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Processes of Secularization in Contemporary India: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission

MAYA WARRIER

University of Wales, Lampeter

The perceived resurgence of Hindu nationalist sentiments in India, particularly since the 1990s, occupies centre-stage in much of the current academic writing on contemporary Hinduism. This preoccupation with politicized Hinduism has meant that other developments in contemporary Hindu society, which run contrary to the dominant trend, have tended to go relatively unnoticed in recent academic literature. One such development has to do with religious belief and practice within some of the more popular modern guru organizations in India, many of which own and manage vast institutional and financial empires, command an international presence, and, within India, attract followers largely from educated, urban, 'middle class' sections of the country's population. Commentators in the past have tended to see the popularity of these guru organizations merely as a sign of intensified religiosity among urban middle class Indians. A closer look at these organizations and the place which many of them occupy in the lives of their followers, however, indicates that this apparently intensified religiosity also carries within it seeds of something quite different—trends towards the secularization of civil society.

Let me clarify, at the outset, what I mean by 'secularization'. I refer here to a process where religious affiliation comes increasingly to be seen not as a requirement, but as an option, 'one among a range of possible loyalties freely chosen and freely left' (Vanaik 1997: 101), and where 'the case for free choice and complete revisability of religious identities be[comes] increasingly accepted and respected' (*ibid.*). This is a process where questions of religious identity take on an increasingly reflective character, and religion itself ceases to be taken for granted as part of a larger all-pervasive religious culture, but becomes instead the result of individual construction through a process of conscious choosing and selecting from a

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range of possibilities and options (Bruce 1998; Wallis and Bruce 1992). Secularization in this sense refers not so much to an overall 'decline' of religion as to the retreat of religion from *public* life. By secularization I mean therefore a decline in the public, community-affirming and socially-binding aspect of religion, and a growing trend towards the internalization of faith such that it is personal choice, inner spiritual striving and self-fulfilment that become central to religious life rather than the affirmation of shared community orientations, affiliations, aspirations and identities.

Scholars studying New Religious Movements, or indeed New Religious 'Organizations' (Chryssides 1999) in the West have often commented on how many such organizations, especially those originating in India (as also elsewhere in the East), tend to focus more on the private and individual aspects of religious life (self-authorship and self-fulfilment) than on the public and collective (fostering a sense of community).[1] It is remarkable that similar observations have not been made by scholars studying the same organizations in their home (Indian) environment. Perhaps the tendency to overlook the private, individual and interiorized aspect of modern guru-centred religious organizations in India has to do with the intellectual legacy bequeathed by scholars like Louis Dumont, which tends to see lay Hindu society as composed not so much of individuals as of castes, families and other social groupings which subordinate the individual to the imperatives of the collective.[2] Be that as it may, what scholars have observed for the Western following of modern transnational guru organizations from India is in fact equally true for Hindu adherents in India. The religious faith that many of these foster in their largely urban, educated middle class Indian following is of an individual, private and inward-looking variety that is concerned not with community identities but with individual self-fulfilment.[3] It is here that tendencies towards the secularization of small, yet significant, segments of Indian society become evident. This paper aims to dem-

[1] For instance Chryssides (1999).

[2] Among the few scholars who have challenged this view are Béteille 1991b; Mines 1994, 1998, 1999; Mines and Gaurishankar 1990.

[3] Gurus fostering this kind of individual and inward-looking religious faith are certainly not a new phenomenon in Hindu traditions. Yet, these qualities of interiorization and individualization in religious faith have been relatively ignored in the recent literature on modern gurus. These are of particular significance in the contemporary Indian context precisely because of the contrast they pose to strident public assertions of religious and national identity made by Hindutva campaigners.

onstrate this aspect of contemporary Hindu faith by drawing upon an ethnographic study conducted among the urban educated middle class devotees of one such modern Indian guru, Mata Amritanandamayi.

In what follows, I first describe the Mata (mother) and the vast and growing institutional network she heads, exploring her religious style, and the nature of her appeal. Following that I turn my attention to the urban, educated middle class devotees of the Mata. In this connection I examine the many problems involved in trying to define and clearly delineate that section of India's population popularly referred to as India's 'middle classes'. I also examine the existing literature on the middle class followers of modern gurus, pointing out inadequacies in the approaches of earlier scholars. Finally, I explore the religious faith and practice of devotees of Mata Amritanandamayi. In doing so, I draw attention to the private and individual-oriented aspect of this guru-faith, and attempt to show how it provides an instance of processes of 'secularization' among its educated middle class adherents in urban India.

Mata Amritanandamayi—The Guru and her Message

Mata (mother) Amritanandamayi belongs to the *bhakti* or devotionalist tradition of Hindu faith, where individuals seek spiritual salvation by means of intense and personalized devotion to particular gods in the Hindu pantheon under the guidance of a guru or preceptor. Because of the eclectic nature of her professed divinity, it is impossible to place the Mata within any one stream of Hindu devotionalism—Shaiva, Vaishnava or Shakta. She encourages devotees to worship god in whatever form they can best relate to. For most devotees, the object of worship is the Mata herself, whom they regard as a goddess. According to popular belief, Mata Amritanandamayi[4] is an avatar-guru, a divine incarnation who has descended to the earth in order to fulfil a divinely ordained mission. In her self-representations she appears as a spiritually enlightened individual who has dedicated her life to the alleviation of humanity's suffering. She was born in 1953 in the south Indian state of Kerala

[4] *Amrita*, in Sanskrit, means 'immortal'. According to popular understanding, the English translation for Mata Amritanandamayi is 'mother of immortal bliss'.

to a 'low-caste' family of fisherfolk.[5] According to her biography,[6] at the age of twenty-one she realized her identity first with the Hindu deity Krishna, and subsequently with the goddess Devi. Her claims to spiritual knowledge and enlightenment are based not on systematic striving within any of the established devotionalist and/or renunciatory orders in Hindu religious traditions, but on the strength of spontaneous ecstatic visions and mystical states.[7] Central to her self-representations today are her 'Devi *bhavas*', regular public appearances when she dresses up in the regalia of the goddess and thus 'reveals' her goddess aspect (*bhava*) to her devotees.[8]

In seeking to fulfil her mission to alleviate humanity's suffering, the Mata relies on her vast organizational network, the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission (henceforth MAM). This organization was established in 1981 and has its headquarters in the leader's native village of Parayakadavu in Kerala's Kollam district. In the course of the 1980s and '90s, it shot to prominence as a fast-growing and highly successful enterprise, drawing hundreds of thousands of new devotees into its fold every year both in India and abroad, and commanding vast material resources, obtained mostly through generous donations from devotees across the world. The organization has, at its core, several hundreds of ascetic disciples of the Mata, both male and female, all of whom undergo several years of rigorous spiritual

[5] The biography identifies her as belonging to the Araya (fishing) caste, a group classed in both pre- and post-Independence ethnographies (including census reports and other official accounts) as 'economically backward'. The state of Kerala classes this group as one of the 'Other Backward Castes' for purposes of 'reservation' benefits in educational institutions and certain categories of employment. My enquiries in the village revealed that Sudhamani's parents marketed fish for a living. They had themselves had no formal education but sent most of their eight children to school. The Mata, according to her biography, underwent formal education up to the fourth standard of the local primary school.

[6] *Mata Amritanandamayi: A Biography* by Swami Amritaswarupananda, Mata Amritanandamayi Mission Trust, Kollam, Kerala, India, 1996. Extracts from the biography are also available at the website of the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission, www.ammachi.org, set up and managed by the Mata's disciples in the USA.

[7] See McDaniel's (1989) discussion of alternative paths to spiritual enlightenment demonstrated by seekers in various Hindu traditions. McDaniel distinguishes between the 'path of progression' within a lineage order and the 'path of breakthrough' followed by ecstatics and mystics. The Mata's spiritual attainment fits well within McDaniel's description of the latter path.

[8] *Bhava* here must not be confused with the devotee's *bhava*, described in ethnographies of Hindu devotionalist traditions (for instance Toomey 1990: 29–30; van der Veer 1988: 159–72). The latter refers to the devotee's emotional attitude towards the guru or the deity, whereas the former refers to the 'divine mood' or 'aspect' not of the devotee but of the guru or god.

training under the Mata's tutelage at the MAM's headquarters in Parayakadavu. Far more numerous than her ascetic disciples are the Mata's lay devotees. These number several hundreds of thousands, not just in India but also abroad. The MAM network today spreads out from Parayakadavu to branches and centres in more than twenty metropolitan cities and towns across the length and breadth of India, as also to MAM bases abroad in the USA, Britain, France, Australia, Japan, Mauritius, Reunion Island and Singapore.[9] The Mata Amritanandamayi Mission runs a wide network of charitable and other institutions in India, ranging from orphanages, hospices and a high-cost 'multi super-speciality' hospital in Kerala, to modern schools, computer institutes, and engineering and management colleges.[10]

The Mata's teachings convey in essence the message of universal love. She attributes humanity's 'suffering' to the absence of love in modern society. This absence of love, she argues, stems from an overwhelming obsession with the self, and from an excessive preoccupation with consumerism and material acquisition. Her mission, as she defines it, is to restore selflessness, love and compassion to their rightful place in the modern world. There are two particularly noteworthy aspects of the Mata's religious style which are relevant here. The most important is the highly intimate and personal way in which she relates to her devotees. She seeks to communicate her message of love by enfolding individuals in her 'divine' embrace. At public *darshans* (literally 'viewings', or more specifically occasions when devotees get to see their guru or god and visually feast on the latter's

[9] The more active of the MAM centres abroad consist of an ashram headed by a renouncer disciple of the Mata, who engages local devotees in regular spiritual activities. The biggest of these centres is a 160-acre ashram in San Ramon, California, headed by one of the Mata's earliest American disciples, and actively involved in promoting the Mata and her Mission in the USA. There are also more informal Mata Amritanandamayi '*satsangs*' or spiritual gatherings in several foreign countries where lay devotees come together for regular programmes of ritual, meditation and worship. The MAM's website provides a listing of addresses, phone numbers and other contact details for each of these ashrams and *satsang* groups across the globe. According to the MAM webpages, the more recent additions to the MAM's overseas outposts are situated in Brazil, Argentina and Hawaii.

