in South India<sup>1</sup>. On 27<sup>th</sup> September 2003, she celebrated her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. The birthday celebrations were a grand affair, attended by the President of India, several high profile dignitaries, politicians, pop stars and cine idols from across India. The Mata is today a vastly popular spiritual leader with a following that runs into several hundred

thousands, if not millions, of devotees across the world. She heads a successful institutional enterprise, the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission, which commands extensive financial resources, and runs an international devotional network with branches and centres across India's towns and cities, and abroad in the US, Canada, UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, Australia, Japan and Singapore. The headquarters for her spiritual establishment are located in her native village, now renamed Amritapuri after her, in Kerala. The largest of her establishments abroad is a sprawling spiritual centre in San Ramon in California headed by an American disciple.

In India she has set up several high profile educational and medical establishments. Important among these are a chain of schools in more than twenty Indian cities, institutes of higher education for management studies, engineering and computer science in south India, a state-of-the-art 'multi-super-speciality' hospital in Kerala, and a hospice for cancer patients in Bombay. She runs several charitable schemes, important among these being an expensive pension scheme for poor widows and a large-scale housing project for the homeless. These manifold ventures are financed by the generous donations pouring into her establishment from devotees across the world.

All of this is to indicate the sheer size and scale of the spiritual establishment headed by Mata Amritanandamayi. From the point of view of her devotees, of course, far more important than this is the figure of the Mata herself. According to the official biography of the Mata produced by the Mission, after an early phase of intense spiritual questing, she came to realise her innate divinity at the age of 21 when she gained mystic union first with the popular Hindu god Krishna, and subsequently with Devi, the goddess. She began to attract devotees with her early miracle working powers – she is believed to cure incurable diseases, bless childless couples with offspring, avert impending disasters and miraculously assist devotees at moments of personal crisis.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the Mata is the unique style in which she interacts with her devotees. As devotees queue up to meet her, she takes waiting individuals in her arms and bestows on them what is seen as a divine embrace, often whispering endearments in their ears. Most individuals break down and cry as she hugs them, experiencing the embrace as a moment of emotional upheaval and indeed miraculous personal catharsis. Her public appearances, when she meets with devotees and bestows her embrace on them, are referred to in the Mission as *darshans* – opportunities for her devotees to meet their beloved guru and partake of her spiritual beneficence<sup>2</sup>.

At periodic intervals, the Mata appears at what are known as *Devi bhava darshans*. These are *darshans* with a difference. Here the Mata appears not in her usual white garb, but in the resplendent raiment of a goddess. She appears dressed in bright colourful silks, a crown on her head and flowers adorning her person. This is her *bhava*, aspect, as Devi or goddess. Devotees perform a ritual of worship before her at these *darshans*, as they might do in a temple before the image of a deity. To receive her embrace when she is thus adorned is, for devotees, to secure a moment of intimate proximity with the divine, the goddess, in all her bounteous glory<sup>3</sup>.

There are three images which devotees most commonly use to describe her. She is for them firstly, a mother figure. What they seek, childlike, in her arms, is the protection, security, and affirmation of unconditional love, that a child seeks in the loving arms of its mother. She is, secondly, in their perception, a guru. Devotees look to her for spiritual guidance. She prescribes certain ritual practices and methods of spiritual self-discipline, which are believed

to enhance their progress along the path to spiritual enlightenment<sup>4</sup>. She has nearly a thousand spiritual aspirants under her tutelage who, having rejected mundane social life, have sought entry into the Mata Amritanandamayi Math or ascetic order, to train for a life of spiritual seeking. Thirdly, she is, in the view of her devotees, an avatar, a divine incarnation in the form of a goddess. As a goddess, she is believed to have incarnated upon the earth in order to achieve a specific mission. The concept of an avatar with a mission to accomplish is a theme I will take up later in this paper. I turn now to an analysis of the Mata as a renouncer, examining what I described earlier as a crucial contradiction in the role of a renouncer in Hindu traditions.

