

**RETHINKING THE POLITICS OF NEOLIBERAL RELIGIOSITY:
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF MIDDLE-CLASS GURU FAITH IN MATA
AMRITANANDAMAYI DEVI**

BENU VERMA

SUPERVISOR: DR. FARHANA IBRAHIM



**DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY – DELHI**

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by

BENU VERMA

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Submitted

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to the**



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For My Daughters – Samaira and Yana

May you always be able to tell a reflection from a ray.

Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis entitled **Rethinking the Politics of Neoliberal Religiosity: An Ethnography of Middle-Class Guru Faith in *Mata Amritanandamayi Devi***, being submitted by Benu Verma to the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, for the award of **Doctor of Philosophy** is a record of bonafide work carried by her under my supervision. In my opinion, the thesis has reached the standards of fulfilling the requirements for submission relating to the degree.

The contents of the thesis have not been submitted in part or full, to any other university or institute for the award of any other degree or diploma.

Prof. Farhana Ibrahim

Professor

Sociology and Social Anthropology

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi

Hauz Khas, New Delhi – 110016

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Thesis Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic study of the middle-class devotees of *Mata Amritanandamayi Devi* or Amma (mother), as her devotees lovingly call her. One of the most prominent spiritual Gurus in India today, she is hailed as a *purna avatar* (full/complete reincarnation) and propagates the practice of *sanatan dharma* (eternal religion, also understood as synonymous with the central teachings of Hinduism) for the spiritual enlightenment of her devotees. Her devotees are well-educated, urban and middle-class, who are intimately tied to their caste-class and cultural traditions, even as they aspire to move forward and make sense of the rapidly changing world around them. Amma's middle-class devotees depend on her for more than just religious succour. She is deemed a friend, philosopher, and guide—roles necessitated by an individualistic turn of neoliberal religiosity and roles that this new age spiritual guru has readily expanded to accommodate given her devotees' apparent social and emotional precarity. Living in neoliberal times, where market ethos defines most relationships and where the traditional expectation of state accountability has been transferred onto the guru's unstructured spiritual ministrations, belonging to Amma is deemed by her devotees as a rare blessing; as they feel and cherish her "unconditional love." *Seva* or selfless service unto another is a religious tenet and an everyday practice that ensures social outreach, inner discipline, and the necessary politics which serve as prerequisites to the pursuit of a wholesome life for Amma's devotees.

The thesis explores and analyses the relationship between middle-class devotees and their guru and offers a critique of the understanding of neoliberal religiosity as religiosity practiced by a neoliberal subject towards sovereign self-actualization. As I place my lens amidst the devotees and look at their life journeys and their connections with Amma, I look for what it means for them to belong to her and also what it does for them. How the personal gets connected with the political, and what are the consequences of this relationship? In a way, the thesis conjures up the guru through a study of her devotees and, in doing so, makes significant observations about them as well as their context. The palpable pressure to transition into a neoliberal individual subjectivity that middle-class devotees of Amma face, is stalled by the comforts offered by the guru. Even as the devotees relate to her as individuals, the affective nature of this relationship—seeking wonder, play and hope—offers a critique of neoliberal religiosity as it plays out among the middle classes,

who are raring to make sense of neoliberal modernity amid yearnings to keep the old world order alive as they tend to balance their burgeoning consumption with spiritual and moral conquests.

This thesis sees the advent of neoliberal religiosity in India as a contested site, where the very discursivity that allows the neoliberal processes to unfold and propagate among the middle-class devotees of Amma also becomes a site for moral and structural resistance to it. An individual, rationalized, but deeply affective relationship with the guru, an expectation and proliferation of experiences of wonder and play, denied in principle by a neoliberal ethos and the consistent practice of *seva* by the devotees project a resistance to the *ex-ante*, result-oriented value system of neoliberalism. On the other hand, the ideological grounding and political orientation of *seva* and *sanskar*, which defines the caste, class, and gender habitus of the devotees, project a unity with the neoliberal ethos, where status quo, a hierarchy of class, caste and gender and reliance on the market as master, reign supreme and share a logical unity with neoliberalism.

थीसिस सार

यह थीसिस माता अमृतानंदमयी देवी या अम्मा (मां), जैसा कि उनके भक्त उन्हें प्यार से बुलाते हैं, के मध्यवर्गीय भक्तों का एक नृवंशवैज्ञानिक अध्ययन है। अम्माँ भारत में सबसे प्रमुख आध्यात्मिक गुरुओं में से एक हैं, उन्हें पूर्ण अवतार (पूर्ण / पूर्ण पुनर्जन्म) के रूप में सम्मानित किया जाता है और वे आध्यात्मिक ज्ञान के लिए सनातन धर्म (शाश्वत धर्म, जिसे हिंदू धर्म की केंद्रीय शिक्षाओं के समानार्थी के रूप में भी समझा जाता है) के अभ्यास का प्रचार करती हैं। उनके भक्त सुशिक्षित, शहरी और मध्यम वर्ग से आते हैं, जो अपनी जाति-वर्ग और सांस्कृतिक परंपराओं से घनिष्ठ रूप से जुड़े हुए हैं, भले ही वे आगे बढ़ने की इच्छा रखते हैं और अपने आस-पास की तेजी से बदलती दुनिया को समझने की चाह रखते हैं। अम्मा के मध्यवर्गीय भक्त केवल धार्मिक सहायता के लिए ही उन पर निर्भर नहीं हैं। उन्हें एक दोस्त, दार्शनिक और मार्गदर्शक के रूप में समझा जाता है - भूमिकाएं जो नवउदारवादी धार्मिकता के व्यक्तिवादी मोड़ के कारण ज़रूरी हो गयी हैं और भूमिकाएँ जिन्हें इस नए युग के आध्यात्मिक गुरु ने अपने भक्तों की स्पष्ट सामाजिक और भावनात्मक अनिश्चितता को देखते हुए समायोजित कर लिया है। नवउदारवादी समय में रहना, जहां बाजार लोकाचार अधिकांश रिश्तों को परिभाषित करता है और जहां राज्य की जवाबदेही की पारंपरिक अपेक्षा को गुरु के असंरचित आध्यात्मिक मंत्रालयों पर स्थानांतरित कर दिया गया है, अम्मा से जुड़ा होना उनके भक्तों द्वारा एक दुर्लभ आशीर्वाद के रूप में समझा जाता है; जब कि वे अम्माँ के "बिना शर्त प्यार" को महसूस करते हैं और उसे संजोते हैं। सेवा या दूसरे के लिए निस्वार्थ सेवा एक धार्मिक सिद्धांत और एक दैनिक अभ्यास है जो सामाजिक पहुंच, आंतरिक अनुशासन और आवश्यक राजनीति सुनिश्चित करता है जो अम्मा के भक्तों के लिए एक भरपूर जीवन की खोज के लिए पूर्वापेक्षा के रूप में कार्य करता है।

यह थीसिस मध्यम वर्ग के भक्तों और उनके गुरु के बीच संबंधों की खोज और विश्लेषण करती है और नवउदारवादी धार्मिकता की उस समझ की आलोचना करती है, जिसमें इसे एक नवउदारवादी विषय द्वारा संप्रभु आत्म-प्राप्ति की दिशा में अभ्यास के रूप में देखा जाता है। जब मैं भक्तों और अम्मा के साथ उनकी जीवन यात्रा के संबंधों को देखती हूँ, तो मैं देखती हूँ कि उनके लिए अम्माँ से जुड़े होने के क्या मायने हैं। निजी जीवन राजनीति से कैसे जुड़ता है, और इस रिश्ते के परिणाम क्या हैं? एक तरह से, यह थीसिस अम्माँ के भक्तों के अध्ययन के माध्यम से गुरु की कल्पना करती है और ऐसा करते हुए, उन भक्तों के साथ साथ उनके संदर्भ के बारे में भी महत्वपूर्ण

अवलोकन करती है। अम्मा का मध्यम वर्ग भक्त समूह एक नवउदारवादी व्यक्तिगत मनोवद की ओर बढ़ने के स्पष्ट दबाव का सामना करता है, पर यह दबाव गुरु द्वारा दी जाने वाली मार्गदर्शन के कारण बाधित हो जाता है। भले ही भक्त उन से व्यक्तिगत रूप से जोड़ते हैं, इस रिश्ते की प्रभावशाली प्रकृति-आश्चर्य, खेल और आशा की तलाश- मध्य वर्गों के बीच नवउदार धार्मिकता की आलोचना प्रदान करती है, जो नवउदारवादी आधुनिकता की भावना के बीच पुरानी विश्व व्यवस्था को जीवित रखने के उत्सुक है क्योंकि वे आध्यात्मिक और नैतिक विजय के साथ अपने बढ़ते उपभोग को संतुलित करने के लिए प्रयासरत हैं ।