[10] The MAM's website carries extensive information on its institutional structure and the activities of its various charitable and other organizations. The webpages on the educational establishments provide important information for candidates who might want to apply for admission. The pages on the hospital in Kerala provide details about the specialized facilities available there for the treatment of a range of diseases. These pages often also detail the work in progress at some of the Mata's newer institutional ventures and solicit financial and other support from devotees who may be interested in contributing towards these.

form—an important element in Hindu devotionalism) devotees queue up in order to receive her embrace. The Mata takes each of the waiting devotees into her arms, and lavishes her love on them individually. She comforts those troubled by pressing personal problems in much the same way as a loving mother comforts a troubled child, and offers solutions to their problems. For most devotees the embrace is an intensely emotional experience, and many cry openly in her arms, even as they relish the comforting intimacy of her motherly touch.[11] Devotees believe she also intervenes in their personal lives, resolving conflicts and solving problems in miraculous ways, thus assuring them of her constant love and protection. The Mata travels widely, moving from city to city within India visiting her ashram branches and offering local devotees a chance to meet her and receive her embrace. She also travels abroad every year, covering most MAM centres outside India. These annual 'world tours' and 'India tours', and the public programmes she conducts in the course of these tours,[12] are the most visible feature of the Mata's mission to serve humanity and alleviate its suffering.[13] Because of the highly personalized way in which she relates to devotees, the Mata succeeds in forging intimate bonds of love with every individual who enters

[11] The Mata's mode of interacting with devotees is unlike that of other gurus and godpersons in India. No other guru in Hindu devotionalist traditions in India is known to make a practice of ritually embracing devotees individually in order to convey his or her love for them. The embrace is novel for two reasons. It is unconventional because of the numerous socially-recognized restrictions on physical contact between people, particularly between men and women. In the Mata's case, she embraces men and women equally. Besides, physical contact between guru (or god) and devotee is usually known to be an expression of inequality between the two. The devotee touches the guru's feet, thereby acknowledging his/her lowly status compared to that of the guru, or alternatively, the devotee prostrates him/herself on the ground before the guru, and the guru, reciprocally, blesses the latter by placing his/her hand briefly on the devotee's head. The Mata, by embracing devotees individually, appears to do away with such extreme forms of inequality, and seems instead to reinforce the metaphorical mother–child relationship, with its key motifs of surrender and love, which is implied, but seldom *physically* expressed, in other devotionalist traditions.

[12] Typically these public programmes are a combination of two or more of the following items—a discourse by the Mata or one of her disciples, a *bhajan* (prayer singing) session led by the Mata, *darshan* (when devotees individually receive the Mata's embrace) and puja (congregational rituals of worhip in which all present participate, performing the ritual in unison according to instructions issued by the Mata).

[13] The Mission's monthly publication, *Matruvani*, as well as its website, provides updates of the Mata's tour schedules in India and abroad. They also provide news updates on the important events at MAM branches and centres across the world.

her fold. It is this individual tie between guru and devotee that constitutes the cornerstone of the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission. Ties between devotees, where they exist, pale into insignificance in comparison.

The second important aspect of the Mata's religious style that is of particular relevance to this discussion is the importance she attaches to this-worldly rather than other-worldly concerns. She appears as an avatar concerned first and foremost with alleviating humanity's everyday suffering. Most crucial to her reputation as an avatar-guru are the countless miracles attributed to her. Devotees cherish every opportunity to narrate their own and others' experiences of miracles worked by the Mata. These include stories of how she heals the sick and dying, how she miraculously solves the financial problems of her devotees, rids alcoholics of their addiction, grants childless couples the boon of children, blesses the jobless with employment, resolves family disputes and settles marital discord. All of this the Mata is believed to effect simply by making a divine resolve, a *sankalpa*, willing that her devotees' wishes may be granted.

The same preoccupation with this-worldly concerns is evident in her efforts to establish schools, orphanages, hospitals and other institutions to serve society's various needs. This is not to say that the Mata's teachings are devoid of an other-worldly component. Her message to her devotees (which I shall examine in some detail in a later section) include such soteriological elements as the doctrine of karma and transmigration of the soul, and the belief that to attain salvation or *moksha*, the individual must secure release from the *samsarik* cycle of birth, death and rebirth. This other-worldly focus, however, in the Mata's scheme of things, does not compete with, but instead complements, her engagement with matters of this world. The complementarity between the other-worldly and this-worldly aspects of the Mata's message is most evident in the rituals and other religious practices she prescribes to her devotees. *Grahadosha nivarana* pujas, one of the most popular pujas conducted by the MAM, are a case in point. These are pujas intended to counter malefic planetary influences (*grahadosha*) in one's horoscope at particular points in time, thus ensuring one's well-being during the specified period of inauspiciousness.[14] This type of puja is believed to result in

[14] See Fuller 1992: 241–5 and Pugh 1983 on planetary affliction or *grahadosha* as a common explanation for misfortune in India, and the measures taken to counter the affliction. Astrology is a vastly popular aspect of contemporary Hinduism, as borne out by the numerous websites on the internet which offer astrological predic-

material prosperity for the practitioners, ensure their good health and longevity, and secure the well-being of their offspring. It is thus expected to yield specific this-worldly awards. Simultaneously, it is also believed to reduce the negative karmic residues accumulated by the practitioners over several previous lives, and thereby hasten their progress towards ultimate salvation or *moksha*.

The Mata Amritanandamayi Mission's main emphasis is thus on alleviating immediate worldly suffering, and the Mata's prescribed rituals, her teachings, and indeed her very personality as a compassionate mother-figure are geared towards this end. Religion in this case is geared more towards questions pertaining to life-in-this-world than with questions of an other-worldly nature, and the former constitutes the major testing ground for religion to prove its modern efficacy. From the point of view of the Mata's devotees, it is her ability to provide solutions to their everyday problems that is the ultimate yardstick for evaluating her authenticity and legitimacy and indeed efficacy as a modern guru and goddess.

India's Urban 'Middle Classes'

The Mata's following consists of large numbers of Indian as well as foreign devotees, the latter mostly from the rich countries of the West. This study, as I noted at the outset, focuses on the Mata's Indian devotees, most of whom are educated, affluent Hindus living in India or abroad.[15] These persons belong, by their own reckoning, to the much-talked-of, yet somewhat nebulous and indistinct category that has come to be known as India's 'middle classes'. There are no clear markers to indicate the precise occupational ranks, income levels or educational achievements that define the middle

tions of one's future on the basis of the date and time of one's birth, and offer advice on appropriate action based on these readings. Particularly noteworthy among these is the astrology link maintained by the popular Indian website *Rediff on the Net* (www.rediff.com) which promises to ascertain one's 'karma index' for a specified number of years upon payment of a fee. The 'karma index', this site claims, 'combines the ancient principles of Vedic Astrology with modern information technology for predictions with mathematical precision'.

[15] The Mata does have a small non-Hindu (Christian and Muslim) following within India as also a small number of low income devotees from urban and rural backgrounds, mostly the beneficiaries of her charitable ventures. Both in terms of numbers, as well as the extent of their involvement in the Mission's activities, these individuals constitute only a tiny fraction of her total Indian following, the bulk of which comprises hundreds of thousands of urban affluent middle class Hindus.

classes as a separate and distinct category. Yet India's 'middle classes' are the subject of much discussion and debate in the popular Indian press, as well as in academic writings on India. These 'middle classes', though small in size in relation to the rest of the population, are widely said to comprise, in absolute terms, a sizeable constituency of more than 200 million, that is, over 20 per cent of the country's total population of just over a billion.[16]

In the existing literature on present-day India, there are relatively few ethnographic studies of what it means to be 'middle class' in a contemporary Indian context. What we do have is extensive historical literature on India's colonial intelligentsia (an important constituent of the 'middle classes' of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), who have been seen as disproportionately important in contributing to the rise of 'modern' nationalist ideologies and political organizations in the colonial period. The category that is today recognizable as India's 'middle classes' has swelled in size considerably since the days of colonial rule. In the early-to-mid twentieth century, the main constituents of the 'middle classes' were primarily cosmopolitan anglophone intelligentsia in the liberal professions, as well as business and commercial groups.[17] After Independence, and particularly in the closing decades of the twentieth century, there have been many new recruits to the 'middle classes' owing mainly to the growth of Indian industry, and the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1980s. Industrialization and liberalization opened up new opportunities in India's business and service sectors, led to rising incomes, and increased the purchasing power of upwardly mobile persons in urban India who benefited from these new developments. Significant numbers of wealthy farmers too spread their networks of interest into the commercial and service sectors, and joined the ranks of the middle classes. In the 1980s and 1990s, media and business attention came to focus on India's expanding middle classes

[16] There are no clear estimates of the size of India's middle classes. Varma (1998) describes several attempts in the 1990s (the early years of India's post-liberalization era) to define them in terms of income levels and consumption patterns. Those making these attempts (government-sponsored research organizations, as well as private industrial concerns) are not agreed on the yardsticks for delineating the middle classes. 'Several figures were bandied about', writes Varma (1998: 170), 'ranging from 200 million to 500 million'. From Varma's discussion, it appears that 200 million would serve as a modest but not unrealistic estimate of the size of India's preponderantly Hindu middle class population.

[17] See Gordon 1978; Ray 1979; Markovits 1985; Varma 1998; C. A. Bayly 1983; Joshi 2001.

and their 'insatiable propensity to consume'. At international forums they emerged as a key selling point for India, bearing testimony to India's economic progress, and promising a vast potential market for foreign investors.[18]

India's 'middle classes' have been an important focus of recent commentaries on the resurgence of Hindu nationalism in India since the 1980s.[19] Many such commentaries posit a direct correlation between the expansion of the middle classes since the 1980s, and the rise of Hindu nationalist forces in the same period, arguing that present-day Hindus suffer from a sense of alienation and defeat as a result of the legacy of India's colonial experience and their own exposure to post-colonial modernity.[20] Similar arguments are advanced also to explain the enthusiastic participation of modern middle class Indian urbanites in high profile and popular guru organizations. It is these explanations to which I now turn.