### **The model of the renouncer**

*Sadhus* or *sannyasis*, Indian renouncers, provide the most readily available model for understanding the phenomenon of divinised human beings in the Hindu world. Renouncers are commonly understood as individuals who have rejected mundane social life, with all its ties and attachments. In an ideal-typical sense, renouncers are lonely figures, free of all social ties, pursuing a solitary path of spiritual striving. Ideally they are single and celibate, own no property, wander from place to place with no permanent sense of home, and live on the alms that householders may provide. They lead ascetic lives, their spiritual aim being to free themselves of what is seen as the bondage of karma. Their ultimate goal is understood to be *moksha*, release, from the ceaseless *samsarik* cycle of birth, death and rebirth, a key element in most Hindu belief systems<sup>5</sup>.

The austerities which renouncers observe in order to build up their spiritual strength, are believed to result in the accumulation of miracle-working powers. Renouncers, as a result, are both revered and feared in the Hindu world. They are revered for their spiritual accomplishments, and householders often seek them out for spiritual guidance, and also in the hope that they might deploy their miracle working powers in order to secure the well-being of the householder. Renouncers are feared because their anger, if provoked, is believed to be potent enough to precipitate crisis and calamity.

Ideal-typical renouncers, in the Hindu scheme of things, are lonely wild ascetics with matted hair, living off alms and devoid of all personal possessions. They appear at the margins of society, detached from the cares of this world, and focused single-mindedly on spiritual questing. In the real world, however, renouncers in fact appear more often than not as members of wealthy renunciatory orders, or as leaders of devotional groups. Rather than subsist in the margins of society, they are thus located in the very heart of social life, contending intimately with everyday concerns of mundane society, often commanding vast material resources, and wielding considerable political and social influence<sup>6</sup>.

Mata Amritanandamayi is perhaps a fairly typical example of this kind of renouncer guru. In her self-representations she conforms in several respects to the ideal-type of the celibate ascetic. She claims to be single and celibate, is seen to lead an austere life, and to possess no property of her own. Though she does not belong to any renunciatory order herself, she in her turn has instituted an order of renouncer-disciples, who, as I mentioned earlier, lead a life of spiritual striving under her tutelage. Like most other renouncer gurus today, however, the Mata is very much a key social figure, heading a sprawling institutional enterprise at the very heart of Indian society, commanding vast material resources and exercising influence over the Indian polity and economy at the highest levels. How does she, as a renouncer, justify her intimate and extensive engagement with society?

## Resolving the paradox

The answer lies in the dual aspect of the Mata's self-representation. Mata Amritanandanayi's self-representations depict her not just as a renouncer guru but also, and most crucially, as an avatar. Her claim to have been incarnated on earth as an avatar in order to fulfil a particular divine mission draws upon known symbols and meanings in Hindu traditions. Indeed the concept of the avatar is one with which most Hindus are familiar. Scriptural as well as popular understandings of avatars define them as divine incarnations whose life on earth is intended to address a specific worldly need or problem. The supreme Hindu god, Vishnu, is believed to have incarnated himself on earth at various times in the course of human history to address specific earthly needs. In the popular Hindu religious text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna, who is believed to be one of Vishnu's ten avatars, claims that whenever the world should experience a decline of *dharma* or righteousness, he will incarnate himself in earthly form in order to destroy the evil threatening the world order, and to redress the imbalance between right and wrong<sup>7</sup>. It is this conception of the avatar that appears to inform her devotees' understanding of the Mata's claims.

While the concept of the avatar is itself not new, and while it is also not unusual to find devotees making claims on behalf of their gurus regarding their presumed avatar status, the phenomenon of a guru making this claim on his or her own initiative is a relatively new and noteworthy development in the Hindu world. According to some devotees of Mata Amritanandamayi, it is they, rather than the Mata herself, who make the claim that she is an avatar. This assertion is important, given the value placed on self-effacement in Hindu guru traditions. Ideal-typical renouncer gurus do not flaunt their own abilities or assert their enlightened status; it is for others to discern the extent of the guru's spiritual achievements. In the case of the Mata, it is true that she often makes self-denigrating statements about herself, denying that she is an avatar or a goddess. She does, however, claim to 'reveal' her divine status to devotees during her *Devi bhavas*. This self-profession of divinity is reinforced when devotees perform the *aarati*, (ritual of worship) before the Mata, a ritual otherwise addressed only to the images of gods and goddesses in Hindu temples and household shrines. The *bhavas*, the Mata's interpretation of their meaning, and the ritual performed during the *bhavas*, all appear to confirm the Mata's 'avatar' status and her ready acknowledgement of the same.

