

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

THESIS SUBMITTED BY

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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.