यह थीसिस भारत में नवउदारवादी धार्मिकता के आगमन को एक विवादित स्थल के रूप में देखती है, जहां जो प्रसंगिकताएँ नवउदारवादी प्रक्रियाएँ को अम्मा के मध्य-वर्ग के भक्तों के बीच प्रकट और प्रचारित करने की अनुमति देती है, वही उनके बीच इसके नैतिक और संरचनात्मक प्रतिरोध का स्थान भी बन जाती है। गुरु के साथ एक व्यक्तिगत, तर्कसंगत, लेकिन गहरा स्नेहपूर्ण संबंध, आश्चर्य और खेल के अनुभवों की अपेक्षा और प्रसार, नवउदारवादी लोकाचार द्वारा सैधान्तिक रूप से खंडन ,और भक्तों द्वारा सेवा के निरंतर अभ्यास, नवउदारवाद की पूर्वानुमान और परिणाम उन्मुख मूल्य प्रणाली के प्रतिरोध कि सूचक हैं। दूसरी ओर, सेवा और संस्कार के वैचारिक आधार और राजनीतिक अभिविन्यास, जो भक्तों की जाति, वर्ग और लिंग के *हैबिट्स* को परिभाषित करते हैं, नवउदारवादी लोकाचार के साथ एकता में देखे जा सकते हैं, जहां यथास्थिति, वर्ग, जाति, लिंग, और बाजार की प्रभुता सर्वोच्च जान पड़ते हैं और नवउदारवाद के साथ एक तार्किक एकता साझा करते हैं ।

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Introduction

I first saw Ritu during *Mata Amritanandamayi's* (henceforth Amma) public programme in a local school in Paripally, Kerala.¹ A distinct Punjabi accent in her spoken Hindi had caught my attention among a sea of people speaking in English, Malayalam, Italian, French and other foreign languages, as they waited for their guru to arrive on the stage. Tall, with short hair, wearing a crisp cotton kurta paired with blue jeans, she and her two grown daughters stuck together in the crowd. When Amma arrived and was walking through the carpeted aisle to the stage, people left their seats to gather on either side of it, to catch a glimpse of their guru. Ritu stood near the aisle, her hands folded in prayer with eyes shut and head bowed, with her sunglasses perched on it temporarily, while her daughters excitedly called out to their beloved guru, "Amma! Amma!" As the euphoria settled, her older daughter Pooja and I sat side by side on the chairs in front of the stage where Amma was now lighting the lamp to start the programme. We struck up a conversation, discussing her guru, her research project² and the CAA and NRC³ protests. I had travelled to the Kerala ashram in December 2019, when the protests were in full swing throughout the country and yet, I was surprised to find that there was not even a whiff of the upheaval in the ashram. As I had suspected, Pooja knew little about the details of the bill but knew that a lot of people were protesting against it. She paused for a few seconds before she smiled and said thoughtfully, "well, there is no smoke without fire!" A day later, I met Ritu in the queue for lunch

¹ I use pseudonyms for all my respondents from the field in order to protect their privacy.

² Through my conversations with Pooja later, I learnt that her research on healthcare infrastructure in India held little interest for her. After a year or so of exploring options and brainstorming the need and aim to do research with me and other friends of hers, she gradually settled to do a PhD in Women's Studies.

³ The Citizenship Amendment Act (Bill) protests, also known as CAA Protest or CAB Protest, occurred after the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was enacted by the Government of India on 12 December 2019. The move sparked widespread national and overseas ongoing protests against the Act and its associated proposal to implement a National Register of Citizens (NRC). Protests broke out rapidly across the country. The CAA amends the Indian citizenship act to accept illegal migrants who are Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Buddhist, and Christian from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, and who entered India before 2014, following religious persecutions. The bill does not mention Muslims and other communities who fled from the same or other neighbouring countries. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizenship_Amendment_Act_protests

at the Western canteen⁴ in the ashram and she told me how she preferred the sourdough bread⁵ there rather than the factory baked one at the store⁶, elaborating on the health benefits of the former, as I keenly listened.

That evening, I went upstairs to Neha's room. Neha was a north Indian devotee who lived with her family on the floor above mine in the ashram and I found her sitting in Ritu's room, at the end of the corridor. Long after my conversation with Neha had ended, Ritu and I sat talking about life in general. Her daughters, Pooja, 23 and Kavita, 18, were both "extremely bright and brilliant", she told me. Pooja was suffering from clinical depression, a serious worry which clearly consumed Ritu most of the time. Amidst the many suicidal attempts her daughter had made, daily struggles of keeping her engaged in something long term, dealing with her mood swings and "unhealthy" habits (she gestured to smoking with her fingers as she said this) had broken her spirit and she felt "numb." The helplessness she felt as a mother who could not help her daughter and the rage that came with having to put up with the societal pressure of being a "good mother", were both acknowledged and relaxed by her belief in Amma. "You must get your children to see her (Amma) at least once a year; you and I can only do so much! I am very glad that Pooja feels connected with Amma, I feel *shayad aise hi theek hona ho isne*" (maybe this is how she is destined to heal/get better). Through our long and winding conversation which meandered through topics like daughters, intergenerational relationships, boyfriends and the cultural pressures of motherhood, I gathered how deeply she depended on Amma for emotional support as well as for recouping her lost credibility as a mother, and as a respectable member of her society. As a middle-class woman who had been a homemaker, her success was calculated through how her daughters had turned out. As a mother who felt guilty and defeated by the cultural and familial pressures, and as a woman who felt disoriented and hurt because of her relationship with her own parents, she had

⁴ A canteen in the Amritapuri (Kerala) ashram devoted to the tastes of and run by Amma's Western (people from outside Asia) devotees. Popular cosmopolitan dishes like pasta, pizzas and cakes are served in the canteen, besides the regular breads, casseroles, salads and pies for meals. Most devotees who travel from major cities in India eat here more regularly.

⁵ In a land where people mostly consume commercially baked breads, a taste for sourdough breads signifies rarity as well as a concern for health, typical to the privileged classes. The sourdough bread's popularity has soared with increasing numbers of middle class people endorsing it and also selling it via niche gourmet bakeries, where ingredients and their health benefits are showcased.

⁶ An all-purpose store in the ashram premises catering to grocery and items of daily use by the residents and travelers.

found individual and social succour in Amma – when she surrendered as a child to the universal mother (as claimed by her devotees). Ritu said,

Maybe I was not cut out to be a mother at all, maybe only a mother to one child. I feel I have failed but I am relieved that Amma is there, I feel her grace. I hope Pooja comes out of this but also I feel tired and fed up and I want to get rid of this now, whether it be through her marriage or her taking up a job in some other city.... *Bahut seva ki hai maine bhi* (I have also done a lot of *seva*) ...Once I had gone to a healer in Delhi and she had asked me what would I do if I found out that my daughter had a boyfriend, and I had replied, ‘I will give her one tight slap.’⁷ When she [her daughter] actually made a boyfriend, *chanta mere muh pe lag gaya* (it was like a slap in my face) ... I was always apprehensive about that elite school when we moved to Chandigarh.

Ritu's refusal to acknowledge Pooja's deep friendship with a boy had triggered the latter's depression. Our conversation was interrupted by Pooja, who had just got her “Amma doll”, whom she called *chhotu*, blessed by the guru. She caressed her doll and laid it beside the other two Amma dolls on Ritu's bed. All three of them were different sizes and wore white but differently styled clothes. Ritu, Pooja and Kavita each had an Amma doll to themselves. An Amma doll (as I will discuss later in the thesis) is an individual mediator to the guru.⁸ A symbol of affection for and connection with the guru, it also signifies the guru's pervasiveness. Even though they came to Amma as a family, all of them had an individual relationship with her, apparent through the different Amma dolls and the way they were styled. Ritu told me explicitly that they needed to “heal as a family” but first they needed to face their “individual demons.” Individualism and rationalization, new structural ways of engaging with religion, ushered in by the wide spread processes of neoliberalization in India, are both – symptoms of adaptation to the new order of things as well as sites that resist a complete subsumption under it. The pursuit of self-

⁷ Like many other devotees, Ritu too had been to many healers, gurus and other religious experts who claimed to offer her solutions to her personal angst. In Delhi, especially, seeking help from individual religious experts for familial and personal problems is a common trend. Such religious experts like emotional healers, tarot card readers, astronomers, Babas and minor gurus abound the city as a telling symptom of the neoliberalization of religion.

⁸ Made from the material and cloth that has been used or worn by Amma, these dolls are considered a very special representation of the guru.

empowerment, besides being an individual need is also a reflection of immersion in one's social ties.

Mata Amritanandamayi Devi or Amma (mother), as her devotees lovingly call her, is one of the most prominent spiritual Gurus in India today. She is hailed as a *purna avatar* (full/complete reincarnation) and propagates the practice of *Sanatan Dharma* (eternal religion, also understood as synonymous to the central teachings of Hinduism) for spiritual enlightenment of her devotees. *Mata Amritanandamayi Devi* Mission (henceforth MAM) has ashrams in almost all major cities of India and many cities across the globe, which are maintained by local devotees and ashramites and regulated centrally. The multiple national level not-for-profit organizations of the mission work under the aegis of MAM's global not-for-profit organization called "Embracing the World", which undertakes development and welfare work worldwide and enjoys a special consultative status with the United Nations. The devotees are spread all across the globe and from many different religious, class and caste backgrounds. Devotees practice the spiritual tenet of *seva* for their personal growth, as a reciprocation to guru's grace and a contribution to the welfare efforts of the mission, employing their diverse talents and cultural, social or financial capitals. Popularly known as the "hugging saint", Amma gives *darshan* (the act of seeing and being seen by the divine) to everyone who comes to see her by wrapping her arms around the person and cooing loving words in their ear.