The most popular of modern India's spiritual leaders to make a similar claim is Sathya Sai Baba. Sai Baba's rise to prominence in the 1940s as a popular avatar-guru from Andhra Pradesh in south India pre-dates that of the Mata by nearly four decades. His 'mission' as an avatar, he claims, is to restore *satya* (truth), *dharma* (duty or righteousness), *shanti* (peace) and *prema* (love) to the world. The phenomenon of the avatar-guru clearly resolves contradiction between the other-worldly quest of renunciators and their involvement in the affairs of the world, a paradox which has long been at the heart of much of the discussion and debate surrounding renunciation in Hindu traditions. Both Sathya Sai Baba and Mata Amritanandamayi appear to conform to the ideal of a renouncer in several respects. Yet their claim to have been incarnated on earth as avatars in order to fulfil particular divine missions serves most crucially to eliminate any tension between the ideal renouncer's other-worldly orientation and his/her engagement with the affairs of this world. As avatars incarnated in this world to fulfil particular missions, these gurus are not only justified in their engagement in worldly matters, they in fact derive their legitimacy from this engagement<sup>8</sup>. In other words, in order to justify their claims to be avatars, they must back these claims by actually appearing to fulfil their self-declared mission through active engagement with the world. An important element in the avatar-gurus' endeavours to 'fulfil' their earthly missions is the setting up of institutional organisations towards that end. The size and spread of the avatar-gurus' spiritual empires, and the strength of their following, establishes their

authenticity as avatars, and legitimises their professed mission on earth. The phenomenon of the avatar with a mission to accomplish is in fact a culmination of earlier trends, evident in other religious groups in India like the Swaminarayan order in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the Ramakrishna Mission in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, towards redefining the renouncer-ascetic as one who serves society and works towards its welfare and reform<sup>9</sup>. The concept of a worldly mission constitutes one of the most significant features of these avatar-gurus, marking them out as a modern force driving contemporary change in global Hinduism.

### **An avatar with a mission**

Crucial to the Mata's self-representation as a divine avatar is the idea that she has 'descended' to the earth in order to fulfil a particular mission. An undated pamphlet, entitled *Divine Mother Mata Amritanandamayi Devi and Her Mission*, published by the Mission, dwells at length on this theme.

To the people of this age, bereft of a living faith, their hearts thirsting for pure love, Amma has come as a torrential shower of Divine Love. Ever established in the unbroken experience of Supreme Truth, She accepts everyone as Her own Self. Taking suffering humanity upon Her lap, soothing their pain and giving them hope, She dispels the darkness from their hearts and leads them on the path towards perfection and everlasting joy.

The purpose of the Mata's descent, in this scheme of things, is to alleviate human suffering in the modern world. Why then is the world suffering? The Mata's answer to this has both a soteriological dimension, deriving from traditional Hindu understandings of suffering and salvation, and a 'modern' dimension, that has a particular and immediate relevance to the contemporary world.

The Mata uses the Hindu doctrine of karma and rebirth in order to explain human suffering. According to the karma doctrine as the Mata expounds it, individuals pass through a series of lives in a cycle of births and deaths. One's deeds (karma) in previous lives determine the quality of subsequent lives. To secure release from the cycle it is necessary to rid oneself of the effects of bad deeds, *prarabdhas* (burdens) of past lives. It is also necessary to refrain from indulging one's *vasanas* (harmful attachments or 'tendencies' in this life) which only contribute to the further accumulation of *prarabdhas*. *Vasanas*, and the *prarabdhas* that accumulate because of them, are seen as the cause for the suffering of humanity. One's spiritual aim must be to eliminate these. Such a quest is expected to culminate in 'release' from this cycle and the ultimate union of the individual *atman* or soul with the universal *brahman*, the 'cosmic essence'. This is the attainment of *moksha* or salvation, understood as the ultimate objective of an individual's spiritual search.

