

# New Religious Movements in India: The Mata Amritanadamayi Math

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## Introduction

Of all types of social movements in contemporary India, religious and sectarian movements have, by and large, been predominant. For a long time religious ideas have often been the language of protest, innovation and expression of individuality as well as separate identity. They provide an enormous scope for reinterpretation in order not only to legitimize the aspiration of various sections of the population but also to justify changes in the existing order of social relationships. Clearly, these movements meet the emotional and spiritual needs of those suffering from the destructive impact of colonialism, modernization and globalization in a familiar world. Research on new religious movements<sup>1</sup>, therefore, always has a unique significance in a country like India where religious faith is a dynamic conditioning factor for the vast majority of people. Furthermore, India has long been known for being “a *Guru*<sup>2</sup> factory” and these spiritual teachers have played an active role in bringing solace to the masses at the global forum. Consequently, they have an international influence as well.

Reports with regard to a significant number of *Babas*, *Swamis*, *Gurus*, *Bapus*, *Bhagats*, and so on often appear in the media and yet research on them is quite limited. There is an absence of systematic research on newly emerging Gurus and their missions although some of them have established empires in foreign lands and have lived in regal splendour. The present paper is the end product of a case study conducted on the Mata Amritanadamayi Math, a comparatively new religious movement with headquarters located in Kerala. Having a history of less than 25 years the Math has been in existence under the guidance of an uneducated female Guru, popularly known as Mata Amritanadamayi alias Amma, whose disciples are scattered all over the world.

## Methodological Framework

The study places the Mata Amritanadamayi Math within a larger and more integrated paradigm of modernization in India and globalization in the world. It also examines the growth of this particular religious movement in the Hindu religious and socio-political contexts at the local level, and in the spiritual context at the global level.

To explain the fast development of any new religious movement, one must trace the struggle of a particular Guru and consequently one will see that the growth of the mission depends on the local religious culture. By comparing the Math with other new religious movements, the study will find out if the Math has developed new concepts and practices and if it has,

whether or not they are working properly, adjusting to this rapidly changing world.

Religion has always been something that concerns society. As such religious organizations in India have played a big role in all kinds of social reforms and social activities. Research on the types of education, the function of relief programs and the ways of the Ashram and Mission Trust management, therefore, always has a unique significance in understanding the interaction between the mission and the state.

Today religion is becoming more and more progressively global. Studies on the ideas and activities of an international Guru and the reason for her\his wealth in the age of globalization is a necessity to understand the real role of a Guru in terms of religious or secular communications and the widespread challenges she\he still faces.

The methodology used in this research project includes firstly, an acquisition of historical materials on the new religious movements in India especially since the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, a collection of materials dealing with the history of Kerala as well as all the publications issued under the auspices of the Mission Trust. Secondly, an intensive field work was undertaken which includes participant observation, surveys and interviews done during this researcher's stay in the Ashram.<sup>3</sup> And lastly, a content analysis was done on the data and documents collected during the entire period of this research work.

## **Mata Amritanadamayi Math: The Math in the Hindu Context**

### **The Emergence of Amma and the Hugging Methodology**

Amma (meaning mother) is the head of the Mata Amritanadamayi Math and Mission Trust, which was founded at Kollam in the South Indian state of Kerala on 6 May 1981. Amma was described in the subtitle of a cover story in *The Week* (21 September 2003): "once an illiterate girl, Amritanandamayi at 50 is a global guru who heads a spiritual empire".

The emergence of Amma owes much to "a band of youths". "By the end of 1978, the nucleus of the Ashram grew when a group of well-educated young men, renouncing home and life in the world, took refuge at the feet of the Holy Mother. ...Most of them...belonged to upper class families" (Swami Amritaswarupananda, *Mata Amritanadamayi*, 1988: 176). Having noticed the depth and simplicity of Amma's explanations, this group of educated young men began writing down her teachings. They collected Amma's words, conversations and speeches, then also selected and translated them into English. They realized "the highest state of consciousness from where Amma is speaking" and took lead in reproducing these divine utterances (Swami Amritaswarupananda, "Foreword," *Amma's Heart*, 2004).

Reproductions of Amma's speeches and conversations, "humbly offered" by this particular group of young men, not only reflected the manifestation of the Math but also served as textbooks for devotees. The Ashram Trust has published more than thirty books and some of

them are available in as many as twenty-five languages. With Amma as a leader and the Math as a religious organization, it is reasonable to consider the new movement as a combined creation and can be treated as a whole new establishment in the Hindu religion.

