

New Religious Movements and Gurus

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This paper is an attempt to look at the evolution, function and impact of the new religious movements in India. We propose to critically analyse the role played by these movements in making Hinduism a living reality for the contemporary world. Emphasis is placed on the relevance of these movements and their central figures today. We begin with a general analysis of the expression 'new religious movements' followed by a brief study of the new religious movements in pre-independence India and a critical scrutiny of a couple of such relevant movements in the post-independence India.

The New Religious Movements

The phenomenon of new religious movements is not new in the history of Hinduism. The rise of classical Hinduism is accompanied by many new religious movements of the time. Medieval Hinduism is similarly distinguished by the emergence of a variety of such new religious movements. The development of some of them is attributed to the presence of Islam on the Indian soil. Modern Hinduism in the pre-independence India again found expression in a large number of new religious movements mostly as an antidote to the Western and Christian influences in the wake of the establishment of British rule in India. The new Hindu religious figures and movements which have appeared on the Indian scene during the post independence period are numerous. Thus one could say that the pre and post independence period of India witnessed the emergence of several new religious movements.

The expression "new religious movements" comprises a wide range of movements which range from loose affiliations based on novel approaches to spirituality or religion to communitarian enterprises that demand a considerable amount of group conformity and social identity. This expression was introduced in the 1980s by scholars as an alternative to the older term "cult," which, during the cult debate of the 1970s, acquired a pejorative connotation, and was subsequently used indiscriminately by lay critics to disparage faiths whose doctrines they saw as unusual or heretical. Debates among academics on the acceptability of the word "cult" continue in scholarly research. The Oxford Dictionary defines "cult" as "a

system of religious or spiritual beliefs, especially an informal and transient belief system regarded by others as misguided, unorthodox, extremist, or false, and directed by a charismatic, authoritarian leader." Such a definition may not be applicable in the case of most of the Hindu religious movements. However, "cult" as an "idolization of somebody or something" seems to be more relevant in the context of Hindu movements, which stress an extreme or excessive admiration for a person, philosophy of life, or activity.

Some scholars, especially in sociology of religion, use the expression "new religious movement" to describe any non-mainstream religion, while others use "new religious movement" for the majority of benign alternative religions. They reserve "cult" to label groups which are extremely manipulative and exploitative. While there is no one criterion for describing a group as a "new" religious movement, it usually refers to both movements of recent origin and those different from existing religions. It may be defined as a religious faith, or an ethical, spiritual or philosophical movement of "recent origin" that is not part of an established traditional religious body. The definitions of "of recent origin" vary greatly: some authors see as new movements those originating or appearing in a new context after World War II, others define as new everything originating after the Bahai Faith (mid 19th century), or even everything originating after Sikhism (17th century).¹

"New" in the sense of different from existing religions refers by common consensus to all movements which are not part of any existing religion. Some authors also count as new those movements which are, in religious science, seen as part of an existing religion which is true in the case of most of the new Hindu religious movements. Some authors also consider religious movements as new when they appear in a new cultural context and present themselves as distinct from traditional religion, e.g., new Hindu or Buddhist groups in the Western world. There are also groups which are by some or many authors seen as new religious movements, though they do not define themselves as religions.

Pre and Post Independence Movements

We can distinguish the Hindu religious movements between those that emerged in the pre-independence period and in the post-independence period. Brahmo Samaj,

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_religious_movement, downloaded on 08-08-06.

Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, Hindu Mahasabha, Ananda Marg, etc., emerged in the pre-independence period. Hare Krishna Movement, Divine Light Mission, the Transcendental Meditation Movement, the Rajneesh Movement, the Sai Baba Movement, Sri Sri Ravi Sankar, Mata Amrtanandamayi, etc., belong to post independence period. K. M. Panikkar has referred to the new movements of the pre-independence period collectively as the Hindu Reformation, and notes that both the combined contribution of these movements and the qualitative change in the Hindu context were brought about by the achievements of Indian independence.²