The soteriology described by the Mata is by no means unique to her Mission. It is merely one more variant of a larger body of belief in karma, afterlife and *moksha* (salvation) which, in its myriad forms, informs Hindu religious life in diverse contexts. However, in her teachings the Mata goes on to give this soteriology a particularly contemporary relevance. She identifies certain 'negative tendencies' (*vasanas*) which she perceives as distinctive of modern lifestyles and attitudes, and which result in sorrow. These *vasanas* are firstly, humankind's insatiable material desire, secondly, the extreme selfishness of the modern world, and thirdly, its excessive preoccupation with rationality and the intellect. The modern world is a place of sorrow and suffering because of the imbalanced and skewed nature of the modern individual's engagement with the self and the world. Imbalances in lifestyles and attitudes are, in the Mata's view, a crucial and highly damaging feature of 'modernity' as it manifests itself in contemporary times. Modern individuals are excessively materialistic, rational and ego-centric to the detriment of complementary and 'balancing' aspects of their lifestyles and

personalities – those of spirituality, faith and affect, and selflessness and compassion. It is important to note here that the Mata, while advocating a restoring of ‘balances’ in the modern world, does not attack the objective conditions of ‘modernity’. Thus such objective factors as revolutionised science and technology, modern modes of production and consumption, and the spread of mass communication and media systems do not by themselves present a problem in her scheme of things. What she does attack is what she sees as humankind’s lopsided engagement with these conditions, such that in a world dominated by rationality, materialism and personal ambition, people tend to lose sight of spirituality and faith. She therefore advocates a revision of modern attitudes and orientations, so as to restore a sense of balance between opposites, such that materialism is complemented by spirituality, rationality by faith and emotion, and egotism by selflessness.

How does the Mata expect to achieve her goal of redressing the imbalances of modern personalities and worldviews? As a first step towards fulfilling her mission, the Mata enfolds people from different walks of life in her intimate embrace. This embrace is often presented in the Mission’s promotional literature as a life-transforming experience for the recipient. This is the point at which the Mata ‘hooks’ individuals (to use devotees’ own expression), before going on to work a transformation in their lives and personalities. Once they enter her fold, the Mata encourages devotees to follow certain ritual and spiritual prescriptions which, she claims, are intended to revive the realm of the heart, faith, and the emotions, ‘dissolve’ egotism, and, in the long term, lessen the suffering of the practitioner. The Mata also encourages devotees to engage in small acts of social service or *seva*, which, she claims, will serve to erode their egotism and selfishness. Most important in all of this, however, is not the precise observance of her prescriptions, but the cultivation of what is understood to be an attitude of ‘surrender’ to the guru.

### **Devotion to the goddess/guru**

I turn now to a discussion of what this attitude of surrender actually entails, and the experiences that devotees of the Mata claim to have once they enter her fold. ‘Experience’ is a key word among devotees of the Mata and constitutes the mainstay of their devotion to her. Their faith in the Mata, they often emphatically assert, is based not on ‘belief’ but on experience. What then do devotees’ experiences consist of? Their experiences, I discovered, are in effect, episodes miraculously confirming the Mata’s divine love and protection in devotees’ everyday lives. When I say ‘love’ I mean not love in an abstract, generalised sense, but love which is personalised, which is intimated through various signs which devotees claim to recognise, and which carries with it the much-needed reassurance that the Mata is protecting and guiding them individually, at every step along their life’s journey. It is this one-to-one bond of love and intimacy between guru and each individual devotee that sustains followers’ faith in the Mata.

The experience narratives of devotees are based on the metaphor of the embrace, and appear to revive the very sensations that devotees claim they ‘experienced’ in the moment that the Mata first held them in her arms. Their descriptions of the initial embrace dwell on three central themes which are repeated in most accounts. First, the embrace marks a moment completely removed from the realm of the known and familiar. Devotees suddenly find themselves in a new and strange situation, which induces in them reactions hitherto unknown and alien to them. They find that, for no apparent reason, they have lost control over themselves, and they weep and sob inexplicably in the arms of the Mata. Second, even as they weep, they become aware of immeasurable joy and overwhelming relief in the knowledge that they have reached a safe haven, a sanctuary where they are confident of protection and love. This experience of security and reassurance in the Mata’s arms leads to

a renewed sense of control and certainty. Finally, the embrace establishes a personal one-to-one bond between the self and the Mata. For devotees, it marks a unique moment of communion between the Mata and the individual self when, for a brief instant, the devotee remains conscious only of the Mata's protecting presence, and the rest of the world blurs into insignificance. The sensations awakened during the embrace, like the embrace itself, are momentary. No sooner do they appear, than they disappear. Yet, in that brief moment, they expose devotees to something that they perceive as sublime and divine, and completely out of the ordinary.