In the West, the media often describes Amma as the ‘Hugging Saint’. In the past twenty-five years, Amma has personally embraced more than 24 million people from all parts of the world using what is known as the hugging method. The methodology of uplifting people by simply caressing everyone who comes to her and holding them close to her heart in a loving embrace can be seen during *Darshan*<sup>4</sup> time (everyday from 9 am to 2 or 3 pm). Amma’s hug is called the “Hug Awaken”. Amma explains that “It is not a mere hug, but one that awakens the spiritual principles.... That pure vibration of love purifies people, and this helps them achieve their inner awakening and spiritual growth.” Amma believes that “both men and women of today’s world need to be awakened to motherly qualities. Amma’s hugs are to help people become aware of this universal need”(Swami Amritaswarupananda, *Amma’s Heart*, 2004: 94).

Outsiders think that Amma’s methodology of hugging people is a progressive step or even an action of “defying tradition” in a caste-based conservative society where women are not supposed to touch strangers. The fact that a woman from a fisherfolk family embraces people from everywhere is a great leap forward if we consider that Kerala was once the worst example of caste division and colour prejudice in the whole of India and that the evils of untouchability and inapproachability were predominant in society (The Census Report of Cochin, 1911). By the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, punishments varied according to the caste and social status of the offenders. Amma certainly has defied the “keeping distance” tradition in ‘the Mad-house of India’ (the name Swami Vivekananda gave to Kerala).

#### Service Doctrine and Vedanta to Live by

Amma considers love as her religion. For the purpose of sending the message of love to all her “children” (devotees), Amma has developed a set of “Service Doctrine”. Her advocacy expressed in the statement “Serve people to serve God” is interconnected with her idea of God: “We should understand that God is not confined to the temple or the church. God is within each one of us. Whenever we share what we have with others and help one another, we are, in fact, worshipping God” (*Sri Mata Amritanadamayi*, 2001: 59). Amma believes that “a compassionate heart is a far more precious dwelling place to God than any silken couch or golden throne” (*Sri Mata Amritanadamayi*, 2001: 59). Says Amma about herself: “I am the servant of servants”. According to her, the link between God, Guru and devotees is love and, therefore, she worships devotees.

As a Hindu religious organization of a Hindu Guru, Amma’s Math obviously has to provide a Hindu way of worship (*puja*). Hinduism is a religion which has been practised in the form of temple worship for hundreds of years. Though there is temple worship in Amma’s Math, (a Math temple is known as *Brahmasthanam* temple) it is an absolutely new mode of worship for the devotees. Each *Brahmasthanam* temple contains an unconventional *Pratishta* (*murti* or

image of God) which graphically illustrates the principle of unity in diversity. Amma experimented with the practicality of this new form and came to the conclusion that ceremonial worship performed by a large group is many times more powerful than individual worship. Another important feature of such worship (*puja*) is that the devotee is enjoined to perform the worship himself rather than ask a priest to do it for him.

As far as the *Bhavas Bhava*<sup>5</sup> is concerned, Amma's devotees believe that Lord Krishna and Devi enter the Holy Mother's body three nights a week. During this period she brings out everything that is inside her and manifests those Divine Beings in order to bless her devotees. Bhava Darshan is simply one of Amma's ways of serving devotees, plunged as it is in the deep quagmire of worldliness. During Darshan, any question can be asked irrespective of who the questioner is-- a theist, an atheist, a rationalist or an antagonist. The Mother gently, calmly, and affectionately answers questions without hurting people or belittling their ideas.

A significant development took place on 27 August 1982, when Amma started a Vedanta Vidyalaya (School) in order to impart traditional knowledge in Vedanta and Sanskrit to the residents of the Ashram. The Vedanta system has been the dominant system in Hinduism and is considered to be the one on which the established polity was based. By defending the basic concepts and practices of the Vedanta system, the Math gradually turned into a movement within this dominant system in Hinduism.

The Math is neither a dissenting group nor an anti-systematic movement in the Hindu tradition. The basic Hindu concepts like Brahman, Maya, Dharma,<sup>6</sup> Pure Consciousness, Advaita, Mahabharata Battle, etc., are always explained in the traditional way. Amma herself admits that "Advaita is the foundation of everything" and what she teaches is practical devotion that is rooted in Advaita." In order to make sure that people can really understand the Supreme Being, Sri Krishna, Amma asks them to "survey the Lord's action from the proper perspective", for "if we look through eyes tainted with doubts, everything will appear to be wrong." She emphasizes that "it is because the Lord's teachings haven't been properly absorbed that India has deteriorated to such an extent."<sup>7</sup> Amma has been "re-explaining" the Hindu world vision and yet she never forgot to remind her devotees of the Hindu lifestyle: "Eat only what is necessary, speak only when necessary. Sleep only for as long as you need. Spend the remaining time doing good deeds. Do not waste a single moment in life. Try to make your life beneficial for others as well" (*Sri Mata Amritanadamayi*, 2001: 9). She believes that "spirituality isn't something to be just talked about; it has to be lived" (*Sri Mata Amritanadamayi*, 2001: 60).