Well educated, urban and middle-class, Ritu represents a typical devotee of Amma. Intimately tied to their caste-class and cultural traditions, even as they aspire to move forward and make sense of the rapidly changing world around them, Amma's middle-class devotees depend on her for more than just religious succour. She is deemed a friend, philosopher and guide—roles necessitated by an individualistic turn of neoliberal religiosity and roles that this new age religious guru has readily expanded to accommodate in view of her devotees' conspicuous social and emotional precarity. Living in neoliberal times, where market ethos defines most relationships and where the traditional expectation of state accountability has been transferred onto guru's unstructured spiritual ministrations, belonging to Amma is deemed by her devotees as a rare blessing; as they feel and cherish her "unconditional love." The aspiration for a life which is spiritually suitable for Amma's disciples coincides with material strivings informed by their class-caste status. Characterized by flourish, prosperity and blessedness, close to the Greek term *eudaemonia*, the devotees aspire to

live a life where spiritual and material advancement are not contradictory but complementary.⁹ Not only is such a life the objective of a religious belonging with their guru, but it is also the means to that end. *Seva* or selfless service unto another is a religious tenet and an everyday practice that ensures social outreach, inner discipline and the necessary politics which serve as prerequisites to the pursuit of a wholesome life for Amma's devotees.

Key Arguments of the Thesis

This thesis is an exploration and an analysis of this relationship between middle-class devotees and their guru and offers a critique of the understanding of neoliberal religiosity as religiosity practiced by a neoliberal subject towards sovereign self-actualization. As I place my lens amidst the devotees and look at their life journeys and their connections with Amma, I look for what it means for them to belong to her and also what it does for them. How does the personal become connected with the political, and what are the consequences of this relationship? In a way, the thesis conjures up the guru through a study of her devotees and in doing so, makes significant observations about them as well as their context. The palpable pressure to transition into a neoliberal individual subjectivity that middle-class devotees of Amma face, is stalled by the comforts offered by the guru. Even as the devotees relate to her as individuals (a marker of the neoliberal turn) – the affective nature of this relationship: seeking wonder, play and hope, offers a critique of neoliberal religiosity as it plays out among the middle classes, who are seeking to make sense of neoliberal modernity amid yearnings to keep the old world order alive; in this way they strive to balance their burgeoning consumption with spiritual and moral conquests.

Researching the secular everyday to find strands of religious relationships, the thesis brings out the devotees' caste-class and gender habitus which prepares the ground for and informs their relationship with their guru as well as with national politics. Using Weber's concept of elective affinity, I argue that the middle class devotees' class-caste-gender culture, their acceptance of and praxis of *seva* with the guru, their material and spiritual aspirations and the larger precarity of a capitalist and neoliberal world, come together to produce a certain individualistic religiosity that meets neoliberal subjectivity halfway and is carefully depoliticized at the level of the devotee, even

⁹ Eudaimonia - meaning happiness or welfare, a philosophical concept of a good life.
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eudaimonia>

as it tangentially contributes to advance the larger Hindutva politics, which veils majoritarian religious politics in the garb of an agreeable class-caste culture — as *sanskar*. As the state chooses to govern less directly and more through individual social actors and its perception transforms among the middle classes, gurus become the new points of mediation with the world, making devotees feel both safe and content in seeing the world through their **guru filters**. This means that devotees, in the face of a conspicuous blurring of the democratic tools to seek state action or accountability and limited by their caste-class and gender habitus, voluntarily see the world through the guru's location in it. Their belief and surrender in the guru is an agentic act through which they willingly adopt her politics as theirs. In the neoliberal assemblage they inhabit, which brings together state, religion, political ideology, class-caste habitus and social service in an unprecedented discursive collaboration, their religious, social and political outlooks get streamlined effortlessly through the discursive realm of culture (in a Foucauldian way), which I explore through an ethnography of *sanskar*. Resultantly, even as they shun traditional religious methods and pursue their spiritual journey and guidance in the realm of culture, the devotees and the guru become dissonant members of the Hindutva's Hindu *rashtra* project.

Pivotal Concepts in the Thesis

The thesis carves out a middle-class guru religiosity in the neoliberal era by exploring the correlation between the seemingly distinct elements of caste-class, religion, state and individual evolution, brought together by the neoliberal ethos pervading social, political and economic processes. Menon (2011) in her research on the women in the Hindu right wing movement has written about the **dissonant subject**. This suggests that the *sangh parivar* (family of right-wing organizations) has been able to expand its member base not by enrolling people who are tightly bound to its ideology but by allowing dissonance from preciously held principles and value systems in people's everyday lives. Menon argues that it is by presenting itself in myriad ways that the movement recruits members who have different agendas and beliefs that may challenge, and even contradict, those widely accepted by the movement. It is precisely its ability to absorb these different positions and encompass different agendas that has enabled the movement to dominate the socio-political landscape of India today.

The RSS's (*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*) political project at a national level finds myriad expressions on various local and regional levels, manifested and proliferated through the idea of *sanskara* - an old and popular caste-class constellation in India. In recent years, scholars have argued that the RSS employs subtle ways of social service/*seva* to affect the everyday lives of people in order to secure cadre membership. This has been called **embedded mobilization**, meaning one having different forms and objectives in manifest and latent terms. While in the manifest terms it engages with the everyday material lives and concerns of people, like health, education, livelihood, in latent terms it is a strategy for mobilization. This translation from the manifest to the latent is made possible with the help of the trope of *sanskara*, meaning a typical upper-caste-class Indian culture which is propagated through the everyday philanthropic work of RSS (Jaffrelot 2005; Bhattacharjee 2016). Jaffrelot has also shown how through their activities under the moniker of *seva*, the RSS use of the term *sanskara* aspires to reform mentalities in line with the high Hindu tradition and more specifically to infuse Hindu awareness and national discipline, reinterpreted and presented as a vector of sanskritization for the lower castes, generously invited to learn good *sanskara* at the *shakhas*.¹⁰

Both the idea of a dissonant subject as well as the RSS's embedded mobilization efforts are facilitated by the contemporary neoliberal assemblage I mentioned earlier. It is because of the dominance and acceptance of neoliberal principles that the number of members matters more than their ideological adherence. The discursive space of culture, where the various elements of religion, caste-class, state and nationalism come together, is also the space of doing *seva* and asserting *sanskara*. RSS's proliferation in this space and the rise of the reinterred, new-age gurus are made possible because of the state favouring individual actors as it transforms from governance to governmentality, which is another major consequence of embracing neoliberalism.

The embedded mobilization efforts by Hindutva forces make a collaboration with them sound innocuous because it takes place in the seemingly less problematic or depoliticized realm of "culture." The thesis argues that in this depoliticized realm of culture the caste anxieties of the middle classes converge with the guru's spiritual preaching, concept and modalities of *seva* and

¹⁰ Literally meaning "branches", *shakhas* are branches of the RSS which cater to a local member base upto a limit. The *shakhas* organize regular meetings of their members where they are oriented towards the ideology through various ways. For more information: <https://www.newsgharati.com/Encyc/2021/4/13/RSS-Chaitra-Pratipada.amp.html>

the Hindutva agenda of Hindu *Rashtra*, making the mission and the devotees dissonant members of the latter. The politics thus made possible influences the modicum of political engagement that the middle classes are allowed, making their concern for environmental protection—a common and important concern among the devotees of Amma—another extension of the Hindutva agenda.

Recent political changes ushered by the BJP's rise to power at the centre since 2014 has resulted in creating a socio-political environment most conducive to the expansion of such dissonant membership. "Hindu" being the common ground for both Hinduism and Hindutva, the latter has found ways to both make itself more palatable to the former as well as to ensure its tacit collaboration. The overlapping and consonance of these seemingly incongruous concepts is strategized through fabricated singular and transcendental ideas which make their followers want to belong together, albeit retaining their differences, for example through the tropes of **sacredness of cows** and **indigeneity**, propelled by creative renewal and popularization of Hindu science and a Hindu **middle class environmentalism**. The construction of the enemy "other" in the figure of the Muslim is another such base idea, which brings everything "Hindu" together through the trope of vegetarianism. Staying together to project a majority, the sliding scales between Hinduism and Hindutva create a presence which may be internally diverse but maintain a united stand against the enemy other, consolidating widespread internal dissonance in favour of a united and imagined face of a Hindu "majority."

Even as neoliberalization gets propagated through an assemblage of ideas, economies, socialities, religion and political ideologies, the trope of *sanskara* – its ideological conception, its prescriptions of caste class gender relations and its boundaries which keep in-group from out group and yet maintain a desire for membership, offers both a resistance to the neoliberalization process, in that, the middle class devotees do not become purely neoliberal subjects as well as a reconciliation in partially merging with it structurally, as devotees take up *seva*, (*sanskara's* ideological offspring) as a modality towards an individualistic spiritual journey. Defined in terms of individual failure and success variable as per individual faith and devotion, the practice of *seva* is primarily individualistic. Through its inherent hierarchy and dynamics between the guru devotee and the recipients of *seva* – which is done as selfless service unto another – it facilitates in the very discursive zone where neoliberalization proliferates, an ethos which is contradictory to the

neoliberal ethics. Even as devotees turn into individual seekers, they do not give up on their perceived organic ties with others in the world and the significance of the guru for transcendence.

This thesis, therefore, sees the advent of neoliberal religiosity in India as a contested site, where the very discursivity that allows the neoliberal processes to unfold and propagate among the middle class devotees of Amma, also becomes a site for moral and structural resistance to it. An individualistic, rationalized but affective relationship with the guru, an expectation and proliferation of experiences of wonder and play, denied in principle by neoliberal ethos as well as consistent practice of *seva* by the devotees project a resistance to the *ex-ante*, result oriented value system of neoliberalism. On the other hand, the ideological grounding and political orientation of *seva* and *sanskara*, which defines the caste, class and gender habitus of the devotees, project a unity with the neoliberal ethos, where status quo, hierarchy of class, caste and gender and reliance on market as master, reign supreme and share a logical unity with neoliberalism.

