

MATA AMRITANANDAMAYI

An Embodiment of the 'Embracing' Sainthood

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1. Introduction

History has witnessed manifold personalities who appear with a special flair of spirituality and charisma to enkindle and rekindle individuals and communities. Simple, insignificant and humble human beings become universal figures by gradually assuming spiritual powers. They emerge to be saints and wonder workers. Are saints born or made? The *Bhakti* Tradition has its own role in sensitizing the devotional sentiments of the devotees. The number of saints in the Indian tradition is not in any way less in comparing any other traditions of faith and devotion throughout the world. In recent debates we come across an amazing applaud to the saints of New Age Movements. Sanctity and divinity cannot be put into logical scrutiny to get perfect clarity of notions. Faith and reason, however, exist side-by-side enhancing each other in the human search for the real. Most often we fall short of reasoning in our attempt to understand 'Saints' of the times. Among the modern saints of the New Age, Mata Amritanandamayi is unique in various respects, especially in her dual expressions of divine *bhavas* and her hugging of the devotees to impart her blessings.

2. Amritapuri Amma: A Brief Life Sketch

Unearthing of the historical origin and humble beginning is an important factor in the study of saints and persons who claim to have certain *divine* existence. *Amma*,¹ as she is known among her devotees, was born in 1953,

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¹The Malayalam word "*Amma*" means "Mother." Amritanandamayi is usually addressed by the devotees and followers by this name. It shows their filial devotion to and acceptance of her as a loving mother.

as the fourth child of Sugunanandan and Damayanti of Idamannel family in a poor fishing village, Parayakadavu, Kerala, a Southern State in India. She was named Sudhamani,² though she is known to the outside world as Mata Amritanandamayi (the mother of immortal bliss).

From childhood itself she showed an unusual interest in matters of the soul and became an eloquent chanter of praises to Lord Kṛṣṇa.³ Though her origin was simple and rural, a close study would prove that there was something quite unusual from the very early years onwards in the way she progressed in the path of *bhakti*.

3. Dual Dimensions of Personality: Kṛṣṇa Bhāva and Devi Bhāva

A. An Ardent Devotee of Kṛṣṇa

Reading through the childhood narratives we can distinguish two explicit stages in the life of Amritanandamayi. It is claimed that the baby girl retained a dark blue hue reminiscent of Lord Kṛṣṇa and the divine mother Kālī. Eventually, the dark blue complexion changed into dark brown. Yet, when the little girl's desire intensified to behold the vision of Lord Kṛṣṇa, her skin colour used to assume its blue hue. Even today, as the devotees say, especially when she assumes the divine moods of Kṛṣṇa and Devi, one can observe her dark blue skin colour.

Amritanandamayi had a special flair to study the divine names and from the very early age she began chanting hymns in praise of Lord Kṛṣṇa. The melody and soothingness she infused into the chanting were conspicuous to the flock. On her special devotion to Kṛṣṇa, during her childhood, writes one of her biographers:

By the time Sudhamani turned five, a visible stream of inborn devotion to Lord Kṛṣṇa flowed from her heart, and before long this love took the form of full-fledged devotional songs. The songs were filled with poignant longing for her beloved Kṛṣṇa, and her enchanting, soulful singing of these simple, yet deeply mystical songs became well known throughout the village. While chanting or

²*Sudha* means *amritam* or nectar and it is from this meaning that she is called Amritanandamayi by the devotees and followers.

³Amritaswarupananada, *Mata Amritanandamayi: A Biography*, Kollam: Mata Amritanandamayi Mission Trust, 1998, 25-26.

singing, she would focus her eyes on a little picture of Kṛṣṇa, which she always kept tucked inside her shirt. Then she would sit unmoving for a long time. The extraordinary behaviour and intense devotion amazed everyone and attracted the attention of all the devout villagers.⁴

Sitting still and motionless in isolated places was a regular event in the life of Sudhamani; so, too, sitting in solitude with closed eyes was another regular feature. Unable to understand her unusual states of consciousness and bizarre behavioural patterns, the parents would scold her for not being playful and ordinary like the other children. They even misunderstood it as a psychological disorder. She, however, had an amazing memory in the study matters and did not waste a single minute in idleness.

“Visualizing her beloved Kṛṣṇa’s beautiful form within her heart while repeating His Divine Name, Sudhamani spent her days and nights in her own world.”⁵ Just as cows were very dear to Kṛṣṇa, she too had special liking for them and spared some time to sit with them in solitude, being lost in the divine reverie awaiting the vision of Kṛṣṇa. She danced and sung with a God-intoxicated bliss and the longing to merge in the divine, which was expressed through her constant gazing at the picture of Kṛṣṇa. Her deep spiritual intensity is seen through the following song sung at the age of eight: “O essence of mercy, O compassionate One / O Kṛṣṇa, give me refuge! ... / O Lord of the *Gīta*, Lover of Divine Music, / Give the capacity to sing Thy song... / O Lover of devotional singing, / Do you not hear Thy sacred Names, / Uttered from the innermost heart?”⁶ Further, tired of the day’s work, she used to sit in dark night and pray to the Lord Kṛṣṇa as follows:

O, my beloved Kṛṣṇa, nobody but You can understand my heart. This world is full of sorrow and suffering. Selfishness reigns supreme. People seek only their own happiness and pleasure. My darling, I desire nothing else but complete oneness with you. O Lord, did not You see my suffering today? Let me see your divine form!