Although the Math has been organized in the Vedanta system, it has developed some new ideas to suit social changes in the Indian context. As a grass root level guru, Amma strongly criticizes the so-called Brahmins who have a wrong vision of *Maya*. According to her, despite the fact that in the traditional caste society a Brahmin was a Brahmin by mere birth, in the new society, a Brahmin should be one who is known by his deed (action). Amma stresses that by serving the world you basically battle the negativities within you, such as the ego and selfishness. That is indeed the true meaning of the Mahabharata War and it is understandable

why Lord Krishna asked Arjuna to fight the War, i.e., for the sake of Dharma (*Sri Mata Amritanadamayi*, 2001: 46-47).

Amma believes that people should “live by the principle of Vedanta”: “Today most people limit Vedanta to mere words. We don’t see any Vedanta reflected in their actions. Vedanta is not a load to be carried around; it is a principle to be brought into the heart and practised by the mind” (*Sri Mata Amritanadamayi*, 2001: 58). One of Amma’s main suggestions to people living in the modern world is to “balance the spiritual and worldly life”. By understanding the intense pressures of work and the modern life style, Amma knows very well that it is impractical to ask people to deny themselves any kind of pleasure. At best what she can do is to request them to recognize their “real nature” and put emphasis on “nothing should be done in excess” because “the reason for all this evil we see in the world today is the total misconception that happiness can be found externally” (*Sri Mata Amritanadamayi*, 2001: 13-14).

### The Non-Brahmin model

A considerable amount of religious tolerance has always prevailed among the different sects within Hinduism and this has always been the corner stone of Kerala culture. Against this background, the promotion of the Math by an uneducated female Guru has been comparatively easy to accept as a non-Brahmin model. In comparing Amma’s math with those mutts (or maths) set up by other Brahmins, one can easily find a crucial difference. Whereas the seer of Kanchi keeps a safe distance from his folk, Amma touches, hugs and kisses her devotees.

From a historical perspective, the Brahmins’ domination of the Dravidian south has already been challenged since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The agitation against Brahmanical domination was in fact transformed by Swami Narayana Guru (1856-1928) into a socio-religious movement. Another noteworthy thing is that Kerala is a state “about women and nature”. Kerala’s women have become doctors, pilots, Supreme Court judges, diplomats; they have excelled in sports, politics, are members of the armed forces etc. Thus Amma’s emergence as an enlightened religious figure does not seem extraordinary.

Amma’s explanations of Hindu concepts may sound very traditional, yet, the emphasis on action and service shows the continuity of reforms in the non-Brahmin tradition within Hinduism. While the “lesser form” of spirituality is still a taboo among many orthodox Brahmins, nobody has seen the extent of the power of Amma’s love--religion and hugging methodology uniting all people with divinity. The social programs and humanitarian activities, which are discussed in the following sections further reflect the logical development of the idea of “serve people to serve God” and the spirit of Vedanta.

## The Math in a Social Context

### Educational Institutions and Humanitarian Activities

Educational institutions and humanitarian activities are the two pillars of Amma's social program. From the first school and a branch Ashram in Kondungallur, Kerala in 1987 to date, Amma has opened many schools, training centres and colleges (offering courses in the industrial sciences, computer technology, engineering, business, pharmaceutical sciences). The fastest development in the educational institutions took place in 2003. In that year, the government conferred 'Deemed-to-be-University' status on Amma's institutions of higher learning. The Mission opened the School of Medicine and Nursing, the School of Engineering, the School of Dentistry, the School of Science and Management and the School of Journalism. In 2004, the Biomedical Research Centre, Amrita Research Laboratories, and the Amrita Ayurvedic Medical College, Hospital and Research were established. The Teachers' Training College in Mysore was inaugurated in 2005.