Existing Research and Theoretical Context

The theoretical framework of the thesis borrows from as well as aims to contribute research on the following areas: **Neoliberalism and Religion, Middle classes, Gurus and Seva.**

Neoliberalism and Religion

Durkheim, Weber as well as later sociologists following Weberian thought proposed that modernity would bring about a disenchantment of the world, leading to marginalization of religion. It was assumed that the decline of public presence of religion would lead to secularization as entailed by the process of modernity. Secularization is popularly understood as both a consequence as well as a symptom of modernity. However, modernity having produced “ontological insecurities” (Giddens 2013) among people and having facilitated the rise of individualism as a new structural form of experiencing the world (Beck and Gernshiem 2002) has merely introduced a new context for the resurgence of religion. Bauman has attributed the growing popularity of fundamentalist religious organizations, to the disorientation of late/liquid modernity which fosters “dis-embedment” of people from their social structures without a scope for “re-embedment” (Bauman 2001, 308). He argues that faced by the loss of community identity, belonging and

certainty, people flock to fundamentalist organizations, where they are offered certitude and communal solidarity. Many Indian scholars have argued that the rise of Hindutva sentiment is in response to the de-recognition of religion by the post-Independence secularism policy and ushering in of the post-colonial modernity (Madan1987; Chatterjee 1993; Baxi and Parekh 1995). Others have talked about spiritual Gurus of India offering an option of satisfactorily dealing with modernity's novelty and entanglements rather than completely immersing in it or rejecting it (Warrier 2005; Copeman 2009). The permeation of the market ethos in the religious sphere is not as simplistic as a superficial overlap of operating principles of the two spheres, an interpretation which has made some scholars lament the loss of value in religion, as the presumed shallowness of consumerism takes over. Gauthier and Martikainen (2013) argue that today's economy is not rational-objective but spiritual and symbolic and therefore the consumers cannot be presumed to be rational-utilitarian ones. Neoliberalism ushers in an economy of emotions and communitarian values albeit aimed at consumers as individuals. With new religiosities and increased visibility of religion in the public sphere, in myriad forms, the secularization thesis seems to have lost its credibility in the contemporary world (Berger 2002; Casanova 2006). In the Indian case Catarina Kinnvall (2004) has argued for the resurgence of Sikh and Hindu religious aspects in face of the crisis of ontological security. Vikash Singh (2017) in his study of the *kanwar* pilgrims has argued how neoliberal ethos have accentuated social anxieties and have led to a resurgence of the "collective spirit" which is perceived as helpful in reducing insecurities and existential anxieties of modernity.

The Foucauldian paradigm of power as capillary, shifting and contingent to social interactions, challenges the complacency of a state-centric definition of secularism. Arguing for locating power dynamics discursively, it renders the idea of state control of religion for the measurement of secularization insufficient. Iqtidar (2011) questions the dominant state-centric ways of understanding secularism-secularization. While in the western world secularization seemed to have led to secularism, in South Asia it was hoped that the policy of secularism would eventually lead to secularization. Using Asad's work on secularism (2003), where he proposes that it is fundamentally wrong to juxtapose secular and religious as polar binaries, Iqtidar re-conceptualizes secularism as not a one-time separation of religion and state but as the continuous management of religious thought and practice by the state. She argues that rationalization does not supplant

religiosity, but is placed within it and that individualism, ushered in by the new neoliberal ethos, is not replacing religion, but is adding to it. Further, she rightly points out that rationalization is not the same as disenchantment.

Asad (2003) distinguishes between the terms “secularism” and “secular” and argues that while secularism is a policy, secular precedes it and is neither continuous with the religious nor a simple break from it. It is a concept that brings together certain behaviours, knowledges and sensibilities in modern life. The religious is increasingly becoming available through the secular. As religious groups encourage objectification and rationalization of religion by followers, the latter are free to question and understand their faith individually. This objectification and rationalization of religious practice gets manifested discursively in the everyday codes of conduct (Iqtidar 2011). The realms of the rational and the religious thus seem to coincide rather than exist as exclusive of each other. Both Mahmood (2005) and Iqtidar (2011) have argued for the existence of agency, choice as well as rationality within religion, rather than being contrary to it. Giddens (1979) and Bourdieu (1990), both proponents of practice theory, situate agency as necessarily ensuing from the allowances as well as restraints of one’s social structure. Bourdieu defines “habitus” as a set of “structuring structures” immanent in the everyday social environments of individuals, which yields “structured structures” for individuals and collectives. The habitus then becomes a generative principle for action, a uniquely constituted set of predisposed dispositions, which present infinite choices, which are nevertheless bound by the peculiarity of the habitus. Habitus, for Bourdieu is then a socio-psychological template that one inherits as part of a social field, bearing a certain combination of cultural as well as social capital. The Aristotelian model of ethical pedagogy talks about how external performative acts (like prayer) are supposed to cultivate corresponding internal dispositions. Habitus, concerned with ethical formation, presupposes a pedagogical process through which a moral character is made. Acquired excellence at either a moral or a practical task, is learnt through repeated practice. Therefore, moral virtues such as honesty and modesty can be acquired through a coordination of outward behaviour (bodily acts, social demeanour) with inward dispositions (emotional states, thoughts and intentions). Cultivation of a habitus is done for the purpose of making a virtue a part of a person’s character, a non-deliberated part, which comes “naturally” as a result of strenuous practice. As Lambek (2010) argues, the ethical gets embedded in the action and in the practice around that action. A habitus is

therefore learned and reproduced through pedagogical processes (Mahmood 2005, 134). The idea of ethical formations or habitus, which bestows the responsibility of learning a religious demeanour and inculcating religious dispositions in the individual social actor, does away with the popular binary between supposedly coerced or illiberal religious action and liberal autonomous action, understood as reflection of “natural”, innate personal freedom. The above discussion discredits the juxtaposition of an essentially illiberal model of religion and liberal model of market, religion having become facilitative of liberal and rational choices.

Hirschkind (2001) shows how the enormously popular practice of listening to taped sermons in contemporary Cairo shapes religious sensibilities and its consequences for politics. Listening here is understood as a deliberate act of disciplining the body and through it the cultivation of a certain political stance. It is then a secular way of developing a religious ethic. The idea is to create a regime of personal discipline which might moderate if not totally negate the seductions of a neoliberal consumer culture. In similar ways, ‘*seva*’ being rooted in the everyday material world is an exercise of cultivating a spiritual ethic for the individual devotee. I borrow from these scholars’ contribution in undoing the binaries of religious and liberal action and underlining secular discursive ways of garnering religious sensibilities to study guru *seva* in MAM, manifested in everyday material work, as a means of developing a certain religious as well as political sensibility, as a way of internalizing an ideology.

Middle Classes

To arrive at an empirical definition of the “middle class” in India is notably challenging. The old and the new being its definitive phases, its diversity, history and material manifestations, disallow a clear selection of parameters to measure its size or assign categorical characteristics. Amidst a scenario where it has been seen as an irritating “swamp” of ambiguity in the Marxist left wing theory and as a major theoretical “embarrassment” in the liberal-mainstream theory, where an uncritical approach to its worldview has tended to naturalise it (Deshpande 1997, 295), a study of consumption patterns and behaviours among the new middle class has helped to significantly demarcate it as a category for academic engagement. Economic liberalization and neoliberal ethics permeating in the social and political realm have given rise to the “new middle class” in India, one

endowed with a better purchasing power and better future prospects (Upadhyaya 2004; Fernandes 2006) and on whose shoulders, India as a nation could lay its hopes of development (Fernandes 2006). The middle class is then to be recognized as a cohesive mass not through any demarcating empirical parameters but through their consumption patterns, both current and projected ones, which are sold to their burgeoning aspirations, bolstered by the popular mass media (Mazzarella 2003, 2011a, 2011b; Fernandes 2006).

Commodity consumption redefines the way national as well as social identities are perceived and appropriated (Fernandes 2006; Dickey 2013). In his study of middle class culture in Kathmandu, Nepal, Liechty (2003) argues that adaptation and living of the middle class culture is a constant performance, which is practiced and rehearsed and is accompanied by anxieties over proper performance. Mass media and consumer culture are not side effects of the rise of a middle class, they are its very interlocutors and enablers. Dickey's work on the middle class in Madurai, India (2013) argues that in a social field, people become agents to bestow recognition as a social person, onto another who is performing to earn it. To bestow a glance and acknowledge the presence of a person is to bestow dignity, respect and class membership. This seeing is ensued through a certain code of dress and commodity consumption. To be seen and continue to be considered as a social person is a peculiar middle-class apprehension, leading to considerable rehearsing and performance. As representation through consumption becomes pivotal to the middle class culture, its boundaries become more porous and navigable than before, when they were drawn on ideological grounds. These navigable boundaries make the task of maintaining class membership a constant and serious endeavour by the ones who inhabit it. Consequently, it is not enough to merely inhabit the middle class but also to guard its slippery exclusiveness, to reproduce it carefully, both in the public as well as the domestic spheres (Ray and Qayum 2011).

The middle class is to be comprehended, therefore, as a performative and discursive space (Mazzarella 2011a). Added to this apprehension to consume and display the right commodities both qualitatively as well as quantitatively, is the anxiety of keeping so-called "Indian tradition" alive, which morally justifies an immersion into the material realm (Srivastava 2009; Mazzarella 2011a). It is to inhabit what Srivastava calls a "retractable modernity" (2009, 342), a modernity which one engages with, while being secure in the knowledge that one can retract when one likes.