Subsequent narratives of devotees' 'miracle experiences' dwell on similar themes. These are mostly narratives of episodes in their lives when the Mata 'miraculously' saved them from imminent danger or when her protecting presence helped them tide over situations of crisis. At times of crisis, devotees find themselves in unfamiliar and troubling situations. Even as they struggle to cope, they suddenly become aware of the Mata's enveloping love. This knowledge and the Mata's loving intervention then help to tide them over the crisis. Their knowledge of the Mata's love is reinforced, and their faith in the Mata is thereby renewed. All such 'experience' narratives make a crucial contribution towards creating and sustaining a vibrant collective imagination linking Mata Amritanandamayi's devotees across the world in common adoration of the guru.

One such experience narrative, which had previously appeared in a local newsletter, *Friends of Amma*, produced by, and circulated among, Mata Amritanandamayi devotees in the UK, and which was shared with me by the narrator, a Tamil settled in England, goes as follows:

As I approached the motorway there were no street-lights and the three lanes narrowed to one lane because of the road-works. Suddenly the car began to slow down, the lights dimmed and the battery warning light came on. I still had 70 miles to go, and because of my back problem I knew I wouldn't be able to push the car to a safe place. A line of cars followed me at 60 mph. The car started missing, and I realized that it would not be visible as the front and rear lights had failed. I yelled in terror: 'Amma, without your help I cannot do anything in this situation!' No sooner had I cried out than a bright blinding flash of light shot up from the dashboard and the head-lamps and interior lights came on. The lights were as bright as a new car's. The battery warning light remained on, however, and the alternator was not charging the battery at all. I was filled with a strong self-confidence which I never had before, because I knew Amma was with me. Normally I would have stopped at the next service station and fixed the fault before driving on. This time it did not occur to me to stop, and I drove the 70 miles home without any fear or problems. I was filled with happiness as I pulled up in front of my house at 11pm and turned off the ignition. A second later, I anxiously turned it back on to discover there was no power at all. I believe with all my heart that this was an example of Amma's many miracles and that at desperate times She will be there to help her children.

It is clear from this account that the metaphor of the embrace with its assurance of protection and security in the Mata's arms, which is so crucial to the Mata-devotee relationship, comes to be repeated in devotees' lives whenever they find themselves in trouble and distress. Devotees' narratives of their experiences seem to reveal a tendency on their part to retreat into a state of 'proxy control', a condition which Bandura, as quoted in Madsen and Snow<sup>10</sup>, describes in the following terms:

People are not averse to relinquishing control over events that affect their lives in order to free themselves of the performance demands and hazards that the exercise of control entails. Rather than seeking personal control, they seek security in proxy control - wherein they can exert some influence over those who wield influence and power. Part of the price of proxy control is restriction of one's own efficacy and a vulnerable security that rests on the competencies and favours of others... The dependent ones enjoy the protective benefits without the performance demands and attendant stresses.

Madsen and Snow, who use this concept to explicate the phenomenon of charisma, see the acceptance of proxy control as a psychologically self-preserving strategy that goes to the very heart of the charismatic bond. In this process, they explain, those in despair restore their own sense of coping ability by linking themselves to a dominant and seemingly effective figure - a leader who seems to be acting on their behalf, but also seems to be not beyond their sphere of influence, if only because that leader is 'known' to be devoted to their interests and therefore reachable through petition and supplication. What is truly paradoxical about the entire process of securing proxy control is the idea that only by yielding personal control is a sense of control retained, and only by accepting a leader's understanding of events is a sense of personal understanding restored. Yielding control to the Mata clearly provides devotees with a sense of security and protection. Through their belief in the Mata's powers of wish-fulfilment and miracle-working, and their faith in her divine blessings and guidance, devotees, it would appear, are able to negotiate the everyday uncertainties and anxieties of their fast-paced urban lives. This relinquishing of control to the Mata leads to devotees' growing dependence on her. Indeed, devotees' 'experiences' include such mundane incidents as getting train reservations during rush season or discovering a petrol station close at hand after being stranded with an empty tank in an unfamiliar part of the city, all of which are attributed to the guru's divine intervention in their lives at critical junctures. It would appear from their accounts that devotees have no room in their lives for 'luck' or 'chance' or personal striving. Every fortuitous event in their lives comes to be interpreted as a miracle worked by the guru and a sign of her grace.

