

Reviews

Hindu Selves in a Modern World: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission, by Maya Warrier. RoutledgeCurzon South Asian Religion Series; London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005. x + 185pp., £85. ISBN 0-415-33988-X (hb).

Mata Amitanandamayi or Mata, as she is affectionately known, has established a global movement, which originated in the backwaters of Kerala. Her unique style of guruship, which involves her hugging thousands of people at regular 'darshan' sessions, is certainly intriguing. It is surprising, then, that there is not more scholarly research into why the movement is so popular and what it has to offer the modern devotee. In this respect it is satisfying that Maya Warrier has written *Hindu Selves in a Modern World: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission*, which affords the reader a glimpse into the world of Mata's devotees. This book eloquently and sensitively investigates why middle-class, urban Indians and also many Westerners are drawn to the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission (MAM), critically analysing the Mata's 'modern' diagnosis of the world's problems.

Warrier explores 'how modernity and modern selfhood came to be negotiated in this Guru's fold' (p. 2). She does this in three ways, firstly, by her detailed examination of Mata's narrative, particularly her perceptions of the problems of the modern world and the varied remedies she offers. The book provides a portrayal and analysis of the devotees' engagement with Mata by presenting the reader with a selection of the devotees' own accounts of their encounters with her. Warrier then supplies her own narrative constructed through her meetings with Mata, her family, her devotees (Indian and non-Indian) and other key personalities from within and outside the organization.

Chapter 1 introduces Mata and her movement. Pointing out that the majority of the devotees are Indian middle-class urbanites, Warrier explores why Mata, who is only one among many modern gurus, is attractive to them. She also proposes to investigate Hindu selfhood, which is conceived as 'rooted in "tradition"' as opposed to Western selfhood envisaged as 'the quintessence of "modernity"' (p. 15).

Chapter 2 explores, in some detail, a variety of initial encounters with Mata that in many cases have led to the individual becoming her disciple. *Darshan*, which is the term used for the hugging encounter with Mata, is described variously as 'a sudden unaccountable rush of feeling, a point of high tension causing them to either break down and cry or feel unparalleled joy' (p. 29). These vivid accounts provide the reader with a tangible sense of Mata's considerable power and influence.

Chapter 3 identifies and discusses the main problems with modern society as identified by Mata, which consist of 'obsessive materialism' (p. 47), the reliance on science to the exclusion of faith and spirituality, and selfishness (p. 49). Warrier then analyses the ritual prescriptions offered by Mata in order to 'fulfil the task she has set herself in easing the suffering of humanity' (p. 53). The individual nature and universalistic aspect of these prescriptions appears to be an important attraction

for many devotees. Another interesting aspect of this chapter is the focus on the modernity of MAM, particularly with regard to its method of global dissemination and its development of high tech hospitals and training facilities.

Chapter 4 investigates why devotees choose Mata at a time when there is so much choice. Warriar goes on to examine how Mata's devotees 'conceptualize their relationship between Mata and other gurus, and negotiate their often multiple guru allegiances?' (p. 65)

In Chapter 5 the options that are open to those who have chosen Mata as their guru are explored. The organization is shown to consist of different groups of devotees, those who become 'modern' renunciators base their lives on service or *seva*, which although it provides a "leveling" activity that erodes the individuality and autonomy' also provides the disciple with 'considerable scope for nurturing his/her personal distinctiveness', as disciples are encouraged to 'realize their individual capabilities' (p. 86) to achieve the aims of the organization. There is also a place for the householder in the organization where faith and devotion are central. Warriar articulates 'the evident diversity in devotees' religious orientations and practices' (p. 93) by providing contrasting examples.

Chapter 6 provides an understanding of how Mata's devotees internalize their experiences. One of the unique features of this global organization is that Mata's devotees, through their experience of her embrace, conceptualize their relationship as a one-to-one bond with their guru. By sharing their narrative, devotees relive it, confirming it by their exchange with others.

In Chapter 7 the 'shared understanding of selfhood' and the 'global orientedness' (p. 119) of MAM is investigated. Warriar contends that the universal and inclusive nature of MAM appears to accommodate the opposing perspectives of those who view it as an essentially Hindu organization, but also those who see it as purely universalistic. This chapter also includes a portrait of MAM headquarters at Amritapur, revealing how the eastern and western devotees perceive each other and how their aspirations fit into the traditional dichotomy of materialistic West and spiritual East. This research finds that in fact the western devotees are often more spiritually motivated than the Indian devotees who sometimes seek material ends.

The book is concluded in Chapter 8 with Warriar drawing together her conclusions on the popularity of Mata as a guru for middle-class Indians, the construction of modernity by MAM and the ideas around the perceived loss of Hindu selfhood highlighted in Chapter 1. She concludes that modernity, as constructed by MAM, has not 'ruptured the Hindu sense of self' (p. 140) as has been suggested of modern Hindus (not specifically in relation to MAM) by some scholars who have sought to explain the increase in Hindu Nationalism. In this respect Ram, the *avatar* and epic hero who has been adopted by the Sangh Parivar, is contrasted with Mata who is perceived as an *avatar* who embodies maternal love.

Above all, this is a fascinating and well constructed book that is enjoyable to read. The concluding paragraphs at the end of each chapter remind the reader of the main points. The book is accessible, but also offers an important analytical view of Mata and her movement in contrast to the many publications that have been written by her devotees.

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