⁴Amritaswarupananada, *Mata Amritanandamayi: A Biography*, 26.

⁵Amritaswarupananada, *Mata Amritanandamayi: A Biography*, 28.

⁶Amritaswarupananada, *Mata Amritanandamayi: A Biography*, 31.

These miseries are nothing for me, but the separation from you is agony.⁷

This passage is an explicit expression of her intimacy to Kṛṣṇa. While Sudhamani was occupied in doing anything, her lips kept moving spontaneously and nobody understood that she was incessantly repeating the name of the Lord. Unfortunately, people took it as a sign of madness.

As she reached her late teen, she was immersed in an unbroken stream of spiritual awareness. Her devotion to Kṛṣṇa was indescribably intense. "Sometimes she considered herself to be the beloved of Kṛṣṇa, while at other times she was His servant. This unlettered girl, who had not studied past the fourth grade and had never read the *Vedas* or *Upaniṣads*, became the embodiment of supreme devotion to Lord Kṛṣṇa."⁸ Often, while collecting leaves to feed the goats, Sudhamani was accompanied by small companions who followed her wherever she went. They loved her company. Sitting on the branch of the tree for plucking the leaves, Sudhamani would occasionally become overpowered with the distinct feeling that she herself was Kṛṣṇa. At other times, she had visions of the divine:

Kṛṣṇa would come late at night and appear before her. The divine flute player would catch hold of her hands and dance with her. At other times He would play with her and make her laugh. In those blissful moments, she would dance like never before in divine ecstasy, the dance of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā.⁹

This ardent devotee of the Lord Kṛṣṇa gradually started assuming the natures of Kṛṣṇa in her own personality. It caused many misunderstandings in the beginning but, gradually, realizing her intimacy with Kṛṣṇa and the divine aura in her daily life, people started flocking at the feet of this devout lady.

B. Emergence of Kṛṣṇa Bhāva

The intense devotion and love towards Lord Kṛṣṇa gradually changed her

⁷Amritaswarupananada, *Mata Amritanandamayi: A Biography*, 42.

⁸Amritaswarupananada, *Mata Amritanandamayi: A Biography*, 76-77.

⁹Amritaswarupananada, *Mata Amritanandamayi: A Biography*, 82-83.

to assume Kṛṣṇa *Bhāva* in the worldly abode. In many places one could see her pictures dressed up like Lord Kṛṣṇa. In 1975 while she was coming from the field after collecting grass, she had overheard the final verse of the *Bhāgavatam*, being read aloud during a prayer meeting. Hearing them she became still and with a sudden change of mood she stood amidst the devotees. Overwhelmed with divine bliss, feeling of inner identification with Lord Kṛṣṇa, she started transforming her features and movements like that of Kṛṣṇa Himself.¹⁰ This was the beginning of the expressions of *Bhāvas* and there were mixed reactions from people. Many demanded miracles to substantiate the truth. Only later, however, she responded as follows:

I am not interested in making someone a believer by showing a miracle. My intention is not to show miracles. My goal is to inspire people with the desire for liberation through realization of their Eternal Self. Miracles are illusory; when I do one miracle you will demand for more. I am here not to create desire but to remove it.¹¹

However, due to the persistent questions and criticisms she agreed to do something in the next *Bhāgavatam* discourse. On that day a great crowd gathered there and she changed a pot of water into pure milk and later into pudding, made of milk, bananas, etc. It was distributed to a crowd of more than thousand, yet the pudding remained unfinished. Many, even her parents, however, took this Kṛṣṇa *Bhāvas* as only a temporary possession of Kṛṣṇa and that her devotional practices were temporary aberrations that would cease in course of time. Later, her father called upon an astrologer, though the latter is said to have asserted that Sudhamani is a *Mahātma* (Great Soul or Saint).¹²

The Kṛṣṇa *Bhāva* of Amṛitanandamayī is not a sheer flight into the spiritual world; it is, according to her, integrally related to the day-to-day affairs of life. Referring to her own experiences, she is said to have remained in the bodily existence to address miseries of the world: "In the early days, I used to dance in bliss and move about alone, persisting in Kṛṣṇa *Bhāva*, but no one knew. One day I strongly felt the urge to be absorbed in the Supreme Being without returning. Then I heard a voice

¹⁰ Amṛitaswarupananada, *Mata Amṛitanandamayī: A Biography*, 88.