The National movement in India had its deep roots in the socio-religious movements of the 19th century. According to Kulakkatt, though the idea of reforming the Indian society and its socio-religious practices was proposed by the English missionaries, their imprudent preaching of the Christian religion and their vehement attacks against Hindu religion and its practices aroused the Hindu intellectuals from their despondency.³ They reacted ingeniously against the preaching of these missionaries and their attacks, and defended their religion and practices. As a result, several socio-religious movements have come up.⁴ These movements later became contributory factors in the national movement for independence. However, in most cases these socio-religious movements did not openly identify themselves with nationalism, but instead, maintained that they were strictly religious organizations. The Ramakrishna monks remained largely outside politics as did the Radhasoami Satsang, but the Arya Samaj found itself increasingly drawn into political action in defence of the Hindu community through its *shuddhi* campaigns, anti-Muslim *satyagrahas*, and organizational developments. Politics in the twentieth century was not solely focused on nationalist competition, but encompassed numerous forms of caste, communal, regional and class struggles. The Sri Narayana Guru Movement, for example, was divided between its religious aspect and its concern for the uplift of the untouchables.⁵

² Panikkar, *The Foundations of New India*, 36.

³ Kulakkatt, *Trade, Politics and Religion*, xi.

⁴ It is interesting to note the policy of East India Company towards missionaries and Christian mission. As Kulakkatt points out, "there are four types of opinion among the scholars about the religious policy of East India company: that it was anti-missionary; indifferent to religions; favourable to the native religions; and was very inconsistent. But the fact is that the company consistently followed a policy of accepting or rejecting the missionaries and their activities in view of the ensuing consequences of such an action on the mercantile and imperial interests of the Company." Kulakkatt, *Trade, Politics and Religion*, 416.

⁵ Jones, *Socio Religious Reform Movements*, 208.

While the pre-Independence movements could serve as catalyst to a certain extent in the national integration of the country, the revival and expansion of Hinduism was the main thrust of all these movements. The same holds true of movements of the post-Independence period. Thus with the achievement of Indian Independence the post-Independence movements focus their attention more on the expansion of Hinduism especially in the West.

Vivekananda's concepts of *Karma Yoga* and self-help generated a combination of religion and social service which was new to Hinduism while defending many of the rituals and beliefs of orthodoxy. In the process Vivekananda himself became one of the most popular figures in the Hindu world. To many he represented a revived Hinduism that met the challenges of Western critics and succeeded against them in their own home territory. The socio-religious movements of the nineteenth century added a dimension of social service to Hinduism that had not been present previously. The Ramakrishna movement had created a permanent system of social service through its monks who practised medicine, taught in schools and administered a variety of relief measures. For the Ramakrishna monks and nuns, this type of action was the main expression of their religious convictions. Other movements, however, conducted similar types of social service as an adjunct to their overall religious programme. During the twentieth century, religious movements continued to conduct and expand their social service, as new secular organizations entered this field...⁶ These movements added a dimension of social service to their religious activity.

The Indian mixture of religion and social service was exported to a number of other countries, primarily those with Hindu immigrants. The Hindu movements expanded both within South Asia and beyond, with the result that Hinduism became an international religion for the first time in modern history. This new dimension of Hinduism came through the emigration of Hindus throughout the British Empire and, eventually, to countries beyond it. Socio-religious movements travelled with these migrants. Among Hindus, the Arya Samaj demonstrated this type of expansion to its widest extent, while the Narayana Guru Society and the Radhasoami Satsang were

⁶ Jones, *Socio Religious Reform Movements*, 208.

more limited in their overseas expansion, at least within the years before Independence.⁷

A closer look at these movements shows that they display a basic similarity of patterns. Sharma labels these patterns as orientations.⁸ The first orientation is characterized by (a) emphasis on science and rationality, (b) willingness to assimilate from the West, (c) confidence in one's tradition, combined with (d) absence of antagonism towards, and even appreciation of, other cultures and religions. Ambrose presents the Brahmo Samaj of Mohan Roy as the example for the first orientation of the emerging religious movements.⁹ Roy's effort was to show that Hinduism is on par with all great religions and is valid for Indians.

Orientation two is characterized by (a) emphasis on rationality combined with revelation, (b) willingness to assimilate from the West, (c) confidence in one's own tradition finding expression in missionary activity, and (d) a militant attitude towards other traditions. According to Ambrose, the Arya Samaj of Dayananda exhibits these orientations. Dayananda conceived his Samaj in close resemblance to the organization of the Church with its central authority and network of parishes and sub-centres. He made it obligatory for all members of the Samaj to read, teach, recite and listen to recitations of the Vedas giving a missionary character to Hinduism.¹⁰ He extolled Hinduism as the best possible religion not just valid for Indians but a must for them.