A popular analogy in India draws a contrast between two different attitudes that devotees may adopt vis-à-vis the object of their devotion<sup>11</sup>. The first is that of the baby monkey. When in danger, baby monkeys take a fast grip on their mother's abdomen and have themselves conveyed to safety. In contrast to this, the second attitude, that of the kitten, is more passive. In times of danger, kittens sit and wait for their mothers to carry them away by the scruff of their necks without providing active assistance. The contrast between the two clearly lies in the matter of agency. Baby monkeys are portrayed as active agents who seek to control their own destiny by readily seeking assistance when they need it. Kittens on the contrary are portrayed as passive and lacking all agency. Rather than make any attempt to gain control, they leave all control and agency to a protecting figure who, they hope, will assume charge over their lives.

Are devotees of the Mata kittens or baby monkeys in the way they relate to their guru? In attempting to answer this question during my research on the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission, I was inclined, at first, to see the Mata's devotees as kittens. They appeared to deny all personal agency, and to submit all control to the Mata, who appeared as a kind of divine stage manager<sup>12</sup> calling the shots as it were, down to the last personal detail in devotees' everyday lives. In due course, however, I realised that this was perhaps a rather simplistic way in which to understand what devotion to this avatar-guru was really all about.

### **The Ideal of Surrender**

A different way in which to understand the relation between devotees and the Mata, is to view their experience narratives in the context of their spiritual ideal or goal. The spiritual goal idealised in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission is that of complete surrender to the Mata and her divine ministrations. Achieving complete surrender is seen as a difficult and highly elusive goal. What it entails is the dissolution of one's egotism, and the increasing reliance on one's heart rather than one's head to perceive the world. The Mata, interestingly, places great emphasis on the value of tears in one's spiritual questing. Many of



her ritual prescriptions encourage devotees to cultivate a mood of longing for the mother goddess, and weep copious tears in humble supplication to her. Such weeping is believed to purify the mind, cleanse it of all its negative tendencies, and gradually eliminate all arrogance, pride and egotism, which are seen as major stumbling blocks on the path to spiritual progress and the state of ultimate surrender.

In the course of interviews with devotees, many of them spoke to me about how they found the notion of complete surrender a highly elusive, indeed near-impossible ideal. Yet it was one they actively and self-consciously strived for in their everyday lives. Many appeared to be constantly on the lookout for what they saw as the negative tendencies in their personalities, and were quick to criticise themselves when they detected the slightest trace of egotism or pride. In their self-descriptions they readily acknowledged a disjuncture between on the one hand their real selves - as active agents, seeking to improve their lives both materially and spiritually in manifold ways, taking pride in their achievements, and despairing at their losses, and on the other, their ideal selves – as passive recipients of the Mata's love.

Their narratives of their experiences, then, can well be seen as a means by which they try and make that much closer their elusive spiritual ideal of surrender to the goddess. In this sense, these devotees are not kittens after all but tenacious baby monkeys who, through their experience narratives, strive to secure an ever-harder grip on their mother. What is crucial here are not the experiences themselves, but the way in which these experiences are recounted afterwards. As Victor Turner rightly points out<sup>13</sup>, any experience is incomplete until 'meaning' is ascribed to the events and parts of the experience through an act of creative retrospection. 'Thus experience is both "living through" and "thinking back". It is also "willing or wishing forward", i.e., establishing goals and models for future experience in which, hopefully, the errors and perils of past experience will be avoided or eliminated'. The narratives of the Mata's devotees can thus be seen as 'restored' experience, that moment in the experiential process in which meaning emerges through 'reliving' the original experience. Experience in this sense is brought about and consummated through narrative. In the narration, experience is not only shaped, but also something new may be generated. The narrative transforms the experience itself and in that process, provides unprecedented insights, even generates new symbols and meanings, which may be incorporated into subsequent experiences. Narration in this sense is an illocutionary act, which does not merely *say* something, but which, more importantly *does* something – it is part of the *doing* of an action. It brings about a change of state, does something effective. The narration of experiences on the part of the Mata's devotees, I argue here, effects a process by which they come to conceptualise and construct a new sense of self *as* devotees of the Mata. As devotees of the Mata then, they seek to cultivate a new way of experiencing, where it is her divine agency rather than their personal choices and decisions that is the driving force behind every action and event in their lives.