Immersion into the material realm is accompanied with the knowledge that this immersion is in alignment with Indian tradition and culture, which makes this consumption “moral consumption” (P. 342) and middle classes practicing it, the “moral middle classes”, clearly distinguishable from the middle classes, who merely consume the products of a morally dubious capitalist economy, i.e. the deracinated or westernized middle class.

Post LPG (Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization) proliferation of consumerism and shared popular culture via mass media, have created a sensory libidinal energy, typical to the middle classes, which allows the pleasures of affective engagement and the problem of middle class citizenship to come together into an operative alignment through the arenas of politics, e.g. religious nationalism (Mazzarella 2011a). Baviskar’s (2003, 2011) work on bourgeois environmentalism shows how middle-class anxieties about clean and green spaces in Delhi combine with the state’s agenda and get channelized as contempt for slum dwellers, an eyesore for the bourgeois citizen.¹¹ The middle class are also most often than not upper caste (Deshpande 1997; Baviskar 2003; Baviskar and Ray 2020), which makes their class-caste culture distinctive from the poor or the underprivileged and places them in a powerful position amidst a cultural bargain for physical spaces, social norms and ideologies.

Guru

In his study of the *sant* (saint) tradition in North India, Gold (1987) established some of the basic principles of Guru creation which persist even in the new age Guru movements. The Guru, understood as the mediator to God, was considered almost as, if not more sacred to God. The presence of the Guru in the here and now, made him the quintessential connector to the divine. Proximity to the Guru for gaining esoteric spiritual knowledge, mental and physical discipline and staying under the patronage of the Guru were central to spiritual pursuit. Gold underlined the elements of creativity, flexibility and fluidity as essential elements of Guru religiosity, which render the tradition ageless and open to invention and change through newly appropriate modalities, keeping some of its core elements intact, while changing others.

¹¹ Baviskar uses the term bourgeois to “refer to the group that is instantly recognisable in Delhi by dress, department, and language: *padhe-likhe log* (educated folk) and the propertied, white-collar professionals, and those engaged in business: the owners of material and symbolic capital” (2003, 207).

Pechilis (2004) in her work on female Gurus has argued for an essential difference between the two terms, the *sant* and the Guru. The *sant* does not automatically become a Guru, who requires to perform the social role of a teacher-mediator, a role conspicuously absent among the female saints. While Clementine-Ojha (1985), studying female Gurus in Guru *paramparas* (traditions) in Vrindavan, has attributed their ascent to leadership to chance and charisma, Pechilis' (2004) volume looks at the category more comprehensively, allowing a peek into the changes and continuities allowed to the Guru figure when a woman enters this social position. While many tenets and practices may prove to be empowering for the female devotees of female gurus, these remain contingent and are not a result of any thoughtful and systematic challenge to the traditional patriarchal norms. There is also a resistance among the devotees to look at their Gurus as a particular gender. Even though they might agree that the gender of the Guru is in many ways facilitative for women devotees (though also restraining for male devotees for similar reasons), they argue that the physical form is not to be taken as the final form or meaning which can be attributed to their Gurus, as the Guru is essentially a spiritually transcendental figure.

Lucia (2014) has argued that Amma (MAM) promotes, as a role model, the inculcation of the “maternal-ascetic habitus” (P. 140) among her devotees, irrespective of their genders. The call for awakening of “universal motherhood” is her response to the hyper-masculinity (of modernity) ailing societies worldwide. She calls for the emergence of a balance of the masculine and feminine energies as an ascetic practice to save the world from doom. This maternal femininity, however, is supposedly naturally embodied in women, who are more capable as well as responsible for empowering themselves and spreading selfless love to hark the world back to a balanced state of yore. While American devotees tend to read her message in a feminist light, the Hindu-Americans subsume it under the Vedic principle of non-duality which does not differentiate between women or men, physical forms being (merely) outward garbs of the eternal soul. Amma herself rejects feminism as being rooted in the west and speaking the language of difference and frequently evokes the golden Vedic age as a time when women had ritual agency and high status in society. Her discourse on women is closely aligned with the Hindutva's concept of ideal womanhood, though the two differ on the question of leadership. While the Hindutva ideology places women strongly as the care takers of the domestic front owing to their so-called “innate” qualities of

nurture and sacrifice, Amma calls for their participation as the flag bearers of spiritual-social change (Lucia 2014, 107-46). This extension of natural qualities of women into the public space which Amma advocates has resonance with changes in gender norms during Kerala's modernization (as we will see below). The opposed (as read in an American context) ideas about women's role, manifested in a clear break from the masculine Hinduism of Vivekananda in the West (Lucia 2014, 237), converge and conflate in the Indian context.

The New Age Gurus

Evolving responsively with the changing needs of its devotees the figure of the Guru is fraught with possibilities and therefore inconclusive. As a mediator between the mortal and the divine realms, a human fixer who smoothens the life in the here and now while promising a desirable afterlife, the Guru becomes a metaphor for the act of transcendence from the mortal realm, even while staying immersed in it. The apparently "innovative", "new" and "bizarre" guru figure today, is a continuation of the *sant* who is put in a very different context (Rudert 2010). Operating through the neoliberal principles has brought the Guru closer to devotees' expectations and reinvented him/her into a reliable socio-religious agent, who resolves their dilemma of engaging with commodity-bombarding and ever shifting modernity.

Warrier (2005) argues that in the face of modernity, it is not only the Hindu right-wing ideology that people are flocking to but also they are increasingly taking shelter in the practical spiritual guidance of Gurus like Amma, who offer a way of dealing with modernity without either immersing in its entanglements or totally rejecting it. She presents these two routes, the one of collaboration with the Hindu right wing and the one of becoming a devotee of Amma as essentially contrasting ones. I suggest, in contrast to what Warrier has argued, that these two paths of the Hindu right wing and /or the Guru missions, are not really parallel tangents but co-existent spheres which intersect with their porous and shifting boundaries, many a times converging with each other to proliferate and support, even as they keep their paths formally distinct. This strand of argument becomes more nuanced in light of my discussion of the dissonant subject in chapters on *sanskara* and *seva*.

The idea in contemporary times, as also facilitated by the times themselves, is that the messages and teachings of gurus must be easily accessible, reproducible and consumable, while at the same time, crucially, maintaining the guru's uniqueness and singularity. Before the advent of mechanical reproduction and the proliferation of commodity-consumer logic, the effect of the guru aura was locked into a specific location, time and space, ensuring auratic authority and social privilege. But as the guru travels across the globe and the number of devotees increases, the value of the guru aura has not become redundant. It has been re-invented. The guru is a social form of peculiar suggestibility, a "veritable vector between domains" who can successfully transfer the logic and the ideas of one domain into another, often with "interesting and unexpected effects" and therefore serves as a legitimizing connector of the religious field with the political, cultural and the social (Copeman and Ikegame 2012, 2). "Guru-governmentality" is an example of these interconnecting functions of the guru. Supported by the ethic of guru *seva*, seen as the devotee's primary duty, the guru missions can easily get tasks done on large scales. Also, guru logics may conveniently diffuse the political and historical attributions of a systemic problem to make it look like individual spiritual merit or lack of it. As Sanjay Srivastava (2017), discussing a recent episode of Ram Rahim Singh of *Dera Sacha Sauda*, succinctly puts it,

What remains constant is the mobilization of group identities in the name of individual salvation. And, the charisma of the guru (usually a male) lies in the fact that he is able to convince his followers that his own acts are not anti-social but a-social. That he is beyond the society he seeks to transform on their behalf.

Rudert (2010) sees the engagement of new age gurus with civil society concerns, social work and charity carried out through their NGOs as an essential characteristic fixing them in the material world. While on one hand, it helps explicate the idea of guru as a mediator between the material and the divine for followers, who look at religion as increasingly detached from ritual and attached to the everyday materiality, on the other hand, this immersion into everyday materiality makes gurus more open to corruptibility and suspicion. Nonetheless, this type of immersion remains crucial for the gurus to justify their valuable interjection of the modern times and its dilemmas for their devotees.

Upadhyay and Robinson (2011) have argued that the gurus proliferated the Indian scene through televisions, cassettes and video recordings, following from the template of televised series of *Ramayana* on Indian television, which reinvented and popularized Hindu values and symbols and enabled political strengthening of the Hindutva ideology. The gurus came in to provide ontological security to their devotees. While there is a profusion of gurus and spiritual pathways, there is also a simultaneous streamlining and homogenization happening via television. This argument feeds back into the idea of co-option of the guru by the state and the dominant upper-caste ideology of Hinduism, which is slowly but steadily condensing as “the core” of Hinduism.

Mehta’s (2017) work shows how the Guru sphere in Gujarat has managed to discursively produce a dominant Hindutva ideology, a monologue, through the very instruments that facilitate the building of a pluralistic public opinion, like the use of the public sphere, liberal democratic values like right to assembly and speech, free press and Gandhian idioms. The Gandhian public sphere which produced a very different Hindu identity during the freedom struggle, is often invoked and appropriated to assert ideas of citizenship, caste relations, religious minorities and duties of a Hindu in alignment with Hindutva ideology.

Devotees’ individual and rationalized relationships with Amma and the portability of the guru’s teachings and her aura suggest that neoliberalization has certainly changed ways of belonging with the guru. I would suggest, however, that the traditional terms of guru devotee relationship and the contemporary individualized spiritual seeking (Gooptu 2013) as a result of neoliberalization processes, meet each other halfway in case of Amma and her devotees; both transform to an extent and neither takes over the other completely.