Commentaries on the religious orientations of contemporary India's urban middle class Hindus invariably point to a perceived lack of one kind or another in their lives which they purportedly seek to compensate by participating in a guru faith and/or by owing allegiance to the cause of Hindu nationhood. According to this argument, the lives of these urban middle classes are characterized by a sense of rootlessness, alienation and anomie (Varma: 1998). Firstly, (it is argued), they have lost their anchoring in traditional Indian social support systems such as joint families, village communities, and caste networks, and find themselves adrift in the inhospitable and alienating environment of India's towns and cities which are 'singularly deficient in institutions of community interaction' (*ibid.*: 139). They are therefore in search of a sense of belonging, security and anchoring in new and alternative communities. Secondly, succeeding generations of urbanites see themselves as having increasingly 'lost touch' with the values, traditions, and belief systems of previous generations and feel a sense of being adrift in a world which appears inhospitable and hostile owing to the high degree of com-

[18] See Misra 1961; Frankel 1988; Khanna 1987; Lakha 1999; Ninan 1990, Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995; Varma 1998.

[19] Freitag 1996: 26; Shah 1991: 2921; Chibber and Mishra 1993: 665–72; Parikh 1993: 684.

[20] See Nandy 1985, 1990, 1995; Madan 1987, 1997; Chatterjee 1986, 1993, 1997; Baxi and Parekh 1995. The over-simplified and essentializing assertions of these writers have been challenged by Khilnani 1997; Baber 1996; Vanaik 1997; C. A. Bayly 1985, 1998; Upadhyaya 1992; Basu and Subrahmanyam (eds) 1996.

petition, lack of fellow feeling, cynicism and corruption in India's urban sprawls. Thirdly, the argument goes, they also encounter, in urban India's modern environment, changes of an unprecedented nature, with which they find themselves incapable of keeping pace, and whose very rapidity and scale they find traumatic and stressful. The uncertainties and anxieties that accompany this fast pace of change leaves them hankering after the imagined certitudes and securities of a more 'stable' past.

It is in such a climate of uncertainty, rootlessness and alienation, it is further argued, that religious ideologies, religious organizations, and religious leaders come to thrive as an effective compensation for the middle class urbanite's perceived sense of lack. Membership in religious organizations provides a refuge against the impersonal social structures of a modern urban environment. By invoking the certitudes and simplicities of an idealized past, religion bolsters the individual's capacity to face up to the uncertainties of fast-paced city life. As a repository of ultimate 'truths', religion puts the individual back in the centre of a social and moral order grounded in absolute values. Given religion's ability to effectively address the very problems encountered by India's middle class urbanites, it is only logical (it may be inferred) that modern India should witness an intensified religiosity among these sections of its population.

In much of the literature on modern guru organizations in contemporary India one encounters this line of argument. This is true of extant studies of Sathya Sai Baba, undoubtedly the most popular guru in India today, who claims to be an incarnation of Shiva and Shakti.[21] As in the case of Mata Amritanandamayi, with Sathya Sai

[21] On Sathya Sai Baba, see Swallow 1982; Taylor 1987; Babb 1987, 1991; Chryssides 1999 (179–93) and White 1972. Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988: 53–5) discuss Sai Baba's urban middle class following in Sri Lanka, where he is incorporated into Buddhist faith as an incarnation of Buddha. The Baba's rise to prominence in the 1940s as a spiritual leader from Andhra Pradesh in south India pre-dates that of Mata Amritanandamayi by nearly four decades. His 'mission' as an avatar, he claims, is to restore the four principles of *satya* (truth), *dharma* (duty or righteousness), *shanti* (peace) and *prema* (divine love) to the world (Chryssides 1999). Though there are marked differences in the individual styles and personalities of the two gurus, the similarities are noteworthy. They are both individual bearers of charismatic authority who have attained legitimacy independent of affiliation to any prior lineage. Both follow in the tradition of *bhakti*, yet the religious styles of each reveal a marked eclecticism that allows devotees considerable freedom in choosing their particular spiritual method or approach. Both have attained international renown, commanding a sizeable following outside India, particularly in the Western world. Within India, both head vast institutional empires, which run not only spiritual but also charitable, educational, and medical enterprises. Both gurus

Baba too the bulk of his following in India comprises educated middle class urbanites. In explaining Sathya Sai Baba's appeal, Swallow (1982) argues that his devotees, mainly of high-caste background, feel threatened by a social environment they can no longer control as they once did. In the new towns and the newer suburban sectors of old towns, areas where Sathya Sai Baba's following is most evident, Swallow argues, it is often extremely difficult to maintain the traditional Hindu cycle of religious observances, or to maintain a network of dependent ritual service caste families. Meritocracy has, in principle, replaced caste ideologies, and old service castes are forced to compete with newcomers. Traditional patterns of authority are threatened. Gender roles are shifting and women demand more freedom than they were granted in the past. All of this, according to Swallow, results in these urban dwellers having to constantly make accommodations in every aspect of their social and religious life. Many persons see the present situation as one in which order has disappeared. In such a 'disordered' world, Sathya Sai Baba holds a special appeal. He not only reinforces his devotees' view that Indian society has lost its sense of order, but also holds out the promise of restoring order. Many of Sathya Sai Baba's devotees, Swallow observes, are men and women who feel themselves divorced from their own religious tradition. Sathya Sai Baba succeeds in demonstrating that traditional methods can still solve contemporary problems and that the Hindu religious tradition is still a living force.

The psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar (1984) advances a similar argument about Mata Nirmala Devi, an internationally renowned contemporary Indian guru and healer credited with many miraculous cures, who too attracts educated urbanites from India's middle classes.[22] Kakar's argument hinges on what he describes as the 'modern predicament' in contemporary India. He attributes the

are renowned for their miracle-working abilities. In the case of Sathya Sai Baba, the miracles are of an overt, demonstrative nature and are usually effected in full public view. Babb (1987: 178) notes how Sai Baba sometimes calls his miracles his 'visiting cards', signs of his divine powers by which he may be known for what he really is. His most popular miracle, that of materializing objects out of thin air, has earned him the reputation (in some sceptical quarters) of a cheap conjuror or magician who hoodwinks gullible devotees with his conjuring tricks. The Mata's miracles are more 'subtle' and are seldom openly demonstrated in public. They are mostly experienced at an individual, personal level by devotees who then attribute the supposedly miraculous developments in their private lives to divine intervention by the Mata.

[22] See Coney 1999 for a study of Mata Nirmala Devi's following in the West.

increasing popularity of guru organizations in recent times to the destabilizing forces of change overtaking Indian society. The forces of industrialization, urbanization and secularization, along with their companion ethic of rationalism, he argues, have resulted in a shattering of the socio-cultural order of Indian society. Under these stressful conditions, when more and more people begin to feel helpless, alienated and disoriented, and find that the society they live in is meaningless and normless, they are attracted by the appeal of a guru or spiritual guide who holds forth the promise of providing meaning to their lives. In particular, it is India's 'transitional sector', the newly urbanized emerging middle classes, Kakar argues, who serve as a 'natural reservoir of cults'. These people are neither the 'traditional majority' nor the minuscule minority of the highly modernized and westernized. For them membership in a guru's following provides a much-needed social anchor, and a new group identity that can replace village or caste community (*ibid.*: 214). The 'cult' or guru organization thus stands in between the individual and the impersonal institutions of an urban society.

How far do these explanations reflect the everyday lived realities of modern India's urban middle classes? The constituencies from which Sathya Sai Baba, Mata Amritanandamayi and Mata Nirmala Devi draw their followers overlap to a considerable extent. Thus many of the devotees of Mata Amritanandamayi whom I met and interviewed were, for instance, either simultaneously also devotees of Sathya Sai Baba and/or Mata Nirmala Devi, or had been so at some point in the past before shifting their loyalties to Mata Amritanandamayi. My findings based on fieldwork among devotees of Mata Amritanandamayi casts serious doubts on many of the claims and assumptions made in these earlier studies regarding the sense of 'lack' experienced by middle class urbanites in India. These studies suffer from two important failings. In the first place, they fail to provide ethnographic evidence bearing on the actual lived experiences, attitudes and lifestyles of middle class persons. Mostly, the available observations about the sense of lack in the lives of middle class persons appear speculative rather than based on concrete evidence. Secondly, the category 'middle classes' is itself far too vague, including as it does people from a range of different educational backgrounds and occupational categories, with varying income levels and consumer preferences. Speculating about the lives of India's urban 'middle classes' without sufficiently situating the persons concerned in the context of their particular lifestyles as well as their

educational and occupational backgrounds, results in the kind of sweeping generalizations we encounter in the existing literature about the religious lives and attitudes of India's 'middle classes'.

It is therefore worthwhile to take a fresh look at the arguments previously advanced, to explore which persons from within India's 'middle classes' are attracted to modern gurus and why. Do most devotees of popular gurus like Sathya Sai Baba and Mata Amritanandamayi indeed experience a sense of alienation and anomie in modern India's urban environment? Is urban India in fact as 'singularly deficient in institutions of community interaction' as it is made out to be? Do these devotees in fact feel they have lost touch with their religious and ritual traditions? Do they indeed perceive themselves as traumatized and stressed by their supposed inability to deal with the rapid pace of change in modern urban India? In the next section I attempt to answer these questions by examining in some detail the devotees of Mata Amritanandamayi with whom I interacted during my own fieldwork-based study of the Mata and her following.