Because this 'experiencing' is not a collective, but an extremely personal and individual exercise, devotees are usually keen to share their experiences with others. Most devotees record their experiences in their personal diaries, read them often to refresh their memories, and share these with fellow devotees either when they meet up at the local branch or when they visit the Mata's ashram in Kerala. Several of the books published by the Mission carry personal narratives of such experiences, and its newsletters and journals invariably carry accounts of miracle experiences sent in by devotees scattered across the globe. The narration of these experiences is an important means by which devotees reaffirm their faith in the Mata and establish repeatedly that they are graced by her constant love

and presence in their loves. It is also an important means by which newcomers get socialised into the devotionalist patterns within the Mission, and become acquainted with the ways in which they are expected to 'experience' the guru's love and glory. Last but not least, the sharing, circulating, and popularising of these experience narratives serves a crucial means by which devotees, perhaps inadvertently, win ever more publicity for the Mata, attract ever more followers to her fold, and thereby contribute to making her worldly mission an ever greater success.

## NOTES

1. Amritaswarupananda. 1996.
2. *Darshan* is an important concept in Hindu devotionalism and refers to a visual feasting on the deity's and/or guru's form by the devotee. The sight or vision of the deity is believed to bring good fortune, grace and spiritual merit to the devotee. See Eck 1981. In the Mata's case, *darshan* involves not just beholding the Mata but also being held in her embrace.
3. Though *bhava* is a familiar concept in certain devotionalist traditions, the Mata defines this concept in an entirely novel way. *Bhava*, in some of the more well-known *bhakti* traditions in eastern India, notably in Bengal, refers to episodes of ecstasy and trance, and of madness, passion and chaos, where mystics have been known to be transported into states where they are no longer in control of themselves (see McDaniel 1989). These are understood to be states of direct experience of the divine which are natural and spontaneous, and are marked by freedom and transcendence. The Mata's *bhava darshans* are far removed from these states of ecstasy and trance. Unlike these mystics, she claims to be completely in control of herself during her *bhavas*. Rather than spontaneous chaos, her *bhavas* are ritualised states when the Mata systematically and deliberately dons the garb of a goddess, in order to reveal her 'divinity' to her followers.
4. See Warriar 2003a.
5. See, for instance, Dumont 1970.
6. Trends towards renunciators' active this-worldly engagement go back to the 18th century and even earlier, when north India witnessed the mobilisation of ascetic orders into militant and trading groups, which bore arms and controlled property (see Cohn 1964, Kolff 1971, Lorenzen 1978, van der Veer 1988: 130-37, Bayly 1983:143, Pinch 1996). A significant development in Hindu renouncer traditions came when the Swaminarayan order in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Williams 2001), and later the Ramakrishna Mission in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gupta 1974, Beckerlegge 1998, 2000a & b), redefined the notion of the ascetic renouncer as one who serves society and works towards its welfare and reform. In more recent times, and particularly since the 1980s, the resurgence of Hindu nationalist or 'Hindutva' forces in contemporary India has led to a renewed interest in the study of renunciators, this time as 'Hinduising' agents popularising the nationalist ideology of Hindutva proponents (Jaffrelot 1996, McKean 1995, Van der Veer 1994, 1987).
7. See Hardy 1994 on textual representations of the avatar concept and of Vishnu's ten incarnations.
8. See Warriar 2003b.
9. See, for instance, Williams 2001 and Beckerlegge 2000a & b.

10. Madsen and Snow 1991: 14.
11. See, for instance, Pocock 1973, and Exon 1997.
12. Exon op. cit.
13. Turner 1982: 18.

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#### THE AUTHOR

**DR. MAYA WARRIER** lectures on the anthropology of religion and the study of Hinduism at the University of Wales, Lampeter. Her research interests centre around popular Hindu belief and practice in contemporary India, and among Hindu immigrants overseas.

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