¹¹ Amṛitaswarupananada, *Mata Amṛitanandamayī: A Biography*, 89.

¹² Amṛitaswarupananada, *Mata Amṛitanandamayī: A Biography*, 93.

from within saying, "Thousands and thousands of people in the world are steeped in misery."¹³ On another occasion, she said: "I was able to know everything concerning everyone. I was fully conscious that I, myself, was Kṛṣṇa, not only during that particular time of manifestation, but all other times as well."¹⁴ Then on, she appeared in Kṛṣṇa *Bhāva* and this sacred spot where she constantly did so, became a veritable *Vrindāvan*, the abode of Kṛṣṇa. Devotees began to flock the place for her *darśan* and to be relieved of their problems. This became the beginning of a great movement and pilgrims from all over the world began to come to her.

During her Kṛṣṇa *bhāva*, though she hears and responds to the problems of the faithful, Amritanandamayi maintains a playful and detached attitude. In that state there is neither love nor lovelessness. In order to reach this state of transcendence she has decided to love and serve her devotees as a mother and, thus, to assume the nature of the Divine Mother.¹⁵

C. Emergence of the Devi *Bhāva*

Besides the Kṛṣṇa *Bhāva*, Sudhamani showed Devi *Bhāva*, too, at various occasions which could be seen as a second face of her life. As it is recorded, after six months of the Kṛṣṇa *Bhāva*, she started assuming Devi *Bhāva*. Once she heard an inner voice within her as follows:

My child, I dwell in the heart of all beings and have no fixed abode. Your birth is not for merely enjoying the unalloyed Bliss of the Self but for confronting suffering humanity. Henceforth, worship Me in the hearts of all beings and relieve them of the sufferings of worldly existence...¹⁶

Quite after sometime she started manifesting Devi *Bhāva*, which is an expression of the mood of the Divine Mother. In these moments the oneness with the Divine Mother is being expressed. Mother is an embodiment of love accepting everybody regardless of religion, caste and

¹³ Amritaswarupananada, *Mata Amritanandamayi: A Biography*, 90.

¹⁴ Amritaswarupananada, *Mata Amritanandamayi: A Biography*, 90.

¹⁵ Amritaswarupananada, *From Amma's Heart: Conversations with Mata Amritanandamayi*. Amritapuri: Mata Amritanandamayi Mission Trust, 2003, 82.

¹⁶ Amritaswarupananada, *Mata Amritanandamayi: A Biography*, 139.

colour. At times she would appear as a fierce Mother to remove the powers of evil. Certain transformations occurred in her after she had manifested the Devi *Bhāva*: "She was generally aloof and uncommunicative. All her time was devoted to prayer and meditation on the form of Divine Mother. She became more daring and her facial expression changed."¹⁷

D. The Meaning of the Divine *Bhāvas*

The meaning of varied *Bhāvas* in the life of a person cannot be understood by mere intellectual analysis. Great thinkers of India had classified the divine *avatāra* into three main categories: *Pūrṇa Avatāra* – full or perfect manifestation of the deity, *Aṃśa Avatāra* – partial manifestation, and *Āveśa Avatāra* – temporary overshadowing by divine power. The manifestation of Sudhamani in the dual *bhāvas* can be understood as *Āveśa Avatāra*. This is the temporary descent of or possession by the deity, by making use of the body of some people in order to perform certain deeds. One can trace such instances in the epics, such as Lord Viṣṇu's incarnation as Paraśurāma as depicted in the epic *Srīmad Bhāgavatam*. Here Viṣṇu entered the body of the Paraśurāma and returned after the completion of a special task.¹⁸ There were instances in which Kṛṣṇa himself assumed the form of Rāma and his consort Rādha as Sīta when they invited Hanumān to *Dwāraka*. Here Kṛṣṇa was assuming Rāma-*bhāva* only. The life of Lord Chaitanya is yet another example for assuming diverse divine *bhāvas*. In this respect Sudhamani can be an extension of these kinds of temporary manifestation of the divine. According to her followers, "These divine *bhāvas* are nothing but the external revelation of her incessant Oneness with the Supreme."¹⁹ She used to dress up as Kṛṣṇa or Devi during her *bhāvas* so that devotees may distinguish the *bhāvas* and pray accordingly.

4. The Claim of "Universal Motherhood"

The devotees usually address Amritanandamayi as "Amma." While the modern world lags behind the qualities of compassion, sympathy, empathy and tolerance, she embodies them with an exception. Through her loving

¹⁷ Amritaswarupananada, *Mata Amritanandamayi: A Biography*, 141.

¹⁸ Amritaswarupananada, *Mata Amritanandamayi: A Biography*, 197-98.