The third orientation is characterised by (a) emphasis on rationality combined with mysticism, (b) willingness to help assimilate material techniques of the West, offering in return the spiritual techniques of the East, (c) self-confidence in one's tradition, expressed in an attitude of neither wishing to convert away from it nor wishing others to convert to it, combined with the propagation of Hindu ideas and ideals, and (d) emphasis on universality. As Ambrose points out the Ramakrishna movement represents the third orientation showing that Hinduism as a religion can not only borrow from other cultural elements but can also contribute to other

⁷ Jones, *Socio Religious Reform Movements*, 207.

⁸ Sharma, "New Hindu Religious Movements," 221.

⁹ Ambrose, "Hindu Religious Movements," 367.

¹⁰ Ambrose, "Hindu Religious Movements," 369.

religions.¹¹ In short, Hinduism was shown as a universal religion valid not only for Indians but to the entire world and especially to the materialistic West.

What one notices in these modern movements is their attempt to show universality while being rooted in the particularity of their religious ideals which are being projected as universal. Again, presenting themselves neutral in their approach towards conversion, they promote conversion allegedly in the name of filling the 'spiritual vacuum' of the materialistic West. The spiritual in turn results in the material while the affluent materially support these movements. The 'selling of the spiritual wares' makes these movements get established and institutionalized.¹² The Sai Baba tradition, Amritanandamayi, Ravi Sankar and others are the best examples of such orientations in the modern times.

We focus our attention on a general study of the modern Hindu religious movements of the post-independence India with special reference to the Sathya Sai Baba and Mata Amritanandamayi movements as representative schools.

The Sai Baba Movement

The Sai Baba movement revolves around the figure of Sri Satya Sai Baba, a spiritual leader claiming the largest following in the recent past, with 30 million devotees in 165 countries around the world. Sai Baba was born in 1926 in the village of Puttaparthi in the Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh. It was in 1940, at the age of 14, the boy called Sathya Narayana Raju claimed that he was an incarnation of Sai Baba of Shirdi in Maharashtra. That 'Grand Declaration' changed an individual's destiny - and a village's too. In the 1950s he established his ashram Prasanthi Nilayam ("Abode of Peace") in a nondescript hamlet, Puttaparthi. His fame grew as the miracle worker and the incarnation of Shirdi Sai. In a society governed by a strict caste hierarchy, his family's origins as a cowherd people of the Bhattaraju community, consanguineous to the backward caste Kapus, have never been an issue. It was in 1963 he made his second major claim that he was an incarnation (*avatar*) of Siva. Thus Sai Baba made two primary associations, the first

¹¹ Ambrose, "Hindu Religious Movements," 372.

¹² It is a paradox that while accusing other religions of receiving money from abroad for their support most of these movements witness today the same phenomenon in themselves.

reincarnatory and the second incarnatory, the first with Shirdi Sai Baba, the second with Siva. These boosted his following.

The claim to be an avatar is by no means uncommon among Hindu holy men. But the question why should Sathya Sai Baba seek a particular association with the god Siva is puzzling. It has often been maintained that Siva was an 'alien' god who was assimilated into the Hindu pantheon.¹³ If such, indeed, was the case, Sharma observes that Siva would be better qualified to preside over the integration of the influences of an 'alien' West with Hinduism. Moreover, the fact that Siva is a god more concerned with cosmic change makes him ideally suited for mediating transition in a society undergoing widespread and rapid social change.¹⁴ From a sociological perspective, Sai Baba's following comes from all classes of the society including the tribal and *dalit* groups. India is undergoing rapid socio-economic changes as the processes of industrialization, urbanization, modernization and Westernization gather pace. This has resulted in the expansion of all classes, caught up in the tensions generated by competing claims of tradition and modernity. The Sai Baba movement enables people to maintain contact with tradition and modernity as the country modernizes.¹⁵

Sai Baba defines his mission as, a) *Vedaposhana* (preservation of Veda), b) *Vidvatwa poshana* (preservation of wisdom), c) *Bhakta rakshana* (salvation of devotees), and d) *Dharmarakshana* (preservation of righteousness). Baba says that he has come to implant faith in the divinity of man. On another occasion he said that his main task is the re-establishment of Vedanta and the Vedantic way of life in India and the world. His declared mission is to 'reconstruct the ancient highway to God' restoring peoples' knowledge of God and faith in the spiritual heritage of India, and ever emphasizing the basic principles of *Satya* (truth), *Dharma* (righteousness), *Shanti* (peace), and *Prema* (love) as keys to the spiritual growth of humankind.