Caste, Gender and Guru in Kerala

Even though a thorough analysis of the trajectory of guru figure in the context of Kerala is beyond the scope of this thesis, I make a humble attempt at trying to understand the complex waves of interconnected social and political changes in the matrix of modernising Kerala. We will see how some unique features of the guru personality of Amma have resonance with the changes that were taking place in her native state in the 19th and 20th centuries. Yet, all of that resonance and

peculiarities of her trajectory as a guru get faded, blurred, even forgotten in the context of Delhi – where the habitus of *sanskara* that the devotees inhabit transform her into the kind of guru that they would easily relate to – an identification highlighting the quintessential measure as well as a core talent of a new age guru. Amma was born in a lower caste fisherfolk family in Kerala, and her magnificent rise to popularity and authority has made many look at her trajectory as one which defies caste and gender rules. In the chapter on *sanskara* I talk about the caste habitus of Amma’s middle class devotees and broach the question of her own caste to argue how the mission, perpetuating a Hindu view of spirituality cannot do away with the traditional and popular caste and gender dynamics. A peek into the figure of the guru in Kerala and changes in caste and gender sociality in 19th and 20th centuries, however, makes for an important dimension to reckon with when trying to read Amma as a guru figure.

Among the continuing strands of thoughts from the time when Kerala saw its first guru figure risen from a shunning of caste norms at the turn of the 19th century, Shree Narayana guru, are – the coexistence of spiritual and material well-being, importance of inner belief as the locus of spiritual change and growth, oneness with the larger human race – *manushya samudayam* (human community, as Shree Narayana guru called it) – as real and caste as artificial (Kumar 1997). Shree Narayana guru took to yoga to defy the concept of body as a carrier of one’s caste markers, asserting that religion was really a matter of the mind, in the sense that we today think of spirituality (as distinct from religion and ritual). He emphasized that caste doesn’t mark but disrupt the true symbolism of the body – which is itself a symbol, a container of the soul and should therefore be taken care of, disciplined and kept clean. In identifying the body as facilitative of one’s true spiritual potential by shunning caste and yet talking about keeping the body clean, Shree Narayana appropriates the purity-pollution discourse for a more objective, spiritual purpose; something which might sound revolutionary even in today’s day and age. With religion as an inner belief, Shree Narayana emphasized on community as a locus of reform, re-conceptualizing Ezhava as a community rather than a caste, thus negating the need for conversion among religions as an anti-caste strategy. The inner goodness of a man is all that mattered, in his thought, for the purpose of spiritual evolution. His disciple Kumara Asan, developed this trope of individual interiority further, by exploring intensities of desire, where desire defied the limits of its bodily containment and hence became transcendental in character. Desire thus, transferred from the body to the soul –

the suitable space of desire and an interiorization of desire led to an eroticization of the inner self, which marks an important moment in the history of self-articulation in Malayalam writing (Kumar 1997).

The thrust therefore, shifted from external caste markers to individual interiority, making the individual the new site of convergence for socio-political and economic changes. This individual, however, was masculine in the very process of it being formed or engendered, (with a double play on the word) Devika (2013) argues. Women in modern Kerala, therefore were accepted in public only while displaying a certain kind of womanliness which resonated with their innate (as assumed) domesticity. While individuals as per caste were determined by forces beyond oneself, it was believed that individuals as per gender was a determination that reflected one's inner qualities of mind, making gender the new, modern distinguisher among people. Reforms in the wake of modernity, shunned caste in order to use gender as a differentiator. This brought in the traditional gender binary as the primary axis on which men's and women's roles, capacities and worth were judged for the new modern state. This meant that women were suitable for the public spaces/positions only when they represented an extension of their domestic roles and qualities like nurturance, patience and service. This justified women's roles in public institutions like schools, hospitals, orphanages and charity organizations. Emphasis was not on clearly marking out public and private realms as suiting different genders but on different significations that gender can give these realms, a school of thought still prevalent among the devotees of Amma, as I will discuss in the 4th chapter. This led to the rise of a "social" sphere which the women must inhabit as opposed to the "political" sphere which was considered a domain of men. This division resolved the dichotomy of public and private in modernising Kerala. This domestic-public image of the Malayalee woman, Devika (2013) argues has been popularized by the development literature praising the "Kerala Model." "And it may be that this 'embourgeoisified' Womanhood, which has certainly spread far beyond the propertied classes since the 1930s, is precisely what is celebrated as the beating heart of the much admired 'Kerala Model'" (2013, 273).

Both Devika (2013) and Mohan (2015, 2017) argue that the presence of Christian missionaries played an important catalyst in the changes in social texture of 19th and 20th century Kerala. It made possible certain dynamics among caste groups and religions which would not have been

possible otherwise. Mohan carves out the concept of a “colonial modernity”, which spilled out as a result of European modernity, to its colonies. He has argued that this colonial modernity became a facilitator for formation and articulation of the idiom of resistance. Negating the popular view that caste transformation was a result of an overall environment and pervasiveness of nationalism, which according to him only serves the purpose of legitimizing the caste movements, he asserts that protestant Christian missionaries were the first to ever talk about the slave castes in Kerala, while the national elites remained indifferent to their situation. Some landmark changes that occurred with the coming of the missionaries were the abolition of slavery in 1855, introduction of free wage labor and spread of literacy as a direct consequence of missionary intervention in India. Since slavery was part of an organic caste system in Kerala, little changed in the lived situations of slave castes, which remained in penury. However, the coming of the law, the new governmentality of the colonial rule and literacy drive held out a promise for these castes. Mohan (2015) underlines that the scope of liberation and emancipation through the missionaries was very clear to the slave castes, who actively sought engagement with the former. Mohan (2017) has argued how the popularized and upheld image of Christian manhood, informed changes for slave castes, women and religiosity and patriarchal ideas in the state. Christianity offered the slave caste a new found personhood via proper dress, mannerism, food, sense of self-worth and religiosity, hitherto denied to them. As the institution of family was stressed and became desirable for the slave castes, patriarchy changed and so did the nature of gender relationships.

The dissatisfaction with the existing social arrangements and perceived inadequacy of the missionary intervention, as the hierarchy between castes and sects persisted within the Church, led to the rise of movements like the *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS) in 1910 under the leadership of Poyikayil Yohannan, which was probably the most nascent version of the guru and a congregation in Kerala. Yohannan, pursued the cause of material and spiritual emancipation of the slave castes by creating a new religion which shunned both Hinduism and Christianity, but was defined largely through the Christian lifeworld. The core of this movement for a new divinity, with Yohannan as the savior prophet (who gradually came to represent for his followers, the divine truth that he pursued), rearranged the discourse of caste slavery as the basis for building the progressive orientation of the movement. In order to develop a congregation which was self-empowered and respectful for the others to take seriously, he advocated the revocation of caste

norms on the Dalit body, cleanliness and wearing white, were the primary features of which.¹² The community was a way for the Dalits to negotiate modernity through religion as a site for articulating equality, both material and non-material (spiritual), made feasible only through the overall context of colonial modernity, which kept identities and social institutions in a flux. It was rooted in the context of the long term challenges to caste inequalities in Kerala society and in the context of church in particular. His idea was to create a new religion for Dalits, which could not be enfolded into Christianity or fall back on Hinduism, to create a separate identity for his followers as “Yohannan’s community”, for which demands were also raised with the state at the time (Mohan 2015).

Mohan (2015) argues that the prophetic image of Yohannan was attributed to its followers’ Christian life worlds, emphasizing that the context of the congregation determined the features of the guru/prophet, an element that has continued in the new age guru followings. Another important feature of the PRDS which situated Yohannan specifically in comparison with the modern day gurus is the element of teaching. Underlining the difference between preaching and teaching as the difference between the missionary/saint and the guru – the latter being inclined towards logical reasoning and giving rationale to the followers for a certain tenet. 19th and 20th century Kerala saw a questioning of the traditional association of clothes with caste. Different castes were supposed to wear clothes in certain ways as markers of their caste identities. The upper garment – blouse conflict where the Nadir (lower caste) women wanted to wear blouses like the upper caste Nairs is a popular one and has engaged the imaginations of many artists and authors alike (Mohan 2015). Yohannan proclaimed having “annihilated caste” from his body by daring to wear clean and white clothes, (Amma always wears white unlike other new age gurus who wear orange or yellow ochres) depicting a purity and integrity of soul and self – hitherto denied to the Dalits and encouraged his people to do the same. He also taught them how to bathe and clean their bodies properly. Even though his organization was based on the critique of both the Bible and the Vedas, a popular offshoot of his sect was later identified with Hinduism.

¹² Other organizations challenging caste hierarchies and demanding access to public spaces and resources, like *Cheramar Mahajana Sabha* led by Pampady John Joseph and *Brahma Pratyaksha Dharma Paripalana Parayar Mahajana Sangham* led by Kandan Kumaram (Mohan 2015, 154) emerged from the discontents with Hinduism, which kept Dalits outside the caste fold and with Christianity which still segregated them as Dalit Christians.