¹⁹ Amritaswarupananada, *Mata Amritanandamayi: A Biography*, 202.

embrace and charitable activities, Amritanandamayi heals the heart of the world in order to rekindle love and mutual respect. Her compassion crosses the barriers of nationality, race, caste and religion. Through the principle of unity among human beings across the boundaries of castes and religions, Amritanandamayi claims a universal motherhood and, thus, tries to transform the whole world. "Amma's teaching is universal. Whenever she is asked about her religion, she replies that her religion is Love. She does not ask anybody to believe in God or to change their faith but only to inquire into their own real nature and to believe in themselves."²⁰ Even in her early twenties the awareness of universal motherhood was seen in her. She unceasingly started to embrace and, thus, to express the universal love. True love, according to her, rejects nobody but accepts all.

"Amma's all-embracing *maitri* and total identification with the entire creation is amply revealed through her refrain to children: "To truly love Amma is to love equally all beings in the world."²¹ Thus, the loving concern for the whole world and all the beings in it projects the ambience of universal motherhood. Together with the humanitarian values and works she advocates, the appearance in Devi *bhāva* might also contribute to the spiritual glory added to the apparent universal motherhood of Amritanandamayi. Once she replied to a group of people who asked her the question "How can you be a mother, who has never given birth to a child?"

A woman doesn't become a mother just by giving birth; the maternal quality has to blossom within her. Similarly, a woman who has developed the mother within herself, in all its fullness, is no less a mother than a woman who has given birth to a baby...²²

5. The Divinity of Amritanandamayi

Reading through the books on Amritanandamayi, one gets the impression that at least the devotees consider her as a divine being. The expressions like, "Holy Mother," "Universal Motherhood," "Formless Self," etc., point

²⁰"Embracing the World" (A Pamphlet), 5.

²¹Puri, *Racing Along the Razor's Edge*, 72.

²²Jnanamritananda, *Lead Us to Light: A Collection of Amma's Teachings*, Part I. California: Mata Amritanandamayi Center, 2002, 55.

to the divinity attributed to her by devotees. Moreover, the uppercase letters used with the expressions related to her are also pointing to the intentionality to introduce divine reverence and devotion. In an interview she was asked: "Are you God?" Then she asked in return: "Son, tell me what is your concept of God?" The interviewer told: "That which we cannot see, One who has supernatural powers, etc." Hearing this she replied: "I don't believe that God is there above the sky. I have a concept of God in terms of qualities. The attempt is to instill those qualities in people."²³ Making an evaluation of this reply, one may not come across any explicit expression or claim on the part of Amritanandamayi that she herself is God.

Once, while she was speaking about *sannyāsa*, somebody asked her: "Is *sannyās* also attaining Godhood?" She replied: "*Sannyās* is a state where one is able to behold and adore the entire creation as God. *Sannyās* is the state of pure awareness."²⁴ Here, too, she accepts herself as a true *sannyāsini* and not as having Godhood or divinity. On another occasion she described herself as "Nothingness."²⁵

Indeed, the descriptions of the miracles performed by her at the household and in the ashram point to certain extraordinary powers. To face the rationalists who were against her claims and spiritual prowess, she is said to have changed water into milk, and to sweet pudding, which was served to the crowd in abundance.²⁶ Besides these, she could possibly give an impression of divinity by the dual manifestations of Kṛṣṇa *bhāva* and Devi *bhāva*. The temporary divine manifestations occurring in the human body cannot be said to make the person similar or identical with the deity. She is said to have attained the ultimate state of God-realization. In her biography one comes across the following statement about herself: "Having attained perfect control over the mind, I found that I could identify myself with any aspect of the Divine which I chose by my own will. Suddenly I realized that I myself am Devi."²⁷ In many writings on

²³Sujit Chandra Kumar, "Embracing the World," *The Week*, September 21, 2003, 24.

²⁴Amritaswarupananda, *From Amma's Heart*, 63-64.

²⁵Amritaswarupananda, *From Amma's Heart*, 76.

²⁶Amritaswarupananda, *Mata Amritanandamayi: A Biography*, 89-90.

²⁷Amritaswarupananda, *Mata Amritanandamayi: A Biography*, 143.

Amritanandamayi, a close reader can find explanations on the "Supreme Self" and the "Formless Self" being identified with her. These expressions, however, bear a tint of Divinity, ascribed to her by her devotees, contrary to her conviction and will.

There was a group of rationalists who protested against her movements from the beginning onwards. The dual *bhāvas* were met with serious setbacks. The fundamentalists tried to dethrone the prayer sessions and the group gatherings by giving inverse explanations. One way or the other, their attempts failed before her, which is, again, considered as a validating sign of her personal prayer experience and constant relationship with God.