Mata Amritanandamayi's Urban Devotees—A Profile

Among the devotees of the Mata I met in the course of my fieldwork, there were persons descended from the older middle class intelligentsias of early and mid twentieth-century India, as well as newer recruits to this category, mainly first or second generation migrants to India's metropolitan cities. They included government officials, lawyers, doctors, teachers, college lecturers, journalists, managers in multi-national corporations or in smaller private concerns, computer software personnel, engineers and scientists. Though there are wide variations in the income levels of these persons, they do share some broad similarities in several important respects. Most of them are English-speaking, well-to-do urbanites in white-collar employment (many in the newer and more prestigious occupations involving high-tech skills, with comparatively high earnings). Most have had a formal education up to graduate level, and many are highly qualified in specialized areas such as medicine, information technology, business management and engineering. Though the majority are persons from high caste backgrounds, it is true for most of these individuals, as Béteille (1991a) argues, that the ideology of meritocracy has, to some extent, displaced that of ascription. Thus their social and eco-

nomic status derives not from their place in a given caste hierarchy,[23] but from their capital, credentials, and expertise. Their lifestyles vary considerably but many of them own at least a house and a car, which places them in a small but significant minority of Indians who can afford such luxuries in an otherwise poor country. Most share the same aspirations regarding the kind of consumption standards they would like to achieve and maintain, and the kind of futures they envisage for their children. Many of these persons also command transnational connections and operate in a world of accelerated flows of capital, technology and information across countries. Among the devotees of the Mata whom I met, many had travelled abroad, to study or work or to visit close relatives resident in foreign countries.

The most distinctive feature of these persons is their perception of good education as vital to ensure their economic mobility and access to global opportunities. They try to secure, for themselves, or as the case may be, for their sons and daughters, entry to prestigious schools and universities, even if it means paying a 'capitation fee' to enter.[24] These serve as springboards to educational opportunities overseas in the USA, UK, Canada and Australia. Many of my informants already had sons and daughters studying in universities abroad where they sought to cultivate an international professional identity and gain access to business and career opportunities world-wide. These individuals place education at a premium not only because of its value as a means to upward mobility, but also because of its symbolic value. Education serves as an important status marker, distinguishing those with an English-medium education in a prestigious school or university from others who, having received instruction in an Indian regional language, lack the resources to seize higher and better opportunities in the educational and professional fields.

Along with the value they attach to education, the premium they place on commodity consumption too is central to the construction of social identity and status among my informants. Most of them reveal a keen awareness of consumer items available in the market. Shopping is a prime occupation to fill leisure hours. Individual orientations to shopping however differ drastically from one family to the next. Those at the lower end of the income scale such as government officials and university lecturers generally appear anxious to

[23] See S. Bayly 1999, especially chapters 8 and 9, on the complex issue of caste identities in modern India.

[24] Kaul 1993.

shop at places where they can bargain and get goods at the lowest possible prices. Others more flush with money, especially young managers and software experts in well-paid jobs in multinational companies, are often concerned more with prestigious brand names than with cost cutting. India's economic liberalization which has brought about an influx of foreign investments in Indian industry, as well as access to foreign television through satellite transmission, has facilitated, for these persons, an unprecedented exposure to global economic and cultural influences. This is reflected in the consumer aspirations of my informants which tend increasingly to certain 'globalized' standards, though not to the exclusion of local cultural sensibilities. Consumer items such as Barbie dolls and Nike sportswear, television soaps like *Santa Barbara* and *NYPD Blue*, fast-food centres like Pizza Hut and Burger King, are, for some, a part of their everyday world, and for others, an important component of the worlds they aspire to. So also are self-consciously 'ethnic' eating places, chic Indian boutiques and popular Indian-language television serials.[25] As Pinches (1999) rightly points out, consumer items operate for most of these individuals as principal signifiers of social status and achievement. There are thus certain 'positional goods' (*ibid.*: 32) that are important markers separating the more well-off urbanites from the less advantaged—these include cars, often in the latest models, expensive dwellings, clothes with designer labels, meals bought at expensive restaurants and modern fast-food centres, expensive holiday package tours, recreational facilities, and mobile phones.

This consumer culture is evident equally in less tangible spheres of urban middle class life, most notably that of religious preference. The urban environs of contemporary India provide a wide range of religious and spiritual wares for their ready consumption, including devotionalism centering on gurus, rites and rituals concerned with temple worship, courses on techniques of spiritual and physical healing, and religious discourses and conferences to name but a few.[26]

[25] See Appadurai and Breckenridge (1995), Ninan (1990), Robison and Goodman (1996).

[26] The recent revolution in the means of communication (particularly since the mid-1980s) in India and the impact of the mass media have contributed to a spurt in religious and spiritual awareness among India's urban middle classes. Myriad journals and magazines on religion and spirituality, television programmes on a multiplicity of religious organizations and leaders, and advertisements in the print and electronic media announcing the inauguration of a temple here or the observance of a religious festival there, all contribute to this awareness of the range and

The more high-profile religious institutions attract participants from the more affluent sections of society who can contribute towards the growth and publicity of the respective organizations and their leaders, either through donations in cash and kind, or through the circles of influence that they command in the higher echelons of India's business and political circles.

Is it the hope of finding a sense of belonging in a community of adherents that attracts persons from India's urban middle classes to modern religious and spiritual institutions? My study of Mata Amritanandamayi's followers leads me to conclude otherwise. None of the Mata's devotees whom I interviewed appeared to 'miss' a sense of community in their urban environment. Most of them claimed to share close ties with members of their extended family, either resident in the same city, or geographically dispersed yet closely in touch with one another through modern means of communication. For many, their immediate 'social circle' comprises friends from the educational institutions where they studied, colleagues at their work place, or even neighbours. Many are members of groups like social clubs, alumni associations and neighbourhood welfare committees. India's modern urban environment, as these persons experience it, is certainly not, it appears, the breeding ground for alienation, isolation and anonymity that previous scholars have made it out to be. Some of my informants claimed they preferred not to socialize extensively simply because their commitments at home and in the workplace left them little or no time. In the course of their everyday lives most see little or nothing of their fellow devotees, and prefer to keep things that way.

Similarly, none of these persons expressed any anxiety about 'losing touch' with their religious traditions. All of the devotees I met, almost without exception, claimed to have gained their early orientation to religious faith and observance from their parents and grandparents. A significant number of my informants claimed they had felt dissatisfied with the 'mechanical' and 'ritualistic' religious observances and 'blind faith' of their parents, and sought greater 'meaning' in their own religious lives. This 'meaning' they found by seeking guidance from a guru like the Mata, by listening to discourses and sermons delivered by religious scholars, and/or by

diversity in religious options and possibilities. Pamphlets and newsletters, posters, audio tapes and video cassettes circulate widely to provide potential devotees with a sampling of the available spiritual and religious wares. See Babb and Wadley (eds) 1995.

acquainting themselves with Hindu philosophical and/or religious texts and commentaries. Others who had not been actively searching for meaning of any sort, claimed to have found this meaning almost serendipitously, through a chance encounter with, and subsequent surrender to, their guru. Rather than worry about 'losing touch' with existing traditions then, most of the Mata's devotees were concerned about the 'meaninglessness' of traditional faith and practice as they had known them, and sought to replace these with what they claim is a more informed, meaningful and reflective approach to religion.

Just as my informants were not unduly anxious that they were 'losing touch' with Hindu traditions, they were not, also, particularly concerned with issues of 'Hindu' identity. During my fieldwork, I discovered that devotees of the Mata were not centrally concerned with questions of nationhood and Hindu nationalism. Hindutva was certainly not a favourite topic of conversation among my informants, and even when pressed to comment on aspects of politicized religion in the country, their answers were mostly vague and disinterested. Some claimed they did not know enough about the Hindutva phenomenon to comment on it, others denounced Hindutva campaigners as 'fanatics' and self-seeking political manipulators. Most devotees were keen to draw a distinction between 'spirituality' (which is how they preferred to describe their faith in the Mata) and the 'politicised religion' of Hindutva campaigners. The latter, in their view, is divisive and seeks to define a 'community' of adherents by constructing boundaries between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', whereas the former is a private quest concerned with individual self-enhancement rather than community or nation building.[27]

It is certainly true for most of these persons that they have encountered (and continue to encounter), in the course of their lifetime, large-scale transformations in the objective conditions of their existence owing to the acceleration in transnational flows of capital, technology and information following India's economic liberalization, the modernization of India's telecommunications, the opening of new educational as well as career opportunities, and the growing preference for cosmopolitan lifestyles. It is these objective transformations,

[27] Many of Heelas' (1996) observations regarding the New Age movement, especially with regard to its language of self spirituality, its emphasis on self actualization, self enhancement and adherents' assumption of self responsibility in realizing the spiritual goal, are true of the Mata's devotees as well. These devotees are concerned primarily with self growth and inner experience, and do not appear greatly concerned about issues pertaining to religious and/or national identity.

as Miller (1994) rightly argues, which finally transform the sense of change in the modern world from something constant and gradual to something accelerating exponentially, and which create an overwhelming sense of the compression of time and space (*ibid.*: 65–6). It would be incorrect to assume, however, that this change is experienced by the entire range of India's middle classes as overwhelmingly stressful, traumatic and alienating. On the contrary, most of the devotees of Mata Amritanandamayi whom I encountered were individuals who had benefited vastly from the changing conditions in India's political economy, and who had done well for themselves by seizing the education and job related opportunities that had come their way. For the majority of these individuals, their experience of the unprecedented pace and scale of change in modern India's urban environment has resulted not so much in a sense of despair and failure, as in the hope of increasing possibilities and multiplying opportunities. Most importantly, it has meant a growing awareness of multiple choices in every sphere of life, including that of religion. This awareness of the diverse opportunities confronting them, and the recognition of individual choice as key to negotiating life in a 'modern' world, are centrally important, as I shall demonstrate in the next section, to understanding why significant numbers of India's educated middle class urbanites are attracted to modern gurus like Sathya Sai Baba and Mata Amritanandamayi.

