

Reflection

RITUALS IN NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

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1. Introduction

Rituals are part of every society, civilization and religion. Recently, archaeologists discovered the statue of a man devoutly offering flowers to the statue of a snake which is estimated to be 70,000 years old. According to the archaeologists, these statues might be the earliest expressions of ritualism. Thus, the symbolic expression or rituals are very ancient, perhaps even dating back to the evolution of the homosapiens. Thus, rituals and symbolic performances became part and parcel of every human society from its genesis, giving meaning to life and strengthening individual and social bonding. The famous French philosopher Paul Ricour and Mircea Eliade theorised in the twentieth century about the importance and the existential need of rituals in religions and human societies. Connecting rituals with the myths they interpreted that ritual enactments are the desire of the participants to go back to the period of *Ithihasa* or *Ilud Tempore*, to the primordial time and space, in their attempt to recharge themselves by keeping in touch with their origins. As humanity evolved through millennia, social and religious rituals were established defining and expressing social and religious identity and differentiation symbolically.

In religions and religious organisations rituals are related to worship. Initiation to the religion, passage to adulthood, marriage, priestly consecration, death ceremonies, etc., are sanctifying events in connection with the daily lived experience, and are known to be sacraments. Of course, there are other religious practices and performances to be

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conducted either on a daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly basis. It is the rituals that preserve a religion and infuse new life into it. Religion without rituals is meaningless. Humanity has not yet reached the philosophical heights where it can dispense with rituals and symbols and devote to pure dogmas of abstraction. In *Bhagavad Gita*, we read: “Greater is their trouble whose minds are set on the unmanifested; for the goal, the unmanifested, is very hard for the embodied to reach” (12:5). Almost in the same tone Jesus admonished his doubting disciple Thomas: “How happy are those who believe without seeing me!” (Jn. 20:29). It is the rituals that give colour, meaning, and concrete forms to the abstract ideals of religion. In the social organisations too there are rituals such as inaugurations, oaths of allegiance, club meetings, sport events, parades, processions, etc. In the new market economy, shopping is considered to be a social event, and at certain times, it is even celebrated in a ritualistic manner. Thus, every human situation can be seen as loaded with symbolic significance. Thus, there are no limits to the kind of actions that may be incorporated as a ritual. However, the essential feature of a ritual is that through common understanding or imposition by an external source, there are prescribed modes of behaviour for the participants or the performers. Sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc., are some scientific disciplines that delve deep into the meaning mechanisms of symbolism and ritualism.

2. Two Indian New Age Gurus

Let us examine how the rituals bond the individuals to the Gurus, or religious heads, and how gradually they evolve into a movement of strength and spirituality to be reckon with in the social arena. As research cases we shall analyse the New Religious Movements headed by Mata Amrtanadamayi and Sri Sri Ravisankar.

2.1. Mata Amrtanadamayi

Sudhamani, an illiterate little girl came to the lime light of world’s spiritual arena. The ill treatment she received at home, the social boycott from the local community, illiteracy, and many other severe adversaries and difficulties burned her in the crucible of the spiritual *sadhana*, transforming her into the glittering embodiment of wisdom and compassion capable of distributing the nectar of divine love all over the world absorbing the pain and tears of all. She is fondly and devoutly called by her disciples and *bhakthas* as ‘Amma’, irrespective of age and status.

She hugs everyone and chants melodiously in their ears assuring them that they are her beloved little children; knowing their problems she relieves them of their pain assuring them of her love and deliverance from evil. She is, therefore, an apostle of love. From her experience of abuse and lack of love she has known the importance and value of love. She, therefore, showers this love abundantly upon her disciples through hugs and the radiating smile of innocence. Her mission and vision is only love and through her 12 disciples and numerous educational and social institutions she has established this fond message throughout the world.