There were, of course, people with certain extraordinary powers of the senses and spirit, which could be seen as a kind of psychological and spiritual emulation and not as a sign of Divinity, or identification with any particular deity. In my opinion, Amritanandamayi's divinity is only a postulation and attribution made by her close followers, which gradually got popularity by their propaganda and proclamation, especially through their profuse access to the modern mass media communication. Moreover, she is mostly supported and assisted by two closest followers, namely, Swami Amritaswarupananda and Swami Ramakrishnananda Puri, from whom most of her books have come out. They are well learned and efficient in managing the affairs of this spiritual movement in such a way as to attract people and to appeal to their hearts. Seemingly, this movement enjoys also political patronage from prominent Hindu political parties and their leaders, which, given the unhealthy tendency of mixing up religion and politics to the highest extremes in the contemporary India, may tend to question the credibility of the movement and its spiritual motives.

6. 'Embracing' Outflow of Love

"The hugging saint of Kerala," as Amritanandamayi is known, is considered to be an embodiment of love of God to human beings. She has been showing and expressing her love towards the sick, weak, old and downtrodden. There were many occasions in her life where she had cared the bedridden sick people. Sometimes, even against the protest of the parents and relatives, she offered food and other assistance to the needy. She believed that people suffer because of their fate which is the result of

their past actions (*karma*). She positively responded to this Kārmic understanding by saying, "If it is their fate to suffer, it is my duty to help them."²⁸

Presenting Amritanandamayi with the "Gandhi-King Award for Non-violence" for 2002, Jane Goodall, a British Primatologist and former recipient of the same award, said: "She stands here in front of us, God's love in a human body."²⁹ She even reflected moments of extraordinary patience and love Amritanandamayi showed to the miscreants and evildoers. In her own words: "For me to reject someone would be like rejecting my own self because I am not separate from anyone and no one is separate from me."³⁰ It is being recorded in her history that even ferocious and wild animals became obedient and docile at the presence of her love. Indeed, *Amma's* love is not confined to humanity alone but embraces the entire animate and inanimate world. During the period of her *sādhana* (spiritual practice) even the animals sought her company and closeness. When someone asked about it she replied: "When one gets rid of all attachments and aversion and attains equal vision then even hostile animals will become friendly toward one."³¹

Amma's all encompassing *maitri* and total identification with the entire creation are amply revealed through her special embracing or hugging. *The Week* has expressed the view that "If there were a world record for hugs, it would surely go to Mata Amritanandamayi, a small, dark woman with a radiant smile."³² If the speciality of Mahesh Yogi is *Transcendental Meditation* and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, *Sudarshan Kriya*, Amritanandamayi's hallmark is a simple, warm hug. *The Independent* reported during her visit to London: "There were no rousing speeches, no religious messages, no strong-arm fund raising tactics; just a round faced woman in an armchair, smiling and dispensing tactile tonics."³³

It is not possible to count the number of devotees she embraces. The estimate goes above 25 millions and the number increases each day. She

²⁸Puri, *Racing Along the Razor's Edge*, 61.

²⁹Puri, *Racing Along the Razor's Edge*, 62.

³⁰Puri, *Racing Along the Razor's Edge*, 63.

³¹Puri, *Racing Along the Razor's Edge*, 72.

³²Kumar, "Embracing the World," 19.

³³Kumar, "Embracing the World," 18.

appears in Devi *bhāva* and dresses up in the manner and continuously hugs from evening till morning. With a friendly pat on the back, she brings disciples, sometimes two at a time, close to her ears, whispering away their innermost anxieties. Sometimes she kisses them and calls them "my darling son." Grown up people bury their faces in the lap and pours out their worries and sorrows. As it is recalled by Philip John,

There is a subcultural perception of comfort and security in the mother's bosom. In a spiritual setting the devotee looks forward to a symbol of this relationship. *Amma* has translated the hug into that symbol. The hug is, therefore, a perpetual reminder of that relationship.³⁴

In one of the occasions she spoke of the impact of her hugging. According to her, it is not just physical contact that is taking place but the love she feels for all creation flows toward each person who comes to her. The vibration of that love purifies the receivers and helps in their inner awakening and spiritual growth. They will be awakened into the motherly qualities. Love is a language everybody can understand: it is universal.³⁵

She is an embodiment of the embracing sainthood and, thus, an innovator and initiator of a particular brand of spiritual practice. No other saint can claim this tactile technique and tonic but it pertains to Amritanandamayi alone. According to her understanding, her love flows to the other through the hugs and embraces as if a river flows incessantly. In her speech in the *Millennium Peace Summit* at the United Nations, she said: "What cannot be accomplished with force, violence and war can be accomplished with love."³⁶

7. An Appraisal of Amritanandamayi and Her *Sadhana*

Amritanandamayi is a saint and a divine personification in the hearts of many. In the beginning her fame and name depended more on the supernatural powers and miracles, though, of late, it has undergone a shift of emphasis, and the accent is mainly on her humanitarian works. No doubt she does great services to the society by her spiritual and charitable

³⁴Kumar, "Embracing the World," 19.