Baba teaches universal religion. He attracts devotees from all religions, sects and cultures, from Asia as well as the West. Sai is not a jealous god. You can worship Christ or Krishna or Allah, he says, and still believe in him. This has obviously

¹³ Hirianna, *Essentials of Indian Philosophy*, 38ff.

¹⁴ Sharma, "New Hindu Religious Movements," 230.

¹⁵ Sharma, "New Hindu Religious Movements," 231.

widened his appeal. Besides claiming to be Sai Baba incarnate, Sai is perhaps best known for producing *Vibhuti*, the sacred ash prized for its sacramental and healing qualities. In his early days, Sai Baba used his “miracles;” but now he realises that there is need for a more lasting impact, in the form of schools, hospitals and drinking water projects and other humanitarian services. He says: “*manava seva is madhava seva*” (service to man is service to God). He stresses the importance of service to humanity in his exhortation that “the hands that serve are holier than the lips that pray.”¹⁶ Those who are served are looked upon as embodiments of the divine.

Over the years Sai Baba’s establishment has been served by a galaxy of civil servants. There is intense concentration of power through these civil servants. In some ways, the *India Today* opines that “it is the spiritual answer to Delhi’s Shastri Bhavan.”¹⁷ The followers of Sai declare that they direct all their devotion to the gods or God through Sai whose photographs take the place of any other image in the domestic worship. Those who are drawn to the gurus, including the large public that may not even see them very often, or may know them best in photographs or in newspaper articles apprehend their “reality” in a very special way. This is the effect of *darshan* whether proximate or distant. It creates an indissoluble bond between the Master and the disciple. This is described by Hindus as the closest of all human relationships. It affords to the devotees not only a sense of attraction for the guru, but the common devotion to the guru creates a bond among the devotees. Whereas it is difficult for Hindus of different castes, social status or wealth to meet together and be at ease in most of the course of life, yet in homes, ashrams, and even in the context of the nation a socially unifying experience becomes possible in the presence of a charismatic master.

Mata Amritanandamayi

Mata Amritanandamayi, also known by her followers as 'Amma', 'Ammachi' or 'Mother' (born on September 27, 1953), was born Sudhamani in a small village, in Kerala State. Sudhamani was born into a family of fishermen. Her schooling ended when she was nine, and she began to take care of her younger siblings and the family domestic work full-time. From these humble beginnings started the journey of a young woman on the path to “universal motherhood.” Her devotees claim that she

¹⁶ Cited in A. Zachariah, *Modern Religions & Secular Movements*, 236.

¹⁷ Menon & Malik, “Test of Faith,” 44.

had many mystical experiences as a child. Since 1981, she has been teaching spiritual aspirants all over the world. She founded a worldwide organization, the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission Trust, which is engaged in many spiritual and charitable activities.

From early childhood Sudhamani developed an intense love, and devotion to Lord Krishna. Unusual interest and dedication to the deity led her to closer relationship with the deity which filled her with the divine graces in abundance. Overwhelmed with divine bliss, feeling of inner identification with the Lord Krishna, she started transforming her features and movements like that of Krishna Himself, assuming the nature of Krishna - *Krishna Bhava*.¹⁸ In order to reach this state of transcendence she has decided to love and serve her devotees as a mother and, thus, she started assuming the nature of the divine Mother.¹⁹ "These divine *bhavas* are nothing but the external revelation of her incessant Oneness with the Supreme."²⁰ She used to dress up as Krishna or Devi during her *bhavas* so that devotees may distinguish the *bhavas* and pray accordingly. This became the beginning of a great movement and devotees began to flock to her for her *darsan* and to be relieved of their problems.