2.2. Sri Sri Ravisankar

Sri Sri Ravisankar is the founder of the Art of Living Foundation, which is said to be the largest non-governmental agency in the world. The organisation works hard to put a smile on every cheek by eliminating stress and negative attitudes through the *Sudarsanakriya* – breathing-cum-meditation technique – discovered and perpetuated by its founder. So in every war-torn place like Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Iraq, etc., and every place that has been severely affected by natural calamities like earthquake in Gujarat, Tsunami hit areas like Nagapatinam, Sri Lanka, hurricane hit areas like Louisiana, USA, Ravisankar's disciples do humanitarian work to relieve the human pain and suffering and to wipe out the rolling cascade of negative events. It is remarkable that Sri Sri Ravisankar has taken peace initiatives between warring factions in order to build a peaceful and harmonious society. To cope with the misfortunes and to transform the personalities, several levels of *Sudarsanakriya* are introduced to people from every walk of life, including jail inmates, teachers, IT professionals, school children, college students, etc. In order to groom the next generation of humanity in a value driven life, Art of Living Schools are established all over the world. Numerous volunteers of the Art of Living are spreading a stress-free world of smile and happiness. The founder himself is always dressed up with a smile reflecting the inner joy of peace reverberating in his personality. He claims, transcending the rigid boundaries of religions, that he is the embodiment of the love of Christ, the silence of Buddha, and the playfulness of Krishna.

3. The Common Rituals in New Age Movements

In an attempt to understand these two new religious movements in India, we shall attempt to delineate some of their programmes.

3.1. *Sat Sangh*

What is common in different New Age Movements is the *Sat Sangh*. In a *Sat Sangh*, Devotees come from all over the world and passionately wait for the *darsan* of the Guru. Meanwhile they start singing melodious *bhajans* and in between there will be a spiritual talk given by the Guru.

In the Amrta Math, where Mata Amrtanadamayi is the head, the songs are always in praise of the divine mother and they express the earnestness of the devotee to come to her. They also sing the praises of Lord Krishna and express the ardent desire of the “Vrindavan Gopikas” to be united with him. It is during the *Sat Sangh* that the Amma transforms herself as Krishna and Kali. During these *Bhavadarshans*, she would also foretell the future events in the life of the disciples or that of a community. Her hugging is also a part of the *Sat Sangh*. Since the *Bhavadarshan* and the hugging will be described later, here I shall describe only about the *Sat Sangh*. Mother’s voice and that of her disciples, especially Swami Amrtaswaroopanada, is said to lead the *Sat Sangh* into a meditative trance.

In the Art of Living Ashram, songs from all spiritual traditions are sung. Therefore, Hindu, Christian, Sikh hymns are sung during the *Sat Sangh*. Sri Sri Ravisankar also leads the gathering into a meditative trance through his dance and melodious voice. On significant days, he plays the instrument Veena, leading the devotees into *nadabrhaman*. The Art of Living Sat Sang also incorporates the dance. During the Navaratri days, the *Sat Sangh* also resorts to dancing in the typical Gujarati style. At other times, spontaneous dancing springs up, and being inspired by the dancing, many merge into a flowing artistic movement. During *Sat Sang*, Ravisankar interacts with the group and devotees, or an earnest seeker can even ask questions. He also plays into the moods of the *Sat Sang* by offering *laddus* (typical Indian sweet) and, at times, playfully fools the gathering by apparently attempting to throw the *laddus* at them but, in effect, eating them by himself. This may be to exhibit the playfulness of Lord Krishna that has been integrated into his life.

3.2. Aspects of Ritualism in Amrta Math

3.2.1. Krishna and Devi *Bhava*

Among the new religious movements it is the movement of Mata Amritanandmayi that has more meaningful and colourful rituals. Mata came into prominence by exhibiting the personification of the affectionate

Krishna and the ferocious Kali Devi. Because of her colour, she was physically abused by her parents, often scolded and forced her to do all the household jobs and even the works at relatives' houses. This gave her enough and more burden, and made her life bitter one. She had nobody except her Sri Krishna to whom she prayed with a grief-stricken heart and tearful eyes to be compassionate on her and deliver her from this mundane misery. The prayer was so intense and she delved deep into the inner consciousness of identifying herself with Krishna and on a Wednesday in the September of 1975, as she was returning home in Idamannel, near Kollam, carrying a bundle of grass, she heard the devotional *bhajans* on Krishna and in a trance went in the midst of the people who were reciting the *Bhagavatham* and began to act like Sri Krishna. Some of the faithful believed that she is possessed by Krishna and some others were skeptical and asked for a sign. Sudhamani proclaimed that they are all welcome for the next *Bhagavatham* recital and then show her divine personality. Many people assembled there on that day to witness the happenings. She identified with Krishna and she sprinkled over the people with the blessed water and asked somebody to touch his/her finger in the remaining water.¹ The devotees of mother claim that the water was turned into milk and it was distributed as *prasada*. Again, Sudhamani asked another person to touch the milk and, then, the devotees claim that the milk turned into a pudding. The veracity of the incident could not be verified and it has already become folklore. Later, Sudhamani was able to bring her *Krisnabhava* whenever she wanted and that became a part of the ritual of the movement. Another devotional frame that came to be associated with her life was that of the possession of the ferocious divine, Kali Mata. She is said to have assumed the form of the ferocious Kali during one *Sat Sangh*. These two *bhavas* are the identities of Mata and at times she absorbs herself into them to signify the divine in her.