In the educational institutions, the emphasis has been on contemporary subjects, especially business management, commerce, computer, medicine and biomedical research. In order to avoid "personal gain as the only goal in business", Amma guides her students to take into account "the progress of the country". Amma considers that "the aim of education and of securing a job should be our spiritual development and service to the world" (*Sri Mata Amritanadamayi*, 2001: 104). Today, Amrita's advertisement, entitled "An Emerging World Class University in India", which contains recent initiatives from e-learning network, biomedical technology, telematics, research laboratories, and autonomous Bio-inspired robots to network village resources, Ayurveda, Arts and Journalism, appears repeatedly in Indian newspapers and magazines. The universities promise "a unique and holistic experience", which includes "a strong cutting-edge technology orientation" and "the spirit of unity and reverence for all life forms."<sup>8</sup>

Amma's humanitarian activity is an extension of her idea of "serve people to serve God". She often says that serving the poor is our supreme duty to God. As a guru from the bottom, "Mother learned firsthand, right from childhood, the meaning of hardship. ...Mother would like to urge her wealthy children to be compassionate and serve the poor and the suffering" (*Sri Mata Amritanadamayi*, 2001: 54). Having once lived as a servant in her own family, Amma is sure that "God is far more pleased when He sees a poor person being helped and comforted than when millions are spent on an ostentatious religious festival" (*Sri Mata Amritanadamayi*, 2001: 39).

Amrita's humanitarian activities can be divided roughly into two kinds -- healthcare and disaster relief. These activities started in 1989 when the Ashram saved a dilapidated orphanage and school in Kerala. The larger humanitarian activities began when the Amrita Kripa Hospital for cancer patients and the Kuteeram Project that will build 25,000 free houses were launched in 1996. Like the educational institutions, Amrita's humanitarian activities also went on fast track in the new century. The Amrita Kripa Aids Care Home, the Amrita Kripa

Neeti Pratishthan (Free Legal Aid Forum), the first free wedding ceremonies for the poor, adult education centres, and the Care Home for the Elderly were inaugurated in 2003. In 2004, over 25,000 inpatients received free or reduced-fee treatment.

The Amrita Tsunami Disaster Aid Fund of US\$ 23.3 million was announced immediately after the tsunami struck Amritapuri and the neighbouring coastal villages on 26 December 2004. The Ashram became the centre of relief operations and it proposed to rebuild all the houses that were destroyed by the tsunami in Kerala. In addition, it took up reconstruction work in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Pondicherry and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Amma's relief program went beyond the border to Sri Lanka. On the occasion of handing over the keys of the houses built by the Math for the tsunami victims, Oommen Chandy, Kerala's Chief Minister said: "Amma's hands of goodness inspired tsunami relief and rehabilitation activities in the state." He added that "The Ashram's relief activities are a role model for society". The Speaker of the Kerala Assembly said, "Amma's humanitarian activities are a model for the world to follow. In reaching out to the tsunami victims, helping them and consoling them in an area where the government has failed, Amma has been successful. What no government has been able to do, Amma is doing." Similar comments followed from various quarters including different functionaries of the government.

#### Ashram Management and its Responsibilities

Today Mata Amritanadamayi Math and Mission Trust is a growing spiritual centre which is being run according to the ancient traditions of India. As Amma puts it, the Ashram "is a place for those who practice self-sacrifice. The Ashram residents have to strive hard for the sake of their ideal...they would have to be like candles. A candle allows itself to melt so that it can give light to others" (*Sri Mata Amritanadamayi*, 2001: 7).

As far as the management of the Mission Trust is concerned, modern processes are followed. Amma is the chairperson of all the three trusts. There are five trustees in all but none of them is involved in the financial affairs. It is a non-trustee who is in charge of financial matters. Financial support comes mainly from the donations and gifts given by wealthy devotees. As a result, the Mission has acquired considerable property in land, cash and jewellery. When the Math was started, Amma had neither an inch of land nor a penny at her disposal (Swami Amritaswarupananda, *Mata Amritanadanayi*, 1988: 170). But now, she has acquired an empire consisting of Ashrams, temples, resorts, different schools and institutions all over India. There is grave concern regarding the management of financial matters. But Amma always says, "Those who are engaged in selfless service may receive hundreds of thousands of dollars but will deliver the equivalent of millions to people in need." But when people questioned the wealth of Amma's relatives, Amma expressed unhappiness.

In 2003, the highlight of the Mata's programs was *Amritavarshram 50*, which was Amma's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration and a celebration for world peace. People from 191 countries participated in the celebrations and charity activities. The guests included Indian President A.

