
Book Review

WARRIER, Maya. 2005. *Hindu Selves in a Modern World: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission*. London: Routledge. x + 200 pp. ISBN 978-0415-33988-9 (hbk). £85.00.

Hindu Selves in a Modern World is a fascinating study of the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission (MAM). This organization is based around the teachings of Mata Amritanandamayi (the Mata), one of the few, if not only, female transnational Hindu gurus. The Mata is renowned for her controversial practice of physically embracing devotees and seekers. Maya Warrior's study is based on ethnographic fieldwork, not only at the ashram of the MAM in Kerala, but also at a number of other MAM centres in India.

The Mata attracts an international following; however, the majority of her devotees are drawn from the so-called Indian middle classes. Consequently, Warrior's study is primarily focused on this sector of her following. There is a short section towards the end of the book which refers to the Western devotees, but this deals with how the Indian devotees relate to the Western followers. As the title suggests, Warrior's focus is on the interrelationship between faith in the Mata, a construction of a Hindu identity and the encounter with modernity. Warrior critiques two popular models of this interrelationship. The first model suggests that there is a fundamental dichotomy between Hinduism and modernity. The second model proposes that gurus such as the Mata fill a spiritual void in the lives of the urban middle classes who are distanced from their traditional Hindu roots. Warrior argues that the devotees of the Mata are active agents, and concludes that they "seek not to retreat from modernity but to engage with it, by striving, within the Mission's accommodating environment, to negotiate their selfhood in novel, innovative, and personally fulfilling ways" (p. 140). Warrior's thesis is more nuanced than these two earlier models, and her primary data clearly substantiates her argument.

Warrior in her fieldwork has collected some fascinating data and, unlike many other ethnographic studies in religious studies, she uses this data very effectively. Reading through the book one gets a very clear sense of the appeal of this rather extraordinary guru to her sophisticated urban middle-class followers. One also gets a very clear sense of Warrior's own fascination with the group. For example, she poses the question of why these highly successful and educated people "weep in the arms of the Mata" (p. 41). Part of this fascination clearly derives from Warrior's own background of a middle-class upbringing in Delhi. Unlike many other ethnographic texts in religious studies, Warrior locates herself as a researcher and reflects on her relationship with the research participants and on her experience of the fieldwork. This reflexive discussion is not merely confined to a short section at the beginning, but is threaded throughout the text, and adds to the overall strength of the book. There is, for example, a wonderful description (pp. 25–28) of Warrior's first encounter with the Mata.

Warrior writes in a very accessible style, and at the same time engages with complex theoretical and methodological issues. This book is a useful complement to studies of other similar modern Hindu movements, such as Gwilym Beckerlegge's various studies of the Ramakrishna Mission and Lawrence Babb's work on Sathya Sai Baba. It also contributes to an

understanding of the transformation of religion in the context of modernity. This book will be very useful to anyone interested in Hinduism as a living and vibrant religious tradition, new religious movements, religion and modernity, and ethnographic fieldwork.

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