3.2.2. Sri Paduka Abhisekam of Mata

The washing of the feet of Mata Amritanadamayi is something very special that is conducted in the Math. Although it is conducted in every *ashram* and for every Guru, in Amrta Math, special *bhajans* are written for the occasion in Sanskrit and they are sung so devotionally while the selected

¹Swami Amritasvarupananda, *Mata Amritanandamayi: A Biography*, Kollam: Mata Amritanandamayi Mission Trust, 2005, 88-89.

person to conduct the *pada puja* washes Mata's feet first with water, then milk, then with honey and other offerings. During the washing a hymn is sung.² After the washing of the feet is done, the elements with which *pada puja* is conducted is considered as very precious and the devotees drink it as divine nectar, capable of providing eternal life. A well known poet in Kerala, Mahakavi Akkitham, a Brhamin by birth conducted the *pada puja* of Mata and showed his reverence to Mata. Professor Ramnath Narayanasamy of the Indian Institute of Management (Bangalore) told the author how he was lucky to have a few drops of this divine nectar and how happy he was in consuming it. He is waiting like many other devotees for an occasion to conduct Mata's *pada puja*.

3.2.3. Hugging Mother

As a method of imparting her love to humanity, Amrtanadamayi started hugging those who come to visit her, irrespective of gender, cast, creed, and age distinctions. Mata has the disposition of a mother and she expresses it whenever it is possible. Her disciples bear witness to this motherly affection. Dattan, a severe leprosy patient, who was chased away by everybody because of the stench and the pitiable condition, was warmly hugged and consoled by Mata. In his own words "Mother treated me like her own child, just as she was treating everyone else."³ When asked about the affection she had bestowed on him, she commented that "who else is there to take care of him and to love him? Mother doesn't see his external

²An English translation of the excerpts of the hymn is as follows: "Salutation, salutation to the *Padukas* of the Holy Master which are honoured by his lotus-like feet, which remove the delusion, beginning with attraction for woman, and which fulfil all the wishes of the bowing devotees... / Salutation, salutation to the *Padukas* of the Holy Master which are like two boats for crossing the endless ocean of transmigration (*samsara*), which give devotion for the Guru, and whose worship grants the sovereignty of dispassion... / Salutation, salutation to the *Padukas* of the Holy Master, bowing to both of which even the poorest attain quickly one day the status of the Lord of Wealth, and the dumb the status of the Lord of Speech (Brihaspati). / Salutation, salutation to the *Padukas* of the Holy Master which destroy the multitude of serpents beginning with desire, which grant the treasure of discrimination and dispassion, which impart knowledge, and which give immediate liberation. / Salutation, salutation to the *Padukas* of the Holy Master which fulfil all the wishes of those who are devoted to their worship, which are greater than Lord Shiva, and whose worship gives purity of heart."

³Amritasvarupananda, *Mata Amritanandamayi*, 219.

body. She only sees his heart. I cannot discard him. He is my son and I am his mother. Can a mother abandon her son?"⁴ This affectionate treatment, according to the devotees, seems to have cured him; this incident continues to be a legend among Amma's devotees.

Thousands of devotees turn up to rely on her shoulders, to unburden their problems, and to receive a spiritual solace that can lead them to solutions of their varied problems. I met at least three intellectuals, a chartered accountant, a management expert, and a real estate agent who were undergoing different types of mental turmoil. They came back to their normal self after meeting the Mata; even now they continue to be at ease with their troubled situations. My observations indicate that those who have lost their mother in their childhood or those who have lost a chance to experience the affection of a mother or those who were attached to their mother were attracted towards Mata. She consoles them and accepts them as her own children and promises that she will find a solution to all their problems. The solace and peace they had experienced were narrated to me by many of her devotees. Mata is ready to hug the devotees continuously for a whole day and night. A person sitting at a stretch and continuing to hug thousands of people is something extraordinary.