P. J. Abdul Kalam, Deputy Prime Minister L. K. Advani, Human Resource Development Minister, Murli Manohar Joshi, Karnataka Chief Minister S. M. Krishna, former US Senator Larry Pressler, Martin Luther King's daughter Yolanda King, and Hotmail founder Sabeer Bhatia. The celebrations and the guest list, not to speak of the massive funds involved, reflect the importance of Amma. Meanwhile, when the newspapers illustrated Amma hugging Advani and kissing his pate, there had been lot of questions were raised because Advani, a Hindu Nationalist leader, had a major role in assiduously building up Hindu-Muslim communal hate through his infamous 'Rath Yatra' from Somnath to Ayodhya in 1990. In any case, since the inauguration was by none other than Advani, it could have been as disastrous as his 1990 rath yatra. Amritanandamayi's blessings may have boosted his rabid Hindutva and may be read as an implicit approbation of his style of politics.

### Math in Social Development

Mata Amritanandamayi's social contribution to Kerala and other parts of the country has been enormous. Amma's math has created transient, huge and unforgettable modern hospitals and colleges. In sharp contrast, Brahmin mutts have not been able to build such enduring visible monuments for the poor but have poured plenty into dressing up or washing the idols, or even gifting a temple with a diamond studded crown.

However, Amma's programs raise many doubts and arguments regarding how to reform India in the religious field. A curious admirer recently wanted to know Amma's reaction to a media assessment that she was now more like a corporate executive than a guru. Whereas the state government has to keep borrowing money to pay salary to its staff, Amma's Ashram figures at the top of the list of charities receiving donations from abroad. In 1998-99, for instance, the Ashram was said to have received more than 500 million rupees.

The main concern for the development of religious organizations like Amma's math is the healthy growth of such a mission in a secular state. On her 50th birthday celebration, which was an important instance of commercial exploitation of religion by both the print and visual media, people asked if Amma also became a "victim of a religious mafia--the unscrupulous commercial ascetics from whose religious trap she has no way of escape." The four-day birthday celebration could as well turn out to be Kerala's blight, and undermine whatever the Leftist movements of over half a century managed to gain as a secular, pluralist and democratic space, which made Kerala the 'model state' of India.<sup>9</sup> The process that the government uses to aid religious institutions such as temples, maths, wakfs, schools, libraries and so forth, stems from the theory of secularism which treats all religions equally.

Indian political parties, with the exception of the Marxists, have strengthened the conservative religious establishments and in return expect their support in electioneering campaigns. The presence of the President of India, Deputy Prime Minister of India and other high ranking officials at the celebration of Amma's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday marked a special way by which the state interferes in religious affairs positively. This might make Hinduism more respectable and



thereby help propagate it. But the long term implication will be negative once the government gets embroiled in religion. This will not further the establishment of a secular society, and hence a secular state.

Amma's organization seems to have the power to promote social stability as a direct result of its control of resources, interpersonal relationships, communication and expertise. Its resources include control over goods and services, organizational capability, social networks that are community based but at the same time global in scope, various types of agendas and programs. It has been deeply involved in children's education and the training of future generations. Compared with other political leaders, Amma sometimes knows more about food, water and health problems in the community because people in need turn to her first.

Although Amma's Ashram has been involved in building houses for the poor, hospitals, and educational institutions, the very idea of social service through the medium of religion, especially through the majoritarian Hindu religion in a secular society where religion is not expected to play any role in the public sphere, raises at least two issues. Firstly, the failure of a democratic state to perform and deliver state services creates a deepening paradox of enabling various self-styled divinities and 'god incarnates' to use it to perform and deliver state services through make-believe spiritualism, even though the state itself is expected to be secular and pluralist in letter and spirit. Secondly, this 'divine delivery' has effects on the functions of a secular pluralist democracy. Globalization has a role in creating spurious godheads who otherwise would not have had weird spin doctors, networks and media savvy images if not for technocracy itself turning towards spiritualism. Whether such a democracy should draw legitimacy from those forced into the spiritual trap of the dubious godheads or from the people's will is a challenge to the very notion of democracy.

Religion's (re)emergence as a critical dimension in Kerala is a result of the seeming failure of other ideologies and institutions. The power of religion provides both the ideological resources supporting social justice and the ideological basis for social coherence and comprehensiveness. As the problems became more complex, the solutions available in ideologies and corresponding programs of Marxism, communism, nationalism and materialism became less able to explain injustice or ameliorate suffering. Religion, entered as 'default ideology' and has since provided both rationale and modality for fighting against injustice and hope when all else has been tried without success.