Individual Choice in the Modern Guru's Fold

The religion one encounters in many of contemporary India's high profile modern guru organizations is most importantly a religion of choice. It is this, I argue, that makes participation in these organizations particularly attractive to sizeable sections of India's educated middle classes. There are two crucial and closely related elements central to this notion of choice. Firstly, choice means *personal freedom* to create for oneself a religious life conducive to one's particular individual tastes and dispositions. Secondly, choice also means *self-authorship* of a highly personalized form of religious faith. Religion in this sense is no longer rooted in past traditions and handed down in a taken-for-granted way from one generation to the next; it is instead personally constructed by the individual concerned to suit his specific inclinations and requirements. In constructing this personalized religion, the individual makes selections from a wide array of elements

that he or she encounters in his/her religious environment. Guru organizations are a visible aspect of one's immediate environment in contemporary urban India, and each such organization offers its own particular repertoire of religious elements for the individual to choose from. In what follows, I shall elaborate on these themes of individual choice, freedom and personal authorship in the context of religious faith and practice within the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission.

Choosing one's Guru

Devotees of Mata Amritanandamayi often deny that their attachment to the Mata was the result of conscious choice. Some devotees claim that a 'matching of chemistries' between guru and devotee determines which guru is right for which potential follower. Others claim that it is not for the devotee to choose his or her guru, but for the guru to choose her devotees and introduce them into her fold when she feels these individuals are spiritually 'mature' enough to receive her divine ministrations. In all of this, devotees more often than not deny exercising any personal agency in establishing a relationship with their guru and entering her fold as devotees.

Despite this denial of personal agency in their guru devotion, these same devotees revealed, in the course of extended interviews, significant considerations which influenced what was in fact their active choice of the Mata as their guru. Most devotees, it appeared, had sampled several gurus prior to meeting the Mata. Often they advanced specific reasons as to why one or the other of these other gurus had failed to impress them.[28] Kishore,[29] a middle-aged devotee employed as a manager in a private firm in Delhi, observed how his experience of the gurus of the Divine Life Society in Rishikesh[30] in

[28] Most devotees are emphatic in their assertion that it is incorrect and unwise to be judgemental about gurus and godpersons, since they belong to a plane of being which is incomprehensible to ordinary mortals. Despite this, however, there is a great deal of discussion among devotees of the Mata about different gurus, and their relative merits and limitations.

[29] In accordance with my informants' requests for anonymity, I have used pseudonyms in place of their real names throughout this paper.

[30] The Divine Life Society, founded by Swami Sivananda in 1936, is notably different from the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission in its emphasis on intellectualism, philosophical understanding and scholarship, rather than devotion, as the mainstay of spiritual progress. For Kishore, this stress on intellectualism presents itself as an unbridgeable gap between the lay devotee and the learned monks of the organiza-

north India had left him cold, mainly because he found them far too impersonal in their dealings with lay followers, and intellectually far too high-brow in their teachings. Of all the gurus he had met, he said, he found the Mata by far the most personable and loving. Her teachings, he felt, were simple and easy to follow, and these were clearly important factors that led him to 'surrender' to her 'divine' love. Another devotee, an elderly Congressman and Member of Parliament in Delhi, spoke of his encounter with the Shankaracharya of Kanchi, who, he felt, never descended from his high 'pedestal' in his dealings with lay persons, and was far too status-conscious for this individual's taste.[31] He contrasted the Shankaracharya's style with that of the Mata, claiming for her an intimacy and accessibility which he found attractive and engaging.

Needless to say there are any number of individuals who, after sampling the Mata's religious style, have chosen not to enter her fold as devotees. One such person, a woman in her early fifties holding a doctorate in botany and working as a research officer in a herb garden in Kerala, had found the Mata's religious style unattractive. In particular she had found the teachings of the Mata overly simplistic, even 'childish' and therefore not intellectually stimulating enough to win her appreciation. This person frequently attended religious discourses and spiritual training sessions organized by various religious institutions. She had sampled several gurus in the past, yet had never felt inspired to 'surrender' to any of these persons. She therefore preferred to let her religious life take its own course independent of any kind of guru affiliation.

Clearly, guru affiliation and attachment is the result of active decision making and choosing on the part of devotees.[32] This

tion. On the Divine Life Society and its founder, see Miller 1991. This spiritual organization too commands a substantial following both in India and abroad, and has centres in most of India's big cities and towns.

[31] See Mines and Gurishankar 1990 for a vivid ethnographic account of the various dealings of this 'South Indian big-man'.

[32] The act of choosing between gurus is rendered highly complicated by the commonly prevalent fear that a guru or godperson may not be 'genuine'. This fear is fanned by the numerous stories that circulate through local gossip channels, or are prominently publicized in the mass media, about gurus being exposed as con-men (and women) with criminal connections, using their spirituality as a facade for making money, or sexual predators using the mask of their celibacy to run clandestine sex rackets. Two of the most controversial guru figures in India in recent times have been Chandraswami and the late 'Bhagwan' Rajneesh. Chandraswami's myriad political connections and intrigues as well as money-making rackets made him a much-maligned figure in the popular press in the 1980s. Rajneesh, through-

aspect—that of devotees *making choices* between gurus and/or between the various other spiritual wares available to them in present-day urban India—is one that has received little or no attention in the existing literature on modern Indian gurus.[33] Given the vast array of gurus in India's teeming urban spiritual supermarket, each with his or her own distinctive message and style of relating to devotees, individuals on the lookout for a guru are forced to make active and careful choices from among the countless alternatives available for their ready sampling. For devotees of Mata Amritanandamayi, their attachment to her is the result of their free and individual choice and selection. This same freedom to choose, as I shall argue in the following section, may at a later stage cause some of them to want to reject their chosen guru-faith in favour of other, more satisfying forms of religious engagement.

Experiencing Divine Love

Most devotees who make the choice to enter the Mata's fold do so on the strength of their personal experience of the Mata's 'divine love'. Devotees claim to first experience this love when the Mata takes them in her arms and embraces them. According to devotees' narratives, the initial embrace and the tears it often generates leads on to a sense of tremendous relief and a feeling of divine protection. After entering the Mata's fold, most devotees claim to experience

out his career until 1990 as an international guru with a large American following, invited media attention for his sensational teachings, the most widely known of which was his advocacy of sex as a path to enlightenment. (See Mitchener 1992: 16, 116–13; Carter 1987, 1990; Mehta 1993.) Both gurus faced allegations of corruption in the course of their careers as gurus, and fell into disrepute among sections of the Indian public. Sathya Sai Baba too has for some time been under a cloud of controversy with ex-devotees making allegations of murder, sexual abuse and financial racketeering within his organization. (See for instance Menon and Malik 2000.)

[33] The issue of religious choice has, in the context of western Europe and north America, invited much attention from sociologists and anthropologists who have been concerned to explore the spurt of new religious movements in the West since the 1960s, and the resulting multiplicity of religious and spiritual alternatives. Coney (1999), in her study of the Western followers of Mata Nirmala Devi, explores at some length the issue of potential devotees exercising choice and free will at the point of entry into the guru's fold. The same themes need equally to be explored in non-western contexts, and especially in the context of urban India, to see how potential adherents choose between different ways of interpreting and practising what we broadly understand as 'Hinduism' in the contemporary world.

this sense of love and protectedness not just sporadically when they are in the Mata's presence, but in a more abiding way. At moments of crisis, according to devotees, they see evidence of the Mata's divine protection when 'miraculous' happenings keep them out of harm's way. Devotees claim that this sense of being watched over fortifies them so that in due course they are able to face life's numerous ups and downs with a certain calmness and emotional maturity. Most devotees come to see the Mata as controlling every aspect of their lives, such that the smallest piece of chance or good/bad fortune comes to have meaning in terms of the Mata's divine workings.

'Experiencing' the Mata's love is thus the mainstay of devotion in the MAM. Devotees are unanimous in their opinion that in order to understand the Mata, one has to experience her.[34] When devotees narrate their 'experiences', they narrate episodes in their lives which, they feel, elude rational explanation and which they therefore attribute to the Mata's divine intervention. These experiences are disparate, and focused more on the inner subjectivity of the self than on the Mata's external authoritative voice. Perhaps because the 'experiences' are not collective, but instead extremely personal and individual, most devotees are keen to share their 'experiences' with others. Several of the Mission's publications carry personal narratives of such experiences. The following is an instance of one such narrative describing a devotee's experience of the Mata's divine intervention in his life, as he faced a moment of danger on a motorway in England.[35]

As I approached the motorway there were no street lights and the three lanes narrowed to one lane because of the roadworks. 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

[34] This emphasis on 'experience' on the part of Mata Amritanandamayi's devotees bears comparison with the centrality of individual, personal 'experience' in popular charismatic and evangelical movements in north American, west European as also Latin American and African societies. See Cartledge 1998, Percy 1998.

[35] This narrative is based on a typescript given to me by the narrator, a Tamilian settled in England. It had previously appeared in a local newsletter, *Friends of Amma*, produced by, and circulated among, Mata Amritanandamayi devotees in the UK.

Devotees often refer to the Mata as Amma, which means 'Mother' in Malayalam, the Mata's native language.

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.

Miraculous experiences of the kind narrated by this individual serve to fortify and legitimize devotees' faith in the Mata. What happens, however, when personal experiences proving the Mata's divine love are not forthcoming? Devotees have two options when they find that their devotion to the Mata does not yield the expected dividends. They may either turn their attention to other gurus and look for miraculous experiences elsewhere, or they may persist in their devotion to the Mata and intensify their efforts to win her grace and protection, attributing her perceived reticence to inadequacies in their own devotion. It is up to the individual to decide which of these two options he or she wishes to choose. Those who choose to stay often see the former option of drifting from guru to guru in the hope of tangible rewards as immature and futile. Rather than be a 'tourist' of gurus, they prefer to stick with their chosen one and strive for spiritual gain under this chosen guru's mentorship. For many such persons, their experience of the Mata's love comes to be based not on their expectations of miraculous happenings in their lives but on a new orientation to life itself which sees every incident, every chance happening as proof of her grace and protection. They come to see 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 town, as miraculous experiences of the Mata's love. Equally, they see setbacks in their lives as instances when the Mata 'tests' the intensity or otherwise of their faith. Such persons derive their sense of self-fulfilment from this unshakable faith in the Mata and from the belief that their constancy, faith and unflinching trust in their chosen guru must yield dividends sooner or later.