After his death in 1939, PRDS was divided into subjects, a popular one of which is its identification with Hinduism, which reimagines Yohannan's life as per Hindu principles and mores and turns him into Shree Kumara Gurudevan, deifying him. His wife Janamma is believed to have been possessed by his spirit after his death and perform spirit medium speeches within the community. In meetings popularly known as the "tear wiping meetings", she would walk amidst the people to wipe their tears of joy (at being reconnected with their guru) with a handkerchief (P.183). Tears, which were the expression of the suffering of their ancestors and a hope for freedom from crippling caste hierarchy through their guru-saviour, were an affective expression of a painful history to which words can't do justice. Here we see the affective as a mode of relationship between the disciple and the spiritual leader, a feature of guru-devotee relationship that I explore in chapter 2. Yohannan's transformation from an anti-caste and anti-religious prophet into a guru defined as per the Hindu habitus, is another telling feature of his connection with the new age guru figure, who thrives in the context of the devotee getting redefined and transformed as per the latter's needs.

Seva

Seva, meaning selfless service unto another, has a long history in the Indian context. Gaining significant relevance during the colonial period, as a modality of nationalist retaliation and nation building by Indian leaders, like Swami Vivekananda and Gandhi, *seva* served as the linchpin for their three-fold personal (spiritual)-social-political growth (Srivatsan 2006; Patel 2010). Traditionally associated with a menial act of service to the one superior, it takes on divine colours when done for a Guru. As manifested in worldly activities, which have their own ways of being measured, *seva* grounds religious practice in the material world, as it becomes a tangible marker of one's spiritual (therefore intangible) growth (Warrier 2005; Lucia 2014). The Hindutva ethic of *seva* has been understood to be able to manifest itself in contrasting ways of both violent masculine vigilantism, as well as pacifist, spiritual mode of voluntary service in Hindu organizations. *Seva*, as prevalent under the ideological banner of the Hindu right, is a matrix of ideas, activities and practices, that facilitates the construction of the Hindutva ideology in radically new ways. It means both social service as well as a political project to constitute a Hindu community (Patel 2010).

For Swami Vivekananda *seva* meant service for the people, on behalf of the *sangathanas* (congregation) which was essentially a religious and political entity (Srivatsan 2006; Patel 2010). Gurus leading these *sangathanas* during the colonial period were distinctively *savarna* (twice born, upper caste Hindus), who encouraged adherence to hierarchy and complete obedience and loyalty. The aim through *seva* was to forge a new Hindu community of all castes, spiritually and physically strong, integrated on the principle of selfless duty community with the objective of ameliorating the lot of the downtrodden. *Seva* was supposed to improve their material condition and position in Hindu society (Patel 2010). As Patel (2010) perceptively points out, Vivekananda offered a *savarna* (caste Hindu) reading of *seva* and was the first to consider majoritarian Hinduism as a distilled form, devoid of many diverse traditions and non-brahmin sects, led by brahmin-elite caste-class nexus.

Through the propagation of practical spirituality and practice of this worldly asceticism, Gandhi popularized *seva* as a materially manifested activity which facilitated a smooth convergence of personal with social and political, a merger that gave a hope for political effectiveness and of spiritual transcendence. *Seva* by the upper caste Hindus for the Dalits and tribals was a political attempt aimed at integration, in the face of Christian missionaries' active proselytization. *Bhil seva mandal* and *Harijan sevak samaj* were created to keep them within the Hindu fold. *Harijan sevak samaj* was created as reparation for the sins of the Hindu history (Srivatsan 2006), i.e. the *sevak* proposed to carry an Indianized, religion and caste based version of the white man's burden (Srivatsan 2006).

The contemporary ideas of *seva* in Hindutva organizations like the *Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh* (RSS) and other communal organizations can be traced back to the majoritarian ideology of Vivekananda and to his dream of making Hinduism a world religion. Hedgewar, an important ideologue of RSS insisted, like Vivekananda, the need to use education, discipline, organization and the strategy of instilling pride in Hinduism by creating a band of celibate *sevaks*. This he did by creation of a male volunteer group organized around a physical regimen of character building in order to combat the apathy and emasculation that was undermining Hindus and Hinduism. RSS, thus developed as a band of volunteers from all castes to save Hinduism from enslavement, and trained its men through *shakhas*. *Seva* got redefined both in terms of volunteers and their work.

After suffering a dip in popularity with the coming of the secular constitution after independence, the Hindutva idea of *seva* got reinvigorated in the 1960s and 70s in an environment where naxalism and Dalit movements were growing and the upper caste Hindus' power hegemony was being questioned. In this scenario, RSS emerged with a new strategy, the Hindutva project of *seva*, with six principal characteristics. Which were,

The attempt to transform Hinduism into a homogenized, rigid, codified and monochromatic identity; the belief that Hinduism is the most ancient perfect and evolved religion, as against other existing religions; an attempt to create clear boundaries identifying the believers from infidels; a belief in the significance of the Vedas, the text that elaborates practices as an infallible authority that defines Hinduism; a belief that Hindus are victims of threats to itself and to the nation; and lastly, as a set of ideas that are insular, that is, ideas which are not willing to be engaged in a dialogue, discussions or debates with other visions, projects and ideologies (Patel 2010, 110).

Bhattacharjee (2021) argues that the *sangh parivar*'s rising influence in contemporary India is due to the cultural connotations of *seva*, which is comprehended as identity performance and moral goodness in a typically Indian way, which is far more appealing than the terms like charity or philanthropy. *Seva*, she emphasizes is an essential tool through which the *sangh parivar* hopes to create a Hindu nation.

Seva as religious reciprocation

Analogous to the making of offerings and sacrifices in a Hindu temple, *seva* is offered as worship and praise and is a critical means of obtaining the Guru's blessings (Copeman 2011). Scholars like Warrier (2003), Mayer (1981), Babb (1986), and McKean (1996) have additionally highlighted the importance of *seva* activities in more obviously Hindu guru-led institutions (Copeman 2009). In the classical sense, the gift-exchange relationship between the Guru and disciple depends on the praxis of *seva* for its sustenance (Lucia 2014). Marcel Mauss (1925) espoused that the free/pure gift is a paradox, that all giving entails reciprocity, material or otherwise. Later scholars who explored a variant in the Indian version of gift that is the *dan*, have argued that it comes the closest to the concept of pure gift, which is not necessarily reciprocal or non-alienated. Pure gift does not create personal connections or obligations between parties (Parry 1986; Laidlaw 2000).

In MAM, *seva* primarily is about the upkeep, maintenance, and proliferation of the mission. Unlike other Guru led organizations, MAM allows the devotees to choose their own way of doing *seva* from a list of required tasks, thus allowing for individual expression, contrary to the belief that *seva* is a leveler that makes individual differences and efforts ambiguous. The amount and degree of hardness of *seva* performed is seen as directly proportional to the honor and esteem that the devotee earns (Warrier 2005). *Seva* for devotees is a routinized inculcation of the ascetic ethos of bodily and mental discipline which they need to connect with every activity in order to serve the Guru and grow spiritually. True *seva* is counted as that which is done with a single-minded focus and spirit of devotion. While the task at hand is central, it is secondary to the way in which the task is completed (Lucia 2014). The thesis develops the idea of *seva*, an apparently secular and discursive practice, as the mode of inhabiting and proliferating a certain hierarchy of caste-class-gender Hindu culture among the middle-class devotees of Amma.

Theoretical Contributions of the Thesis

Through an ethnographic exploration of the concepts like *sanskar*, *seva*, the idea of a dissonant subject, wonder and play in the context of guru religiosity, the thesis proposes the following theoretical contributions about gurus, the middle classes, and the politics of their inter-relationship.

- In presenting the neoliberal resurgence of religiosity in India as a contested site, the thesis will contribute to the study of local processes of neoliberalization in India and South Asia.
- The thesis differs from the present anthropological works on gurus, which put gurus centrestage and engage with devotees only to understand the guru. It locates its lens in the everyday lives of the devotees to understand the embedded nature of their relationship with their guru which materializes and operates through the practice of *sanskar*, a mutually shared cultural space. It elaborates on the mission and its relevance for the middle class devotees and their socio-political context, something the guru also shares and evolves with, but constantly works to keep at an arm's distance in order to facilitate a smooth functioning of it, even as she soothes the pain it causes her devotees.

- The thesis contributes to the evolving body of knowledge on the Indian middle classes by discussing their material and religious aspirations, class and caste habitus and their circumvented political engagement, reflected in their practice of *seva* and their concern for environmental protection.
- It will engage with work on middle-class environmentalism as it brings together the ideas of sacredness of cows, indigeneity and perceived binaries that the middle classes share with the Hindu right wing politics in the fragmented and depoliticized cultural realm. The middle class, as a vehicle of the Hindu right wing's cultural politics, consolidates their efforts at the everyday discursive level, even as it laments its limited political capacities.
- It adds to the literature on neoliberal religiosities, where the religious is made available through the secular and shows how religiosities ushered through neoliberalism, help sustain it even as they resist it. The thesis analyses the everyday discursive practice of *seva* and other everyday secular situations of devotees' lives to determine their religious aspirations and understandings, emphasizing the increasing availability of the sacred through the profane, via culture.
- The thesis will add to the limited body of work on the anthropology of wonder and play, as it discusses the affective relationship between the guru and the devotees in terms of wonder and play, as markers of an individualized religiosity, which both adhere to as well as challenge neoliberal ethos.
- It will further contribute to the study of the concept of *seva* in the Indian context, as it delves expansively on its conceptual evolution, its suitability to the religious context and most importantly, the caste and class politics it produces and sustains; to facilitate mission's and devotees' dissonant membership of the Hindu right via its ideological parent, *sanskar*.
- The thesis will add to a deficient body of work exploring the method of participant observation, contributing to literature on methodology and the question of personal belief in the anthropological fieldwork on religion.
- Lastly, this thesis will directly add to the study of *Mata Amritanandamayi Mission*, (MAM) which has been elaborately attempted by Maya Warriar in 2005 and Amanda Lucia in 2014. Both the studies substantiate my argument of guru's flexible politics and evolutionary principle of the mission. Warriar's description of the mission's stance vis-à-vis Hindutva

politics conflicts with mine, which is a telling symptom of the mission's conscious evolution as per changing times and contexts. Lucia analyses the mission in the North American context and argues that the mission is an answer to the toxic masculine Hinduism in the west initiated by Vivekananda, which will be overthrown by the rise of the primordial feminine, which Amma represents. In India, the primordial feminine and Vivekananda are not in such opposing and contrasting camps. My argument about the dissonant membership of the mission and the devotees therefore adds a necessary political dimension to the study of MAM.