A sizeable section of Indian society today is still living in ignorance and follows religious misconceptions associated with the medieval age. It has been argued that the attitude which the state should adopt towards religion in secular India is that the state should not support religion by giving financial assistance or pamper religious institutions with special privileges such as income tax exemption. After all, religious institutions are very wealthy. Prof. P. C. Chatterji even suggested that "religious institutions should be cut to size and discouraged from indulging in activities which are outside their province in a secular state" (Chatterji, 1995: 305).

## The Math in Global context

### Overseas Ashrams and Amma's World Tours

From the very beginning the Math has been an international Mission. As more and more people started to recognize Amma as a living saint, a sizeable number of foreigners also came to participate in the management and spread of the Mission. Through them Amma learnt skills in the western system of management, including tax-deduction methods and social service activities (*Sri Mata Amritanadamayi*, 2001: 65). Swami Paratmananda, who was born in the USA, has been a senior disciple of Amma since he settled in her Ashram in 1980. However, in 1990 he became the monk-in-charge at the Mata Amritanadamayi Center in San Ramon, California (Swami Paratmananda, 2000). Now the Ashram has branches not only in various Indian cities but also in the US as well as several Asian and European countries.

In recent years, Amma has been traveling “for nearly eight months of the year meeting her ‘children’ in all corners of the globe and individually blessing them” (*My First Darshan*, 2003: 9). Amma's world tours usually include the United States, England, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, Finland, Austria, Holland, Mauritius, Reunion Island, Malaysia and Singapore and lasts for three to four months. The way she receives people by hugging is beyond comparison and has never been experienced by the Western world. People express their feelings by saying: “We have seen Christ! In mother, and in her divine love and compassion, we have seen Christ, the Lord!” In countries where Hinduism is not a main religion, Amma's programs are either held in the homes of Amma's devotees or in different halls and churches. The *Devi Bhavas*, however, takes place in the living rooms of the devotees (Swami Amritaswarupananda, *Awaken Children Dialogues*, 2003: 12).

In 1999, *The Japan Times* carried a story by Angela Jeffs who was covering at length Mata Amritanandamayi's visit to Japan from 28 May to 31 May. She was said to have hugged 20,000 people in a single session. During her next visit to Japan in July 2003, the English daily *Herald Tribune* carried a front-page report and emphasized that “if there were a world record for hugs, it would surely go to Mata Amritanandamayi”. *She has come up with a remedy for Japan's economic blues that has escaped even the most astute politician—give everyone a hug* (emphasis added).

As religion via modem is fast becoming a norm in the digital age, Amma has set up more than ten websites for different purposes. The network provides a wide range of Ashram products from books, magazines published by the Mata Amritanadamayi Mission Trust, to information about colleges, training centers and projects set up by Amma so that people can place their online orders for products and publications securely.

## Amma at International Forums

Amma has been a keynote speaker in various international forums since 1993. In that particular year she addressed the gathering at the 100th Anniversary of the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago by beginning with “May your hearts blossom”. The main addresses she has delivered in international forums are published on time and widely distributed.<sup>10</sup> In 2002, she won the Gandhi-King Award for Non-Violence, a prestigious award of which the earlier recipients were former South African President Nelson Mandela and the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

The iconic image of Amma at the international forums brings her to the center of today’s pressing issues such as religious conflicts. The questions the media and the western world ask her are often related to violence, terrorism, nuclear weapons, etc. Amma always gives simple answers to the complex questions, showing a village girl’s simplicity and wisdom. Amma teaches people to reach out to the deeper value, not to be stopped by the apparent difference because fanaticism flourishes when religious concepts are put before human values. All her addresses focus on the great need for love and compassion in today’s world: “The language of religion is the language of love. Today we know only limited selfish love. Transformation of this limited love into Divine Love is the goal of religion.”

The BBC, PBS and other news media interviewed Amma during the Millennium World Peace Summit at the UN General Assembly in 2000. She emphasized the need for a forum of spiritual and religious leaders to discuss, formulate and implement spiritual solutions for the existing conflicts in society. For Amma, today’s problem is that there are thousands who are ready to die for their religion, but there is none who is willing to live by its principles. People do not realize that religion is a way of life.

## Challenges in the International Stage

In Amma’s opinion, the fundamental problem, the root of all problems everywhere in the world, is one and the same: “That is ignorance, ignorance about the *Atman* (Self), about our essential nature. Too much concern about physical security and too little concern about spiritual security is the hallmark of today’s world. This focus should change”(Swami Amritaswarupananda, *Amma’s Heart*, 2004: 164). But the moot question is whether or not Amma’s religion of love can convince all people and whether or not she can earn an actual place at the table of communication in the international stage.