Many of Amritanandamayi's followers believe in her powers to perform miracles. For instance, she mentioned in an interview that she is often asked by her devotees to perform miracles. She goes on to say that water was miraculously changed into *panchamrutham* (a sweet drink often prepared for Hindu religious ceremonies) in her presence and that her devotees were able to light lamps out of conches filled with water. Hearing of such miracles attributed to her causes many people to become sceptical of her powers while fuelling more devotion in others. Amritanandamayi, her followers and their activities have not been above criticism. Many writers and social activists (mostly rationalists and atheists) have expressed doubts about her divine powers.

Amma as the 'hugging saint'²¹ is considered to be an embodiment of the love of God to human beings. Through her special hugging she expresses the outflow of divine

¹⁸ Amritaswarupananada, *Mata Amritanandamayi*, 88.

¹⁹ Amritaswarupananada, *From Amma's Heart*, 82.

²⁰ Amritaswarupananada, *Mata Amritanandamayi*, 202.

²¹ Amritanandamayi is known to the world media as 'the hugging saint'. She offers warm hugs to everyone who approaches her and in India she has been known to have individually hugged over 50,000 people in a

love towards the entire creation in an all-encompassing spirit and in a total identification with all. The embracing is not just a physical contact but it is the love she feels for all creation flowing toward each person. The vibration of that love which is the universal language purifies the receivers and helps them in their inner awakening and spiritual growth.²² This love is being made real through the numerous charitable and humanitarian endeavours covering a wide range of community welfare, health care, education, spirituality and global mission giving rise to a huge empire of institutions. Hence Mata Amritanandamayi is widely respected as a loving humanitarian and a living saint. Amritanandamayi *Math* (Ashram) known as Amritapuri, executes various charitable and humanitarian projects.

Amma's vision for building a new kind of Hindu temple that would help to re-establish true spirituality as a vital part of the Hindu culture became a reality when she consecrated the first *Brahmasthanam* temple in Kodungallur. Since that time, Amma has consecrated more than twelve new temples throughout India in her effort to re-establish the Vedic truths and moral order of the Indian culture.²³ In 1997, Amma had challenged traditional Hinduism by allowing priestesses to take charge of two of her temples, although a number of Hindu priests and scholarly pundits voiced opposition. She consecrated a number of new temples and empowered her women renunciates to study and become *pujarinis*, or priestesses.²⁴ In so doing Amma, herself hailing from the fishermen caste, has given a clarion call to Hindu women to awake from the degrading caste hierarchy bound Hindu orthodoxy.

It is claimed that "Although Amma is re-establishing the Vedic tradition in India, she is not trying to make converts out of those who come to her. She honours and blesses all traditions. Hence people from numerous religious traditions have gone to

single day, sitting sometimes for over 20 hours. Worldwide, Amritanandamayi is said to have hugged at least 30 million people in the past 30 years. Recently, an outbreak of measles was signalled in Australia by the West Australian Department of Health and is reported to have been spread by Amritanandamayi and her followers largely due to her practice of hugging followers which the Ashram authorities denied. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mata_Amritanandamayi, downloaded on 18-08-06.

²² Amritaswarupananda, *From Amma's Heart*, 94.

²³ Cornell, *Amma*, 104.

²⁴ Women have been offering Vedic sacrifices on festivals since the time of Upasani Baba, the principal disciple of Shridi Sai Baba. Because of this and the training given to the nuns, Upasani Baba has been viewed by some as the restorer of Hindu women to a place of dignity in the ritual and intellectual life of Hinduism, lost to them since the Vedic Age. With Upasani Baba and "Mata" Godavari as their preceptors, a number of young women entered the ashram as nuns or *Kanyas* and offered themselves entirely to the devotional life.

her to receive her blessing of unconditional love."²⁵ However, as Paramthottu observes, seemingly this movement enjoys political patronage from prominent Hindu political parties and their leaders to the mixing up of religion and politics to certain ends.²⁶

Religious Movements, Vedanta and the Gurus

It is Vedanta the perennial philosophy which provides the basis for Hindu religion, the oldest of the living religions in the world today. The religious movements attempt to recapture this perennial spirit and make Hinduism a living reality for the modern man. According to the dominant Hindu belief Vedanta, there is only one impersonal God called Brahman. Hence the world we live in, according to Hinduism is ultimately an appearance (*maya*), having no ultimate value. Nevertheless, the Hindu gurus claim to offer people transcendence and meaning to life, which Western materialism has cruelly denied them.²⁷

The ancient teaching was given impetus in 1893 when the first World Parliament of Religions was held in Chicago. As Robertson observes Swami Vivekananda came to represent India, but particularly to introduce the Vedantic teaching to the West. He made many converts and established numerous centres for the study of philosophic Hinduism.²⁸ Ever since organizations such as Transcendental Meditation, Divine Light Mission, Hare Krishna Movement have proliferated. Besides these, self-styled swamis and gurus maintain their own centres of Vedantic teaching.