³⁵Amritaswarupananda, *From Amma's Heart*, 94.

³⁶Puri, *Racing Along the Razor's Edge*, 210.

endeavours. At the same time, however, it will be a useful effort to make a realistic and analytic study on her personality and her *sādhana* to facilitate a better understanding of the movement associated with her.

A. A Blending of *Bhakti* and *Karma Mārgas*

Being born to a family where devotion (*bhakti*) to Kṛṣṇa was held very high, Amritanandamayi developed a deep-rooted devotion to Lord Kṛṣṇa during her childhood itself. The *bhakti* tradition in South India was very much conducive to the deepening of her relation with Kṛṣṇa. Her father, Sugunanathan, had been an ardent devotee of Kṛṣṇa, which, of course, influenced young Sudhmani in her constant growth as a Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*. Her mother, Damayanthi, too is a lady of intense *bhakti*. It is recorded that her family had a temple in the house itself. The people of South India gave much importance to *bhakti*, especially to Lord Kṛṣṇa, and it formed and framed Amritanandamayi in making herself an intimate friend of the deities.

From early childhood onwards she showed unusual interest and dedication to the songs and *japas* of Kṛṣṇa and this closeness has led her closer to the apparent identification to the deity, which is being expressed in her Kṛṣṇa *bhāva*. Constant love and devotion to the deity are said to have filled her with the divine graces in abundance. On one occasion she said:

The path of *bhakti* teaches us love. First, you develop one-pointed love towards God. When that love becomes the centre of your life and as the devotional practices become more and more intense, your vision changes. You come to understand that God dwells as Pure Consciousness in all beings, including you. As this experience becomes stronger and stronger, the love in you also grows until at last you become That. The love within you expands and embraces the entire universe with all its beings. You become the personification of love.³⁷

³⁷Amritaswarupananda, *Awaken Children: Dialogues with Mata Amritanandamayi*, vol. 4, Amritapuri: Mata Amritanandamayi Mission Trust, 1992, 145.

She thinks that the path of *bhakti*, or devotion and love, is the best way to reach God. The dual *bhāvas* seen in her too make her primarily a saint of the *bhakti* tradition and not of *jñāna* or *karma* traditions. Once a devotee asked her: "Some say that devotion is only the first step and what do you say about it?" Then she replied that no one can learn a language without first learning the vowels and consonants. The alphabet is the substratum of writing. But one cannot write something without alphabets. Same way one cannot build a house without a strong foundation. After the construction of the building, too, the foundation should remain there till the end. The same is the reality of spirituality, too. Devotion is not a mental weakness, neither is it only the first step, but something like the substratum for attaining the goal. It is both the beginning and the end.³⁸ So, according to her, *bhakti* has to be retained from the beginning till the end as the first and primary principle.

However, it is rather interesting, and to a certain extent paradoxical, to note that she started as a *bhakta* and gradually spread deeper roots as a *karmayogin*. At present, people around the world know her out of numerous charitable exposures and humanitarian endeavours. The institutions and global missions run by the Amrita movement are numerous which show forth her *karma* thrust. Amrita Aranya Jeevanam, Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences (AIMS), AIDS Care Centre, Amrita Kripa Sagar Hospice, Amrita Viswavidyapeedam, Amrita Institute of Technology and Science (AITEC), Amrita Niketan Orphanage, Amrita Speech and Hearing Improvement School (ASHIS), etc., are some of the important institutions run by the Amritanandamayi fraternity. There is no area in human life, left untouched by her endeavours, covering community welfare, health care, education, spirituality, global mission, etc.

A saint, who initially embraced only the devotees, has now started to hug the huge empire of her own institutions. Looking at her vast empire of institutions and their reputation, Amritanandamayi once she expressed her views on *karmas* as follows:

Any action done with the right attitude, understanding and discrimination will take you closer to liberation. If, however, the same action is done without the right attitude, it will bind you. An action can either serve as a purifier, which will finally help you

³⁸ Amritaswarupananda, *Awaken Children*, vol.4, 73-74.

realize your Godly nature, or it may add more and more to the already existing amount of negativity, which will eventually cause you tremendous suffering. Whenever you do something try to be aware.³⁹

According to her, the *bhakti mārga* adds perfection to actions:

Whatever actions a spiritual seeker performs must be well thought out. We should be able to transmit the inner silence and stillness that we gain through our meditation into our actions. In fact, meditation helps one to gain a deeper insight into all the aspects of one's action.⁴⁰

Thus, Amritanandamayi needs to be understood as a woman who blends together the ardent love of God (*bhakti*) and the charity towards fellow beings (*karma*).