The first problem Amma has to deal with is how to address the problem of conversion. She is deeply concerned about religious conversions while at the same time she urges people to maintain diversity of culture and tradition. Commenting on religious bigotry, Amma notes, “the problem arises when we say our religion is right, yours is wrong!” Like other Hindu saints, Amma also views religion as an ancient tradition. By saying that all the great religions have infinite wisdom and beauty to share, Amma actually expresses her deep concern for the

efforts of other religious missions to convert Hindus to other religions. Amma stresses that instead of trying to increase the number of followers, religions should create an environment in which one may wisely accept the noble ideals of any religion because “the goal of all religions is one, purification of the human mind.” From the Hindu perspective, there is only one God who is known by different names. According to her, conflicts arise when, instead of focusing on the essence of the religious principles of love and compassion, everyone focuses on the external rituals and traditions which vary from religion to religion. It is because of this that these religions, which were originally meant to foster peace and unity, “became instrumental in spreading war and conflict.”

Evidently, Amma has only one instrument for conversion and that is love. Amma’s ‘children’ come from different countries across five continents. The message of love is the only means by which she enlarges their number and unites her devotees, from old to young, belonging to different religions (Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Christians). The message that she sends to her devotees and religious leaders around the world signifies the commitment of her mission even while she tackles the challenges at the international level: “Let love, peace, cooperation and non-violence be the beacons that light the way into the twenty-first century.”

In an international forum, Amma addressed the major issues that mankind is facing and appealed for the maintenance of peace and harmony all over the world. Every religion is an ideology encompassing comprehensive ideals and principles that govern both life and death. Therefore, religion is able to answer not only the question “how should I live” but also “for what am I willing to die.” In the post-9/11 period, some international relations experts have paid lip service to the need of bringing faith-based voices directly into the conversation, but very few have found a way to actually do it. Likewise, faith-based communities have quite often contributed only moral platitudes, staying only on the margins of international relations, rather than engaging the field in depth, thereby earning an actual place on the table. Nevertheless, both the well-structured, well-organized, age-old main religions and newly flourished religious movements cannot ignore this unfortunate reality, and therein lies the challenge.

## Conclusion

### Supermarket for All

The findings suggest that Amma’s success is due to the fact that she has set up a spiritual supermarket for all which provides different products for different people. For instance, the Math provides a Hindu way of worship to the traditional Hindus so that in the eyes of the Hindus, Amma remains a true devotee, a perfect person and an unsurpassed *Karma Yogin*.

The Math also makes Hindu concepts accessible to westerners. Hinduism has been a nondoctrinaire, nonformalistic umbrella religion which has absorbed ideas from various Indian local cults over a period of time. It is not difficult to find what westerners need from an

open-minded Hindu Guru. The positive mixture of religious and cultural tolerance, the coexistence of different ideologies, the long history of Western education and social reform as well as the service tradition of Kerala Gurus have been the positive contributing factors to Amma's popularity. For they not only create a comfortable environment for Amma to grow but they also make Amma a flexible guru whose topics range from religious ideas to having only one or two kids, using cell phones if necessary, etc. However, some of Amma's ideas, especially the one of birth control, are against traditional Hindu ideas ("Immoral Light," 2001: 10,100).

### Social Services

One of the reasons why Amma is successful is that "her social contribution to Kerala and India has been great". Amma and Sri Narayana Guru share the view that education would pave the way for the social and economic advancement of the people. The educational institutions and humanitarian programs, most of which have been established in the last decade, reflect a shift in the Ashram's approach from *sadhana* (penance) to service, though inmates insist these are but two sides of the same coin. If in the early days her fame was dependent on the belief of her devotees that she had supernatural powers, the accent now is on the service aspect.

New age needs new guru with new style. But the complicated problems people have need to be addressed with spiritual as well as political reforms. Yet the essential identity of India has always been cultural, not political. Therefore, one has to think of Indian modernity in terms of the continuity of India's ever changing tradition. There was always a secular component in India's culture, and it was through the constant interplay between the secular and the spiritual that the system was able to adapt itself to changing situations. Amma's adjustment has been way ahead of that of political leaders as can be seen in the wide-ranging programs that include even free legal aid.

The growth of new religious movements in India also needs to be understood by taking into account the role and impact of religion in the life of the modern and educated middle class. Amma's spiritual service towards the middle class is aimed at balancing life which has been working well when "the preoccupation with religion and religious concerns--the reason of the absence, in recent times, of a strong ideological anchor in the secular realm--has increased and not diminished in the urban middle class after the Babri Masjid vandalism" (Varma, 1999).