I argue that MAM and its devotees become “dissonant” members of the right wing's cultural project by espousing to *sanskar*—a solid bedrock of Hindutva, through which a depoliticization of culture is achieved for both proselytization and maintenance of caste-culture hierarchies that in turn feed into the agenda of creation of a Hindu nation. A discursive manifestation of *sanskar* and a dissonant membership of ideologically right organizations become possible due to the neoliberal assemblage which draws together aspects from religion, state, politics, nationalism and caste-class socialities, which share an internal logical unity and become available in the everyday cultural realm. The discursive alignment of *seva* and *sanskar* with neoliberal principles, however, does not overthrow their conceptual grounding in the traditional understanding of the guru-devotee relationship and they continue to resist neoliberalization of religion conceptually.

Methodology

My fieldwork took place in blocks of months between January 2018 to January 2020 in the Delhi and Kerala ashrams of the guru. The method was primarily participant observation in ashram events and conversations which flew from them naturally, and on occasions I planned individual interviews in devotees' homes. Not only was the very thought of carrying and using a tape recorder to my field improper, I never even used a handy notebook to make observations, knowing that the gaze was on me all the time. I used to make my daily notes only after I returned home from the field and sometimes record urgent and significant observations on the voice recorder of my mobile phone while on my way home. Not using any of these technologies allowed me to enter into deep conversations where I made myself equally available to my respondents. They asked me profound and personal questions as I asked them those too. I am thankful to the ashram authorities for the

permission for fieldwork and all my respondents who allowed me in their lives as I tried to understand their relationships with their guru. It is because of the free flowing nature of conversations with the devotees that I was able to discover the multiple ways and tropes in lives of devotees where their faith in Amma may get manifested – as keen spiritual seekers, as frustrated and helpless parents, as disoriented “children”, struggling homemakers, cultural hippies or as people who just did not know where else to turn in the face of pervasive precarity, other than to go to their guru. My inability to understand Malayalam meant that my interlocutors were urban, middle-class, Hindi or English speaking devotees in the Delhi and Kerala ashrams, and English speaking western devotees in the Kerala ashram. The first chapter of this thesis is dedicated to the exploration of method of participant observation and the art and contingency which characterise it. I will leave the rest of the description about methodology to that chapter.

Chapter 1: The Art and Contingency of Participant Observation: Method, Belief and Power in Anthropological Research on Religion

The chapter discusses my experience of disgust at being offered the guru’s leftover food and an episode of unexpected and overwhelming devoutness felt for the guru after days of preparation for her visit to analyse the politics of belief in my field. I argue that the method of participant observation is as contingent as it is strategic and that ethnographic fieldwork in a religious field cannot be undertaken justifiably by circumventing the question of personal religious belief of the ethnographer.

Chapter 2: From Precarity to Wonder: Experiencing the Transcendent Through the Mundane with the Guru

The chapter explores the individualistic and affective nature of the guru-devotee relationship by analysing personal wonder that the devotees feel with Amma in their everyday lives. Through ethnographic episodes of such experiences which transform devotees’ ontological understandings of life, I argue that the sense of loss, confusion, precarity and distrust of the future magnified by neoliberal modernity and experienced in the everyday by Amma’s middle class devotees, gets converted into an opportunity to experience wonder with her. Wonder materialises in devotees’ personal affective realms shared with their guru and empowers them to take on life’s precarity. It encourages the devotees to mine their inner creativity and develop resilience to deal with the

unpredictability of life, which the guru-taught aptitudes of a playful disposition and an “optimistic faith” i.e. hope, entail. Wonder is both contingent and creatively mined out through a rethinking, careful organization and navigation of the mundane.

Chapter 3: “Amma makes us undertake such adventures!”: Navigating Precarity Through Play with the Guru

In continuation with the previous chapter on wonder, this chapter explores “play” as an inseparable consequence of devotees’ belief in Amma. Adapting a playful disposition in their everyday lives is seen as a marker of devotees’ belief and surrender in the guru. Through ethnography from everyday lives of devotees managing the ashram affairs as well as special stage appearances of the guru, I draw out the prevalence, endorsement and adaptation of a playful disposition as a special characteristic of the guru devotee relationship; an empowering virtue that offers a critique of the pervasive neoliberal principles. In the religious realm, play— also known in India popularly as ‘*lila*’—has been understood by the devotees as the divine way of teaching, sending forth a message, often encrypted and subtle, via an experiential mode to the devotees. Devotees often attribute unpredictable circumstances in their lives to Amma’s mystical ways. I argue that, the permissibility that organized religion allowed in the public sphere via a calendar religious event, has, in the new neoliberal religiosity, which is both individualized and rationalized, been reinvented in the personal sphere of the devotees, materializing in an affective relationship with their guru.

Chapter 4: “A Good Hindu Must Pass on Good *Sanskar* to her Children”: Caste Habitus of Among the Middle-Class Devotees

Through ethnographic vignettes from the lives of two women devotees of Amma, located in different scenarios in their predominantly middle-class environments and performing their gender and class roles diversely, I analyse the discursivity and everyday nature of *sanskar*, which hinges on patriarchal, caste-class defined Hindu value systems, to which devotees in Delhi subscribe and endorse. I analyse their relationships with the guru, the mission, their children, families, their caste societies and their immediate neighborhoods, to bring out the subtle, creative and persistent ways in which a system of moral values based on the concept of purity and pollution, closely knit and almost subsumed under the less problematic expression of “class” distinction, thrives. Through

tropes of hospitality, dynamics and politics of public-private spaces and ideas, and the concept of agency, I develop the *sanskar* habitus of women devotees of Amma, as female devotees of a female guru and what it entails in terms of their caste-class and gender statuses, as the personal gets connected with the political.

Chapter 5: “Amma Only Talks About *Sanskriti* (Indian Culture), Not Religion”: Political Implications of Secular *Seva*

In the backdrop of the previous chapter on *sanskar*, which forms the conceptual background for *seva*, this chapter explores the context and political consequences of *seva*, a modality to belong to the guru, through which devotees contribute to the mission with voluntary work and maintain personal spiritual discipline. I delve into an ethnography of the class and gender dynamics between devotees engaged in *seva* work and the underprivileged beneficiaries of *seva* to draw out the social and political implications generated by them, discursively and spatially, which ensure *seva*'s subscription to and sustenance of *sanskar*. I argue that a dissonant membership of the devotees of the Hindutva movement because of the commonality between their *sanskar*, the value system endorsed in Amma's mission and the embedded mobilization efforts of the right wing working as a catalyst; gets manifested through everyday *seva*.

Chapter 6: Bovine Sifters? Cows, Class and Indigeneity Among Devotees

Through an ethnography of environmental protection efforts of AYUDH, a youth volunteer group of MAM, and devotees' understanding of environment and cows, this chapter explores the trope of indigeneity as the common element between the middle-class devotees of Amma and the proselytising politics of Hindutva forces which make a dissonant association of the two possible. I use the metaphor of the popular binary of cows as *desi*/Indian and jersey/foreign to explore the many other binaries which the middle classes sift and sort their world into, as also endorsed by Hindutva politics. This materialises into a nationalistic concern for the environment as a prime engagement of the middle classes, which is discerned by them as their much required reaching out to create a wholesome life for themselves as they care about the planet. This engagement and its degree and politics too, however, are orchestrated and controlled by the state as much as it is delimited by the horizon of the middle class social empathy. I argue that the nationalist concern with the environment is primarily a result of the devotees following their guru's politics, given

their nativity. I substantiate this point by a discussion on the environmental concern of the guru's western devotees, who do not share her nationality and politics.

Chapter 7: Conclusion: The Universe of Middle-Class Guru Religiosity

The concluding chapter will outline the key themes and arguments of the thesis, which are:

1. Emphasizing the centering of personal belief in anthropological research on religion as an imperative for the emergence of significant anthropological knowledge about religion.
2. Underlining the individual, rational and affective nature of guru-devotee relationship in the backdrop of pervasive precarity ushered by capitalism and neoliberalism, which is analysed through the tropes of wonder and play, hence arguing for a neoliberal religiosity centered on the gurus, which abides by as well as resists neoliberal ethos.
3. Outlining middle class devotees' caste-class and gendered cultural habitus —*sanskar*— as the foundation for their religious bond with their guru, manifested in the form of guru *seva*.
4. Underlining the caste-class politics of *seva* and its role in making the devotees and the mission dissonant members of the Hindutva politics in India, which blurs the religious politics, veiling it under the garb of a less problematic trope of *sanskar*.
5. Analyzing the middle-class devotees' engagement with cow protection and environmental concerns in light of their shared caste-class culture with Hindutva politics.
6. Limitations of the thesis and questions for future research are also identified here.