B. A Woman to be Admired, not to be Adored

In Indian history we come across with instances in which certain human beings emerged with special powers and showed tremendous impact on the people of that time. Sri Sankaracharya, Sri Narayanaguru, Ramana Maharshi, Mahesh Yogi, Bhagavan Rajaneesh, etc., were a few in that line. The real grace and value of them were proved only by the test of time. Mere popularity and propaganda can never sustain one in continuous spiritual tempo until and unless he or she shows-forth personal credibility and extraordinary divine experience. Many those who claimed to be the real incarnations of the Divine were proved to be contrary and people have already discarded them in course of time.

Beverly Noia, Professor of Comparative Religion in New Mexico University, visited the Ashram of Amritanandamayi with a very sceptical attitude and, finally, she made the following remark:

I was very sceptical because we get false *gurus* in the West who come for money. But she was like everybody's darling mother.

³⁹Amritaswarupananda, *Awaken Children: Dialogues with Mata Amritanandamayi*, vol. 8, Amritapuri: Mata Amritanandamayi Mission Trust, 1996, 74.

⁴⁰Amritaswarupananda, *Awaken Children*, vol. 8, 92.

Nobody could have put on an act for so many hours. I don't know if she is God. But she has a special communication with God.⁴¹

She never claims to be God in any emphatic and direct way, although much of her being and activity emphasize her existence so close to Lord Kṛṣṇa. There are, however, mild expressions of identification, which, of course, can be understood as coloured by the interest of the followers who write and translate her dialogues into other languages.

We have seen that she started assuming the divine *bhāvas*. A person assuming the attitudes of God is not God, but an ardent devotee and lover of God. Such a person has a great role so as to attract the devotees to the divine by giving them a taste of the divine through her/his own personal experiences; such a person, however, shall not assume divinity. Nobody has the right to claim devotion to a creature but only respect and at the maximum reverence. God, the Almighty alone deserves adoration.

Personality cult is not an ideal phenomenon to be held high and practised at large. It can be seen that from the beginning there were rationalists who were against the practices and prayer meetings conducted at the premise of Amritanandamayi's household. The former ones have subsided but there are the fragments of those critical approaches to the movement and teachings of this spiritual leader.

The prominent among the critics is Sreeni Pattathanam, a rationalist from Kerala who published a book named, *Mata Amritanandamayi: Divya Kadhakalum Yatharthiavum* (Sacred Stories and Reality of Mata Amritanandamayi). Another critic, Paul Zachariah, a famous writer and columnist who speaks often against Amritanandamayi's movement and activities, states: "Whether in politics or religion, personality cult is not a healthy practice. It will lower the cultural indicator of these followers and affect their critical intelligence."⁴² According to him, a *guru* should draw a line at some point. Great spiritual leaders and experienced persons never allow anybody to worship them. Ramana Maharshi, a man of high spiritual ecstasy and enlightenment, for example, never allowed anybody to worship him. So the devotion and worship offered to her can be viewed as an emulation of spiritual sentiments shown by the followers and not as wilful and deliberate assuming of divinity by Amritanandamayi.

⁴¹Kumar, "Embracing the World," 18.

⁴²Kumar, "Embracing the World," 23.

There are plenty of reasons by which she can be admired but not to be adored. Her origin from the fishery base and the illiterate upbringing, certainly, point to the factuality of admiration. She is a self-made woman who could withstand the persuasion of parents for marriage and the persistent attacks by rationalists. Such a woman could go for a fundamental option by which she could belong fully to Lord Kṛṣṇa and to be an ardent devotee of Him forever. Her spiritual achievements are not usual but extraordinary and admirable. At present one can evaluate her not only by the spiritual inspiration she imparts to people but also by the extensive charitable institutions owned and managed by her and the mission for the service of the people. Although it could be a reason for admiration it does not warrant any kind of adoration, as she is only a creature of God with certain special grace and gifts.

C. Sainthood: A Fact or a Process?

No saint is born but made; it involves a process of becoming. Through the constant *karma* one gradually evolves into the perfection of personhood. The peak of sanctity in the Indian tradition is called as *Jivanmukta*, where, though one has a body, merges in the Divine. This is a realization process of the one who lives in communion with the fellow beings and gets realized through the encounters and endeavours of life. In some of Amritanandamayi's expressions one can understand that she has attained the identification with the Divine to a certain extent. Once she addressed the devotees: "Children, *Amma* beholds God in everything. To *Amma*, there is nothing but God, the *Paramātman*. The *Ātman* alone is. *Amma* sees everything as part of the whole, as an extension of her own self."⁴³

Amritanandamayi herself is well aware of the gradual process of self-realization. She speaks:

The ultimate goal of life is self-realization. Knowing this, we should try to understand the transitory nature of the world. Then, with strong faith, determination, and full concentration, we should chant our *mantra* during every possible moment. You are trying to cross the

⁴³Amritaswarupananda, *Awaken Children: Dialogues with Mata Amritanandamayi*, vol. 9, Amritapuri: Mata Amritanandamayi Mission Trust, 1998, 77.