For many devotees, however, experience that remains static becomes dull and uninspiring. For spiritual experience to be sufficiently noteworthy to be taken as evidence of the Mata's divine intervention, it needs constant renewal. When they encounter an 'experi-

ential drought' over long periods, they prefer to seek elsewhere what they miss in the Mata's fold. It is very common for individuals therefore to cease to be devotees of the Mata and gradually shift their loyalties elsewhere. Some claim to be disillusioned by the Mata and decisively break off their links with her. Others make the shift more gradually. They continue to sustain their Mata-devotion, however half-heartedly, for a time, even as they increasingly shift their focus to other gurus and/or other organizations in their search for greater self-fulfilment.

What makes it possible for individuals to opt in and out of a guru's fold at will is the nature or configuration of the following that converges around modern gurus like the Mata. This is not a closely bounded 'community' of devotees with clear demarcations between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', but more a 'network' of individuals unconstrained by ties of solidarity and communal bonding. These persons are often attached to more than one guru at a time, and their allegiance to their chosen guru(s) can best be described as 'participation' in the guru's prescribed religious and other activities, rather than as 'membership' in the guru's organization. Clearly the educated middle class devotees of popular gurus like Mata Amritanandamayi define their religious lives not as a given, but as something to be negotiated continuously. Their choice of guru, their acceptance of particular elements of the guru's spiritual prescriptions and rejection of others, as also their decision whether or not to sustain personal loyalty to the chosen guru for any length of time, are all important elements in negotiating a particular religious life. This choice is reversible, and devotees are free to abandon one guru in favour of another, and to negotiate a new religious life based on the new guru's spiritual prescriptions.[36] They see their religious personality as a project, as a set of possibilities and potentialities in which there is the need for active self-fashioning through the making of conscious selections and choices. This freedom to choose, I argue in the next section, extends beyond their selection and/or rejection of a particular

[36] Coney's (1999) observations regarding the experience of persons disengaging themselves from a religious organization to which they were previously attached are significant here. The ease or otherwise with which devotees can break away from a guru's fold would depend, Coney argues, on the extent of their 'socialization' within the organization. In the case of an organization like the MAM, lay devotees, even those intensively 'socialized' within the MAM, can disengage themselves from the Mata's fold with relative ease because of the high value attached by the organization to notions of personal freedom and choice in the matter of religious preference.

guru, to their preferred mode of engagement with the chosen guru's teachings and ritual prescriptions.

Engaging with the Teachings and Religious Prescriptions of the Mata

The MAM does not define itself as a 'Hindu' organization. Though most of the symbols, rituals and meanings in popular use within the MAM derive from a recognizably 'Hindu' repertoire, yet it claims to transcend narrow religious divisions and strives to reach out instead to a multi-religious audience. The Mata as well as many of her devotees and disciples appear to share reservations about the narrow particularisms that the term 'Hinduism' evokes. They prefer to locate the MAM within the tradition of *sanatana dharma* which they see as a 'universal and eternal truth' relevant to all people at all times.[37]

The Mata's teachings are based on the familiar *karma-samsara-moksha* complex of Hindu soteriological belief. According to her, all suffering in this life is caused by negative karmas or actions in past lives and the negative karmic burden that accumulates as a result. In order to eliminate suffering (in this and in future lives), the individual must eliminate this burden accumulated in the past, and strive not to accumulate new karmic burden through present actions. The accumulation of karmic burden takes place because of the individual's engagement with, and attachment to, *samsara*, the everyday material world.[38] The modern world, according to the Mata, is characterized by excessive materialism, consumerism, egotism and selfishness which, she claims, are particularly conducive to the accumulation of negative karmic residues. Striving towards detachment from the material world, cultivating a spirit of selflessness, humility

[37] The Mata's use of this term poses an interesting contrast to its use by the Sanatanists of 19th century British India who saw themselves as champions of Hindu orthodoxy, and campaigned against social and religious 'reform' efforts such as the anti-Brahminical initiatives of the Arya Samaj. The Sanatanists are often labelled as 'opponents of change, enemies of modernisation and Westernisation, reactionaries attempting to stem the tide of history' (Jones 1998: 224). The Mata's version of Sanatana Dharma, in contrast, is remarkable for its heterodoxy and accommodativeness.

[38] The Mata's explanation of human suffering in terms of the Hindu doctrine of karma and rebirth is by no means unique to the MAM. 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 (Keyes and Daniel (eds) 1983; Sharma 1973; O'Flaherty (ed.) 1980).

and love for humanity, overcoming greed and acquisitiveness, are all seen as important steps towards reducing one's negative karmas. It is only by eliminating or at least reducing karmic burden that the individual can ease personal suffering in this world and secure peace and happiness. Sustained effort towards this end must lead, it is believed, to the ultimate spiritual goal of *moksha* or release from the *samsarik* cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

The Mata recommends simple rituals for her devotees to observe as part of their daily religious practice. Important among these are puja (a ritual of worship) and mantra *japa* (the chanting of a personalized mantra). In performing pujas and chanting mantras, devotees have the freedom to conceptualize god in whatever form they like.[39] They may, for instance, conceptualize 'god' in purely abstract and impersonal terms, or as any of the deities of the Hindu pantheon, or even as the guru herself. In the case of non-Hindu devotees, their worship and devotion may, for instance, focus on Christ or the Virgin Mary. In each case, the name of the chosen deity comes to be incorporated within the personalized mantra that the Mata grants devotees on request.[40] Besides puja and the chanting of the mantra, she also

[39] Sarkar 1992 notes this same catholicity in the teachings of the popular 19th century Bengali mystic, Ramakrishna. 'Catholicity for Ramakrishna', Sarkar (*ibid.*, 1553) notes, 'was inseparable from *bhakti*: all forms and paths were valid, provided they were followed with genuine devotion'. This catholicity (which, as Sarkar points out, has now come to be represented as a timeless essence of Hinduism), informed Ramakrishna's attitude towards non-Hindus. In Ramakrishna's words (as quoted by Sarkar): 'There is a pond with three or four *ghats* [banks]. Hindus call what they drink *jal*, Muslims *pani*, the English water. He is called Allah by one, some say Brahma, others Kali, still others Ram, Hari, Jesus or Durga . . .' (*ibid.*, 1533). The same attitude is exemplified in the Mata's teachings as well, and this similarity in the two gurus, separated by nearly a century in time, is a significant factor enhancing the Mata's appeal and establishing her authenticity in the eyes of devotees, many of whom are acquainted with the life and teachings of Ramakrishna (mostly through hearsay, often through familiarity with at least some of the voluminous literature on Ramakrishna, and, in some cases, even through direct involvement with the Ramakrishna Mission). On Ramakrishna and the Ramakrishna Mission see G. M. Williams 1991; Gupta 1974; Radice 1998; Sarkar 1992; Swami Gambhirananda 1957; Beckerlegge 1998, 2000.

[40] The mantra is usually a string of words or sounds repeated in order to aid concentration in meditation. It is not a prayer, but 'a kind of sound form of the deity it embodies' (Parry 1985: 209). It is believed to be potent and powerful and capable of bringing about changes in the chanter's mental and emotional state. Studies of religious sects in India led by renouncer gurus show the signal importance of mantras in initiating neophytes into guru lineages and/or devotionalist traditions. This initiation is the mantra *diksha*. The guru whispers the mantra in the disciple's ear, and with that the disciple is ushered in as one of the group. All members of a given devotionalist order share common knowledge of the tradition's mantra, but it

recommends other simple daily observances such as *nama japa* (chanting the many names of the chosen deity) and *dhyana* (meditation). The Mata Amritanandamayi Mission publishes vast quantities of literature in different languages explaining in great detail the meaning of each of these prescribed rituals and other practices, the correct way of observing each, and the benefits to be derived from their regular observance. In each case the benefits listed span both immediate this-worldly gains as well as long-term salvationary rewards. Though she prescribes rituals which belong by and large to a recognizably 'Hindu' repertoire, the Mata encourages devotees to select from this repertoire only those elements which they see as suited to their personal needs and dispositions, and to follow whatever religious or spiritual path they find most appealing. Entering the Mata's fold therefore does not require that (lay) devotees abandon their prior religious practices or reject the religious faith to which they were previously committed. It does not require that they adopt a radically new religious faith and lifestyle, unless of course they wish to do so.

After entering the Mata's fold, devotees have the option of participating in certain collective rituals and other activities organized by the ashram branch[41] set up at the initiative of the local following in their town or city. These branches are headed by a resident *brahmachari* or ascetic disciple of the Mata officially appointed by the MAM authorities. In some cities the MAM branch also has, attached

remains unknown to outsiders. The mantra in this case serves to distinguish insiders from outsiders and bind the insiders together in a common bond of knowledge and practice (van ver Veer 1988: 71–2; R. B. Williams 1984: 136–42; Juergensmeyer 1991: 95–7). The purpose of the mantra in the MAM is different. It serves not so much to bind the devotees together in an esoteric knowledge of one mantra exclusive to the group, as to establish individual and separate links between each devotee and the Mata, and to aid in the devotee's spiritual endeavours by helping him/her focus, through mantra *japa*, on the favourite object of his/her devotion. Rather than group identity, it is individualilty and diversity that is emphasized here. In this, the Mata marks a radical departure from the beliefs and practices of known guru *sampradayas* or orders, where the guru conventionally binds devotees in common worship to the order's central deity.