3.2.4. Sannyasa Deeksha

Mata has also established a religious order to continue her work and the members of this order to attain self realization. Since she was not herself initiated, she asked a disciple Swami Dhruvanada, who was from the Ramakrishna Mission, to conduct the worship and to initiate the disciples into the order. All the members who belong to her order take the last name 'Puri' if the disciple is a male and 'Prana' if the disciple is a female. So Unnikrishnan became Swami Turiyamritananda Puri, Balagopal became Swami Amritaswarupananda, Venugopal became Swami Pranavamritananda, Sreekumar became Swami Purnamritananda Puri, Ramakrishna became Swami Ramakrishnananda Puri, Ramakrishna Rao became Swami Amritatmanada Puri, Neal Rosner became Swami Paramatmananda Puri, Saumy became Swamini Krishnamrita Prana, and Madhusudhan became Swami Premananda Puri.

The disciples have to shave their head and perform their own funeral rites by the ocean side. Then, very early morning there is the fire worship

⁴Amritasvarupananda, *Mata Amritanandamayi*, 219.

which will go to the dawn; there will be mother's discourse narrating the importance of the chaste life they undertake and there shall not be any going back from this stage of self surrender and complete dedication to God. After four years of taking care of the Math cowshed only Amrtageetanda was given *Sanyasa*, though he was already a member of Chinmayananda Mission. Thus, all the swamis and swaminis are well trained for many years and Mother has conducted tests to detect their resolve in taking *Sanyasa*. During the discourse, Mother will collect some anecdotes from the life situations and exhort them. To Swami Amritageetananda Mother exhorted: "if you would turn back from this life, it would be better for you to continue the work in the cowshed rather than seek *Sanyasa*." After the discourse, the special attire made of red colour symbolizing sacrifice and resolve is given. To some she asked to cover their head with a cloth of the same colour.

3.2.5. *Brhamasthana* Temples

Mata has established a unique temple where everyone irrespective of male or female can conduct *pujas*. Normally, in most of the religions, it is the prerogative of the male to conduct the worship and the women are usually participants. Mata had introduced this revolutionary change in the Hindu worship ritual. The first such temple was established at Kodungalloor, Kerala, and the same has been established in many other cities, including one in Bangalore. The concept behind this temple is to eliminate all obstacles that may be hindering the fullness of life. So Siva, Devi, Ganesha, and Rahu who is conceived in the form of a snake are sculpted into a single stone with four sides depicting each deity in order to eliminate the evil influences and give relief to humanity from suffering. Though she is aware that the reality is one, for the common people she has devised the fourfold deity so that the divine energy may flow from a single entity into four dimensions. Mother admonishes her devotees: "God is not in the stone. Isn't he in our hearts? It is to remove the dirt from one's face that one looks into a mirror. We ourselves are not in the mirror. God is everywhere, but in order to purify the human mind and remove the dirt therefrom, a medium is needed. The sacred image is for that purpose."⁵

⁵Swami Paramatmananda, *On the Road to Freedom*, Kollam: MAM Trust, 2005, 195.

Numerous devotees conduct worship at these temples and achieve solace from their sufferings.

All rituals that are practised in the Amritha Mutt signify love; the Mother wants to eliminate all sufferings and as a means to bear the traumas of daily lived experiences she showers upon humanity the divine love through hugging, *Sat Sanghs*, worship at *Brhmasthanam* temples, etc. Mata has a large following; most of them are quite ordinary people as she is and the rich generously pour their resources to support her in eradicating the miseries of humanity. Thus, Mata Amritanandamayi embodies the love that the contemporary world is lacking and assures everyone with her outpouring of love.