### Promoting Secular Values

Amma does not see spirituality as a separate entity. It is an integral part of life. Amma intends to contribute meaningfully to a positive nexus between religion and world peace. Her first understanding is that many contemporary global conflicts are not religious. In a

multi-religious society or in the international stage, Amma has to put human values--those social and ethical norms common to all cultures and religions and which represent a melding of social progress and spiritual growth--before religious concepts. She knows that in order to awaken unity and to spread love there must be respect for diversity. One must also listen to others with an open heart. She asks people not only to deepen the roots and broaden the vision, but also to progress in modern thinking while continuing to value their ancient traditions.

In fact, the values such as tolerance and love that Amma advocates are secular values. In the international stage, Amma has carefully put human values before religious concepts so that people will realize that “the principles that Amma teaches can be applied in all countries” (Ousokainen, 2005). Even the overseas Hindus who returned to India found that “her message is simple and is the same as that of all great religions, to love and to serve others selflessly, seeing ourselves in them. Amma teaches that selfless service is an important part of spiritual practice” (*My First Darshan*, 2003: 3).

Many religious speakers have treated the subject of religion and spirituality as if they are two disparate entities. However, Amma’s powerful words went deep into the center of religion and spirituality, erasing the contradictions, bridging the gap between the two and affecting a harmonious blend of both, thus unfolding their very essence. This unique characteristic has made Amma one of the most significant and powerful speakers on the subject. She has demonstrated that a religious leader can be successful even if she\he puts human values before religious concepts.

A sizeable number of people believe that India’s gift to the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be its spirituality. Guru--which is presumably unique to India--has been a booming industry in India and through India in other countries, especially in the context of globalization. By providing balanced services to all her devotees, putting secular values above religious ones and uplifting spirituality globally, Amma and her mission have shown the positive changes for religious practices in a relaxed way. They have also shown the reasons behind the successful expansion of her new message, pointing to an optional direction for new religious movements to develop globally.

To sum up, Amma’s life, from being an illiterate child with strange spiritual experiences to becoming a global guru who presides over an empire of charities and straddles the material and the spiritual worlds, testifies that only the gurus who address the issues people face can be successful in the increasingly competitive religious market. Amma along with her mission has made significant contributions to society by paying more attention to religious values than religious rituals and symbols, by re-explaining religious concepts in a way that suits the new age and the newly emerged social conditions, and by demonstrating universal values through social programs and social services.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>. There has been disagreement among the scholars around the world on the categorization of New Religious Movements (NRMs). However, if the categorization of new religious movements is considered to be a very big umbrella, all religious movements (sectarian movement, religious reform movement, new religious movement, social-religious movement, etc.) can be included.
- <sup>2</sup>. *Guru*, the word originally used for a Brahmin who trained young Brahmins in the sacred lore, has now come to mean a religious teacher of any kind who gives personal instruction to a *chela* (disciple).
- <sup>3</sup>. *Ashram* is a place where spiritual seekers and aspirants live or visit to lead a spiritual life.
- <sup>4</sup>. *Darshan* is an audience with or a vision of the Divine or a holy person. But in Amma's case, it refers to receiving a hug from Amma.
- <sup>5</sup>. The great masters of India have classified Divine Incarnations into three main categories: *Purna Avatara* (full or perfect ), *Amsa Avatara* ( partial manifestation ) and *Avesa Avatara* ( temporary overshadowing by divine power ). Amma belongs to the third category.
- <sup>6</sup>. Dharma in Sanskrit means 'that which upholds' (creation). Dharma has several meanings in the Hindu context but one common definition is that it deals with the spiritual upliftment and general well being of all human beings.
- <sup>7</sup>. See "The Lord of Yoga- Protector of Dharama," n.10, pp. 86-113.
- <sup>8</sup>. See the Advertisement of Amrita, *Frontline*, 15 July 2005, p.113.
- <sup>9</sup>. After the formation of the Kerala state in 1956, the first General Election for Kerala Legislative Assembly was conducted in February 1957. The Communist Party of Kerala got the majority seats and accordingly a Communist government came into power. This was the first time in history that a Communist Party came to power through a general election, in any country in the world.
- <sup>10</sup> The addresses include "Living in Harmony", an address at the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders at the UN General Assembly in 2000; "Awakening Universal Motherhood" at a Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious Leaders at the UN, Geneva in 2002 and "May peace and happiness prevail" at the Parliament of World's Religions in Barcelona in 2004.

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