[41] The MAM's headquarters in Kerala is referred to as an ashram (spiritual retreat) and the branches elsewhere in the country are referred to as ashram branches. A typical ashram branch comprises a modern building that houses a prayer hall used for collective puja and *bhajan* sessions organized by the presiding *brahmachari*, office rooms for carrying out the ashram's administrative tasks, and residential quarters for the brahmachari as well as for the Mata and her entourage to stay when they come on their annual visit.

to it, a temple established by the MAM called the Brahmasthanam.[42] The *brahmachari* organizes periodic collective rituals and *bhajan* (prayer singing) sessions at the branch premises or at the Brahmasthanam. He also arranges regular religious sermons and discourses (delivered either by himself or by other visiting disciples of the Mata) which the local following is welcome to attend.[43] Whereas some devotees, especially those with considerable free time, participate enthusiastically in these collective activities, others, either disinterested in this aspect of the MAM or too busy to contribute their time and effort to these ventures, prefer to keep their involvement to a minimum.[44] Devotees are allowed complete free-

[42] This temple, both in architecture and in thematic representation, appears as a simplified and abbreviated version of the more complex temple structures characteristic of the southern part of Kerala (Pillai 1985; Stein 1978; Bernier 1982). Within each Brahmasthanam (abode of Brahman—the supreme consciousness or divine essence) the idol or *pratishtha* comprises a single block of stone bearing the images of four different deities—those of Devi, Siva and Ganapati and a serpent god. According to the Mission's literature on the Brahmasthanam, the four images symbolize the principle of unity in diversity, as also of the various stages of an aspirant's spiritual progress. There are Brahmasthanam temples in several MAM centres across India. The idol in each such temple is consecrated by the Mata. Through the ritual of consecration, the Mata is believed to transfer her own divinity to the image and thereby 'energize' it. Daily pujas conducted by her disciples serve to maintain the energy within the image. During the Mata's yearly visits to the temple she conducts special pujas which are believed to re-energize the idol and infuse it anew with divine power.

[43] Often, with the active cooperation of the local following, the resident *brahmachari* mobilizes social welfare efforts such as blood donation camps and free medical care for the poor. These activities belong to a common repertoire of social service engagements undertaken by a wide range of organizations in India including old religious movements like the Arya Samaj (D. Gold 1991), newer right wing groups like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (*ibid.*) as well as devotionalist orders like the Radhasoamis (Juergensmeyer 1991) and the Ramakrishna Mission (Gupta 1974, Beckerlegge 1998). Most religious organizations in India now engage in some charitable and social service activity, mainly because the Indian government requires non-profit religious institutions to divest themselves of their income periodically if they are to retain their tax-exempt status. Spending on medical, educational and other charitable projects is a convenient means of achieving this, and has the added benefit of garnering favourable publicity for the religious organization.

[44] My fieldwork at the ashram branch in Delhi revealed how devotees' involvement with its activities differ widely according to the individual's age, personal commitments, hours of work, family composition, personal energy and drive, health, and income level. Younger people, for instance, engaged in full-time employment and with young children to tend at home, mostly spend no more than a few hours every weekend participating in these activities. Older people, in good health, with fewer family commitments, retired from active service, and leading otherwise unhurried lives, often spend longer hours interacting with fellow devotees and participating in the events organized at the local branch.

dom to decide whether and to what extent they wish to engage with the local MAM branch, and are under no pressure to conform to any given standard in this respect.

It follows from the above description of the Mata's religious style that entry into her fold does not require the entrant to dissolve into a community of like-minded adherents. As free choosers and independent agents working towards their own spiritual development, her devotees enjoy complete autonomy and freedom to engage with the Mata's recommended spiritual practices in whatever manner they choose. There is, as a result, considerable variation between different devotees' orientations to ritual. To illustrate this point I cite below the cases of three of the Mata's devotees I met during my fieldwork in Delhi.

The first is Vasanthi, originally from Kerala, now employed as a lecturer in English literature at the University of Delhi. Vasanthi had been a devotee of the Mata for two years when I met her in late 1997. An articulate and lively individual in her fifties, she lives with her husband, a retired government official, and her son and daughter, in their early thirties, in a middle class residential complex in east Delhi. The entire family is devoted to the Mata. The second is Nirmala, about the same age as Vasanthi, from the western Indian state of Rajasthan, where she spent much of her childhood and youth. After completing her schooling Nirmala did not go on to attend university but married an army officer soon after and assumed the responsibilities of a housewife. She has travelled extensively throughout India, accompanying her husband wherever his army postings took him. She has two grown children and the entire family is now based in Delhi. The third is the case of Kishore, the manager in a private firm in Delhi whom we encountered earlier in connection with his experience of the Divine Life Society in Rishikesh. Kishore lives with his wife and three young children—two daughters and a son—in a well-appointed bungalow in a relatively new industrial township, Noida, on the outskirts of Delhi. Kishore is originally from Punjab in north India, and claims to have been on the lookout for a guru (prior to meeting the Mata) through much of his adult life. Common to all three individuals is their devotion to, and faith in, Mata Amritanandamayi. However, despite this common guru-affiliation, as I shall demonstrate in the following discussion, the religious orientations of these persons differ in some important respects.

The first notable difference lies in these devotees' respective attitudes towards spiritual striving as a legitimate personal goal. Vasan-

thi claims to have learnt, through her engagement with the Mata, the essence of *sanatana dharma* and the true meaning of spirituality as she had never understood it before. In Vasanthi's scheme of things, spiritual striving must lead the aspirant to a state of complete submission to the divine will and eventually, to ultimate 'identification' or 'merger' with the Mata, whom she perceives as the embodiment of supreme and transcendent truth.

> It took me a long time to come to terms with all this . . . She [the Mata] is not an 'other'. She is ourselves. She keeps saying, when you stand on the bank of a river you think there are two banks. Actually there are no two sides—they are the same. The banks are connected—the water of ignorance is rushing through—which makes you think there are two when actually there is only one. She and I, she and you, are one. The thing is, I can talk about it, but I haven't experienced it. And unless I experience it, I haven't got there. In my daily life I make the same mistakes repeatedly. I think I have to do this or that but actually I am not doing anything. She is doing everything for me. But that surrender hasn't come. It will take years and years . . . In my everyday life very often I forget that I am really her. The relation is like that between a drop of water and the ocean. She is the ocean, we are the drops of water. The drops belong to the ocean, but the drop is not the ocean. Only when it joins the ocean does it become the ocean. Until then we are still drops and we can dry up any minute. Yet we think so much of ourselves . . .

Vasanthi believes that personal endeavour is indispensable for attaining the spiritual goal. She therefore makes a conscious effort in her everyday life to overcome what she sees as the greatest stumbling block in her path towards spiritual attainment—her egotism and self-centredness. Vasanthi's spiritual striving has, as a result, led to a high degree of introspection and reflexivity on her part where she scrutinizes her every thought and action in the light of what she understands as the Mata's message, and tries constantly to purge herself of what she sees as the spiritually constraining and 'negative' aspects of her personality. Over time, Vasanthi claims to have perceived a spiritual transformation in herself marked by a gradual detachment from material concerns and a growing sense of inner peace and calm.

Nirmala, unlike Vasanthi, believes that householders must not consciously undertake to engage in a spiritual quest of any kind. Her attachment to the guru, she claims, has little to do with personal striving for spiritual attainment. Instead, she looks to the guru for the strength she needs to cope with her everyday troubles. Without a guru, Nirmala said, one is like a 'rudderless raft' with no sense of

direction and purpose. The presence of the Mata as a guru in her life, she claims, serves to enhance her 'consciousness of the Almighty'. If this consciousness is forever present in one's mind, and if one nurtures it through daily ritual practice, Nirmala believes the result must be a lessening of one's daily troubles and pain. 'If you have to go through some unpleasantness in this life', she says, 'you do have to suffer it, but if you have the protection of the guru, the suffering is less.' By sustaining her devotion to the Mata, and keeping up her daily spiritual practices, she hopes she can secure her own and her family's well-being in this world.

In Kishore's view personal spiritual striving is, in the ultimate reckoning, futile. The more one gains spiritually, he believes, the more one is likely to pride oneself on one's gain and the more elusive the spiritual goal becomes. The closer one gets to the spiritual goal, he said, the greater one's chances of slipping and crashing spiritually. Beyond a point, the guru's help is indispensable. He used the analogy of a game of snakes and ladders (a popular board game in urban India, and in this case, a metaphor for risk) to explain his point.

> One's efforts at attaining *moksha* [spiritual salvation] are like a game of snakes and ladders. Go up a ladder, go down a snake. The higher up one goes, the longer the snakes and the greater the descent. Through one's own efforts one can go as far the ninety-fifth square. But after that, to get to the goal, the hundredth square, without slipping, is the toughest proposition. That is where the guru can help. Prayers to the guru are the only way. The guru can then bear you across the sea of snakes.

Just as these devotees differ in the significance they attach to personal spiritual striving, they differ also in their attitude towards ritual. Vasanthi's mother had been a devout observer of daily pujas at the family shrine in her parents' home in Kerala. Vasanthi, however, had rebelled against its observance because she was barred from entering the shrine during her monthly menstrual periods.[45] This was a rule she had found unjust and discriminating, and she had developed an early distaste for all forms of ritual. After entering the Mata's fold, she began to observe some of the Mata's ritual prescriptions in the belief that these would enhance her spiritual progress. She now sets aside time every day to engage in the meditational practices recommended by the Mata, and to chant her mantra

[45] Menstruating women, in many traditional Hindu ritualistic contexts, are considered impure and defiling and are therefore debarred from entering the 'sacred' and 'pure' realm of ritual observance.

as well as the Lalitha Sahasranama, a devotional composition comprising the many names of the goddess.[46] When I asked her about the significance she attaches to the devotional chants, she explained to me her belief in the importance of sound. 'When certain vowels and consonants are mixed together in a certain manner', she said, 'there is a certain impact. When you speak in an angry manner, there are angry vibrations, the whole atmosphere vibrates with your anger. I think that the Sahasranama [the many names of the chosen deity], if chanted correctly, does the opposite—it soothes the mind and calms the atmosphere.'[47] Vasanthi believes that ever since she started her daily practice of chanting the Lalitha Sahasranama, her temper, which, she said, was earlier extremely volatile, has cooled.