3.3. Rituals at the Art of Living Ashram

The Art of Living Ashram (ALA) proposes to perpetuate peace, harmony, and unity among individuals and within the society. The rituals enacted in the ALA are, therefore, related to these ideals. Due to a stressful life individuals are distressed and are often burdened with physical sickness, mental disorders and are unable to bear a pleasant personality. The motto of ALA is to dress every one with a beautiful smile. So, distressing techniques and positive attitudinal behaviours are emphasized in the ALA. Every member of ALA is bearing a smiling face that itself is an attraction. The business class and bureaucrats, in addition to many school and college students, are the members of the ALA.⁶

3.3.1. Mahasudarsanakriya

Sudarsanakriya is a breathing technique through which one can control the breath and bring peace and tranquillity to the consciousness. It has been specially developed by Sri Sri Ravisankar while he was in the Himalayas. The breathing is synchronized with the movement of the body and the breath is also controlled. Slow paced breathing with very fast and sufficiently strong inhaling and exhaling are part of the initial stages of the *Sudarsanakriya*. There are several stages of the *sudarsanakriya* and the mass conduction of the programme is known as *Mahasudarsanakriya*. Hundreds of thousands of people are invited for the programme and Ravisankar himself conducts the *Mahasudarsanakriya* along with *bhajan* singing, spiritual exhortation, and interview with him, leading people into a meditative trance. The *Mahasudarsanakriya* conducted in Bangalore

⁶Francois Gautier, *The Guru of Joy*, New Delhi: The India Today Group, 2003.

during the silver jubilee celebrations of the ALA and the fiftieth birthday of Sri Sri Ravisankar was a very massive show incorporating more than one million people.

3.3.2. Peace and Harmony Fellowship

Wherever there are conflicts, warfare and calamities, the ALA volunteers under the guidance of Sri Sri Ravisankar attempt to alleviate the miseries of the people and to bring them back into harmony and homeostasis. Thus, Sri Sri Ravisankar visited the war-torn Sri Lanka several times; he met the warring leaders and tried to bring them back into the negotiating table. He went even to the extent of visiting Velupillai Prabhakaran and presented him a white shawl as a symbol of peace. Swami Satyojata is entrusted with the relief work as well as the peace initiatives in Sri Lanka.

Sri Sri Ravisankar also brought together the Pandits of Kashmir who were ousted by the pro-Pakistani militants and the Muslim leaders and enabled them to work together for peace initiatives. In the same way, the Muslim leaders and the Hindus of Ayodhya were brought together by Sri Sri Ravisankar into the negotiating table. For the distressed people of Iraq, he designed techniques and met President Bush and other important people to bring peace into the war-torn region. Sri Sri Ravisankar has also written many books projecting the common elements in all the religions.⁷ Thus, he highlighted the common elements in Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam which are the prominent religions of India. He always brought together the religious leaders to discuss issues of common interest and addressed different religious gatherings. So, wherever there are calamities and disharmony, it is the special charism of Sri Sri Ravisankar and ALA to work for peace and harmony and bring back the individual and communities to peace and calmness. They have made up this process into a ritual part of the Art of Living programmes.

3.3.3. Navaratri Homas

Many of the ALA members are from the Gujarati community and, therefore, grand *Navaratri* celebrations are conducted. Special *pujas* and *homas* are conducted along with religious discourse and dance festivals. Huge outdoor *homakundas* are erected for this purpose and Sri Sri Ravisankar conducts *pujas* along with other priests.

⁷Sri Sri Ravisankar, *Timeless Wisdom*, Bangalore: Vyakti Vikas Kendra India, 2003.

Thus, the Art of Living movement led by Sri Sri Ravisankar work for world peace as well as internal peace of the individual. *Sudarsanakriya* is practised to sustain the blissful attitude of the individual and *Mahasudarsanakriya* is performed for the local, national, and world peace. Sri Sri Ravisankar was first the disciple of Maharshi Mahesh Yogi and some of his ideals, like world peace, are undertaken by ALA. Sri Sri Ravisankar has brought the peace and harmony movement to a higher plane by the introduction of de-stressing programmes like *Sudarsanakriya*. So, Sri Sri Ravisankar and the Art of Living work for the refinement and total transformation of the individual as well the larger humanity.

4. Conclusion

The new religious movements led by Mata Amrtanadamayi and Sri Sri Ravisankar transcend, to a great extent, the boundaries of religions and nationalities. They transform individuals and societies through spiritual exercises that are blended with rituals leading them to a better human life – both as individuals and as a society. Thus, they strive for a better humanity based on spirituality and religious fervour. The traditional religiosity is packaged in a globalized, ritualistic, marketable way so that it suits the tastes of the twenty-first century human person. Mata Amrtanadamayi and Sri Sri Ravisankar reflect the two intimate forms of the divine, namely, the motherly and the androgynous (*ardhanariswara*).