ocean of transmigration, the cycle of birth and death. The *mantra* is the oar of the boat; it is the instrument you use to cross the *samsāra* of your restless mind, with its unending thought waves.⁴⁴

The quoted passage is an evidence for her understanding of self-realization and the staunch belief in the doctrine of rebirth. She claims to have deep and sincere experience of God; thus, the outflow of her love and spiritual powers are only an expression of this experience. One cannot blame her for being addressed as a divine and saintly person or even as God, since it is not out of her own demand. One can, however, indict her both for not saying anything against or for not declining from the practice of showing devotion that the Almighty alone deserves. None can ignore the fact that most of her devotees and followers consider her as a woman of supernatural powers and expressions. They even believe in her power to perform miracles. Of course, that is sufficient for the ordinary folk to consider her as a replica of the divine. It is, however, not sufficient to become an *avatāra* or appearance of the Divine.

Being a devotee of Lord Kṛṣṇa from the very early ages, she herself has been moving through a process of realization and through her constant chanting of *mantras* and *japas* she has striven for the complete realization. If she were fully sanctified and perfected of the human limitations she would not have continued the *bhakti* practices and would have remained calm and delighted in the perfect experience of a *Jīvanmukta*. However, unfortunately, we see her too bound by the temporal and spatial limitations.

D. A Novel Trend in the *Bhakti* Saga

Bhakti does not consist merely in keeping the eyes closed and hands folded; *bhakti mārga* is a tedious task and particular path to God and ultimately aims at liberation and self-realization. The faith or religion, which preaches *bhakti*, is just a medium and not the end in itself or the point of culmination. *Bhakti* can be understood as a movement or process, which concerns the inner self of the human with an ethical and moral quest. According to C. N. Mangala,

⁴⁴Amritaswarupananda, *Awaken Children*, vol. 9, 89-90.

The socio-religious dimensions of *bhakti* movement aim not only of cleansing society, at times through the loving devotion to a Personal God, but they also aim at bringing ethical values into the personal lives of the individuals to enable them to undergo a transformation inwardly.⁴⁵

Thus, *bhakti* is a process of transformation and it is already seen as a movement. In this respect Amridananadamayi is a living spiritual inspiration who could emulate devotion to the almighty through her intimacy with God. She is not a single or independent person or phenomenon in the process of *bhakti* or it is not she who started anything new in the practice of *bhakti*. The already devotional people were given a new impetus by her chanting and tactile approach. Here too the purpose of *bhakti* is nothing but to have better harness with God and to have the purification of the soul. Thus, practices of *bhakti* expect to clear the ways of *karma*, and to be saved from the bondage of the cycle of births.

From time immemorial one can notice the emergence of spiritual leaders proposing new ways and means of attaining God. Even in every religious tradition a close reader can find spirit-filled persons rising at the needful moments in history, to renew, refresh and rekindle human spirit by divine inspiration. The case is not quite different in Hinduism, too. There were great sages, saints and spiritual inspirers coming from different walks of life to give new impetus to the search for spiritual realization. In this respect, Amritanandamayi is a new saga in the long and lasting history of *bhakti* tradition. She could empower and enrich the sentiments of *bhakti* through her specialties of embracing, chanting, appearance in different *bhāvas* and charitable exposures for the devotees and followers.

8. Conclusion

Unfolding the annals of the past one traces out a number of saints and sages, leaders and inspirers, and masters and mystics, who remain immortal and impressive, though they were born mortal. None of them was indubitable at least with regard to some of the minor facets of life. The

⁴⁵C. N. Mangala, "Bhakti Movement in India: A Process of Transformation" in *Dimensions of Bhakti Movement in India*, ed. H. M. Marulasiddaiah, Mysore: Akhila Bharatha Sharana Sahitya Parishat, 1998, 273.

reality and validity of them is being proved by time. Some of them were proved to be fake in practices and external expressions while others remained indicators and burning lamps to show forth the true and unending light to the contemporaries. It is often said that no one can deceive anyone forever, but for a short while. Even the search for physical ecstasy – replacing the spiritual – by Rajaneesh became out of place in the course of time. However, even today there are a few who follow his path but with feeble steps and faded enthusiasm. The factuality of a particular sect of people will stand firm with the real spirit and charisma of the founder or foundress, based upon which many sects and organizations may extinguish or flourish.

Amritanandamayi awakened many around the world, with her originality in exploring new areas of Divine experience by expressing it with a new mode and manner of expression, namely, embracing. Her new method in integrating *bhakti* and *karma sādhanas* is an inspiration to the modern world, though the claims for divinity and Godhood seem to be far removed from reality. Indeed, the respect and reverence acclaimed to *Amma* by her devotees is quite in tune with the Hindu understanding of *Avatāra*, although such claims popularised by political patronage remain elusive as well as questionable.