Apart from daily meditation and chanting, the only other spiritual practice in which Vasanthi engages is *bhajan* singing. Every evening the family holds a *bhajan* session in their home which neighbours are welcome to attend. The participants, numbering about ten or less, sing devotional songs before a photograph of the Mata. According to Vasanthi, she and the other members of her family have neither the time, nor the inclination, for other kinds of ritual engagements. When I met her, Vasanthi had never performed the *grahadosha nivarana* pujas of the MAM, and did not think she would do so in the foreseeable future. She did not attach much significance to astrological calculations and predictions. Her early unease with puja continues to the present, and she prefers not to observe the puja ritual prescribed by the Mata. As a rule she does not worship at temples.

In contrast to Vasanthi, Nirmala claims she cannot do without her puja even for a single day. In her bedroom in her flat in Delhi she has a small shrine where she observes daily pujas before a collection of icons of various gods and goddesses. Among the several paintings, posters and idols of Hindu deities crowding the shrine are photographs both of the Mata and of an earlier guru, now deceased. Apart from her daily puja, Nirmala regularly engages in meditation and *nama japa* every morning, and chants her mantra in the evenings. She feels these

[46] The Lalita Sahasranama, central to the ritual prescriptions of the Mata, is an invocatory poem to Devi contained in the *Devi Bhagavatha Purana*, an ancient text on the great goddess dating back to the 11th and 12th centuries. On this text, see Erndl 1993: 22; Kinsley 1986: 132–50; Dahejia 1999: 23, 99.

[47] Parry (1985) notes this concern, in the reproduction of the contents of ancient Sanskrit texts, with the precise reproduction of sound rather than with the retention of the meaning it conveys. 'The words in themselves are believed to have power once they are vocalised. For this power to become manifest they must be pronounced with precision and exactly the right inflections' (*ibid.* 209).

practices fortify her internally and give her strength. Nirmala also greatly enjoys visiting temples, shrines and other sacred spots. She has had several opportunities to visit pilgrimage centres and temple shrines across the length and breadth of the country while accompanying her husband on his postings in different parts of India.

When I met her, Nirmala had already performed thrice, in three consecutive years, the *grahadosha nivarana* puja organized by the MAM to counter evil planetary influences. She has been told by an astrologer that the present stage in her life is clouded by the malefic influence of Shani (Saturn), and that her husband has a 'weak Jupiter'. She said she feared the havoc these planets might wreak in her life, and was particularly anxious about her husband's health, since he had only recently recovered from a major kidney complaint. Nirmala had sought the Mata's divine intervention at the time, and it was only the Mata's grace, she felt, and the benefits deriving from her participation in the congregational pujas, that had seen her through the crisis. Apart from her regular prayers to the Mata and the other deities in her household shrine, Nirmala also visits a temple dedicated to the monkey god, Hanuman, situated very near her house. This ritual is of vital importance to Nirmala, and she hopes that offering prayers at the Hanuman temple too might help counter the malefic influences of Saturn in her horoscope.[48]

In the matter of rituals and their observance, Kishore appeared more circumspect than both Vasanthi and Nirmala. 'Ritual', he said, 'is one thing I don't know. I am a total failure at ritual technique.' Right from his early teens, he said, he had been practising his own style of puja. At first this simply meant lighting a lamp at the family shrine twice every day. Sometimes he read from ancient texts such as the *Ramayana* to augment his ritual observance. None of this, he said, had changed even after he entered the Mata's fold. He had received a mantra from the Mata, which he chanted morning and evening when he lit the lamp at the household shrine. 'I suppose rituals are important', Kishore said, 'but I tell you, it is Amma who is most important. No ritual, nothing is required—if you have Amma you have everything. The only thing is, people use this route [ritual practice] to reach Amma's feet. If we take directly to Amma's feet and surrender to her wholeheartedly, none of this, no ritual, no puja, is required.'

[48] See Fuller 1992: 241 who notes how, according to popular myth, the popular monkey god Hanuman, because of his immense physical strength, has been 'the only god to have ever worsted Saturn'. Those who believe themselves to be Saturn's

What is striking in these accounts is the evident diversity in devotees' religious orientations and practices. Devotees rejoice in the knowledge that the Mata recognizes the variety in their individual needs, attitudes and preferences. They believe that in her spiritual ministrations, the Mata 'descends' to each one's spiritual level, and handles each individual case differently, instead of expecting all devotees to conform to a uniform and standardized body of spiritual practice. What we see here is an intensely interiorized and private form of faith which defines the religious life as an inner horizon predicated not upon external authorization but upon the personal choice and self fulfilment of each individual.[49]

Conclusion

I have explored in this paper the appeal of popular modern Indian gurus to their followers from largely Hindu, urban, educated, middle class backgrounds. I have sought to demonstrate, citing the case of one such guru and her followers, that India's educated middle class urbanites are drawn to guru organizations not because they are out of touch with their religious traditions, as earlier scholars studying the modern guru phenomenon would have us believe, nor because they find themselves insecure and alienated in urban India's environment of rapid change and transformation. Instead, I have argued, they are drawn to modern gurus because of the religious context in which these gurus and their religious and spiritual networks are located. This is a context offering immense choice, possibility and potential to individuals seeking to negotiate their religious lives in diverse ways. It is this choice and potential that attracts urban middle class Hindus to the modern guru's fold. Sampling different

victims worship Hanuman to seek his aid in quelling Saturn's influence on their lives.

[49] This is not to imply that the religious lives of devotees is entirely an internal thing, negotiated by each individual internally and privately. Though Mata Amritanandamayi's devotees reveal a high degree of individual choice in negotiating their religious lives, this choice is not entirely internal but is negotiated through the individual's contact with the Mata's personality, her teachings, and her prescriptions for a rewarding spiritual life. It is by engaging with this 'public space of discourse' (Taylor: 1985, 1989), and negotiating with it individually and severally, that devotees come to construct their religious lives in unique and distinctive ways. It is significant that their chosen guru is one who, in her turn, respects her devotees' personal freedom as individuals, and allows them to continue, even after entering her fold, to think and act as autonomous, self-directing, independent agents.

gurus and their spiritual wares, engaging with their teachings and religious prescriptions, making selections from the available repertoire of religious symbols and meanings, are all an intrinsic part of this world of guru faith. The appeal of popular gurus like Mata Amritanandamayi and Sathya Sai Baba lies not in their ability to propagate religious values based on external authorization, nor in their capacity to forge community solidarities. Instead, it lies in the freedom of choice they allow their followers, and in the respect they show for each individual devotee's personal autonomy in negotiating his/her religious life and constructing his or her own highly individualized form of religious faith.[50]

From the perspective of her middle class devotees, Mata Amritanandamayi, I have argued, is one in a range of gurus and other spiritual attractions abounding in contemporary India's dense religious supermarket with its global networks and transnational connections. In studying the religious faith that she propagates, I have attempted to take into account the vast array of choices that face her devotees in charting out their religious lives. The religious belief and practice of these persons, my study reveals, is neither the product of external authorization, nor the result of unquestioning allegiance to, and conformity with, centuries-old traditions handed down to them by preceding generations. Instead, it is the result of their self authorship, where each individual creates and constructs a personal and individualized religious world in accordance with his or her needs and preferences. The appeal of popular gurus like the Mata lies in their ability to facilitate, rather than restrict, this process of individual creativity and innovation. By examining at close quarters the religious choices and decisions that the Mata's urban middle class followers make in the context of their attachment to their guru, I have explored here the means by which these individuals come to construct their religious lives as modern Hindus located in a post-colonial world of revolutionized communications, high consumerism and individual choice. Participation in a guru organization such as the Mata's, I have argued, engages these persons in a process of active selection

[50] Pocock's (1973: 100) comments on the modern devotionalist sect are particularly relevant here: '[I]t is precisely the extent to which the central importance of this guru-relationship is lost, or minimized by an over-emphasis upon solidarity, organization and uniformity,' he argues, 'that the sect appears to lose its hold over the population of the modern Indian city'. Conversely, then, it follows that it is precisely the extent to which a personal guru–devotee relationship is facilitated and sustained, and the individuality of devotees recognized, that a popular religious organization like the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission manages to attract, and secure a hold over, vast numbers of followers in urban India.

from the range of religious symbols and meanings they encounter within (and outside) her fold. The result is not the individual's submission to a set of supposedly 'traditional' Hindu values and norms, but the construction of unique and individualized forms of religious faith rooted in assertions of personal choice and preference.

High-profile gurus like Mata Amritanandamayi and Sathya Sai Baba are an extremely visible presence in India's public domain. Their publicity campaigns, their public appearances (each of which invariably attracts hundreds of thousands of followers), their vast networks of charitable and other institutions, the media attention they constantly attract, all contribute to the perception of modern guru faith as a very public assertion of religious affiliations and identities. By presenting an ethnographic account of religion within Mata Amritanandamayi's fold, I have attempted in this paper to look beyond this public façade in order to explore the interiorized and individualized form of faith that gurus like the Mata in fact foster among their devotees. This interiorized and personalized faith, I contend, contains within it seeds of secularization of religion in small yet significant sections of modern India. This trend towards secularization is of immense importance for two reasons. Firstly, though it is only in a minute segment of India's total population that we find this trend in evidence, it is a segment whose members command considerable power and influence in Indian business, political and bureaucratic circles. These are also persons whose lifestyles and attitudes often serve as a model for the rest of society (especially those located in economically and socially less privileged positions) to try and emulate. Secondly, and more importantly, this trend poses an interesting contrast to the recent resurgence of nationalistic Hinduism in India. It is therefore vitally important in that it throws up possibilities and potentials for new and alternative configurations of Hinduism that run contrary to what many scholars studying contemporary India have come to see as the inevitable[51] (and for this writer, as for several others, extremely alarming) future of Hinduism in the modern world.

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[51] For varied views on the causal 'inevitability' of Hindu nationalist resurgences in modern India, see for instance Van der Veer 1994 a and b; Nandy 1985, 1990, 1995; Madan 1987, 1997.

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