In modern times, Sai Baba, Amritanandamayi, Ravi Sankar and others carry on with legacy of Vedantic teaching. Sai Baba believes in *Nirguna* (attributeless) Brahman. The *Nirguna* has *Saguna* (with qualities) aspect only as a help to those who are spiritually immature to reach the *Nirguna* Brahman. Only the *Nirguna* Brahman is real and the world which is unreal is superimposed on Brahman. Man is essentially of divine nature. Salvation is the merger of the self (*atman*) with the Brahman. Sai has

²⁵ Cornell, *Amma* 110.

²⁶ Paramthottu, "Mata Amrtanadamayi: An Embodiment of the 'Embracing' Sainthood," 360.

²⁷ Ankerberg & Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 221. In truth, however, both Hinduism and materialism end in exactly the same place: nihilism. Hinduism also teaches that Brahman exists 'beneath' this illusory universe and, thus, resides in the material creation, including man. This explains why the goal of Hinduism is to go inward, into one's consciousness, to mystically discover that one's true nature is one essence with God, or Brahman.

²⁸ Robertson., *What the Cults Believe*, 136.

said "I am God and you are also God. There is latent divinity in us. The only difference is that you and I are gods and you do not know it."²⁹ If one is already god, then to seek a god outside oneself may sound foolish and could be spiritually destructive.

Sai Baba has established a *Vedapathashala* to teach Sanskrit Scriptures along with the study of Indian spirituality and cultures. He organises many festivals like Gurupurnima and Sai Birthday celebrations in his Aharam. Sai claims to be an *avatar*. Thursday is a special day for Sai worship. Devotees praise and worship him with Sai *Bhajans*. The question, if Sai believes in the *Nirguna* Brahman, the attributeless real beyond comprehension and worship, how can he permit himself to be worshipped? remains unanswered. He has the central command and he permits the idolization. Hence, for tens of millions of people around the globe he is an object of worship as the embodiment of the almighty in spite of being an ordinary mortal.

Like the neo-vedantin Swami Vivekananda, Sri Sri Ravi Sankar wants to bring all the religious traditions together, by using traditional vedic values to contribute to the spiritual awakening of the world, especially the West. Avdeeff considers this project of globalization as a project of "Vedantisation" of the world religious traditions.³⁰ In India, Ravi Sankar comes across really well in the media and appears regularly on the Hindu religious channel *Samskar*, and is omnipresent in the high circulation dailies. He claims a large following worldwide and has a politically backed powerful movement in India today.

Sri Ravi Sankar insists that people must gather as often as possible to do *satsang*. During *satsang* people sing *bhajans* directed to gods and also to the Guru himself. The main expression of *bhakti* in the Ravi Sankar movement, remains the devotion to the Guru. The master teaches the surrender to God, but he also teaches the surrender to himself. On occasions like Guru *Jayanti* (birth anniversary) the devotees clearly identify Sri Ravi Sankar with Lord Krishna. Moreover, during the Guru *Purnima* devotees worship Sri Ravi Sankar. For many devotees he is believed to be an embodiment of divine love. He is frequently presented as "as compassionate as

²⁹ Sathya Sai Baba, *Sathyam Shivam Sundaram*, 112.

³⁰ Avdeeff, "Sri Sri Ravi Sankar and the Art of Spreading Awareness over the World," 335.

Jesus, as playful as Lord Krishna and as erudite as Adi Sankara.”³¹ All these forms of *bhakti* ultimately serve the cult of the Guru in the Art of Living.

Now Amma, “Holy Mother,” is considered by her devotees as a divine being. In her biography one comes across the following statement about herself: “Having attained perfect control over the mind, I found that I could identify myself with any aspect of the Divine which I chose by my own will. Suddenly I realized that I myself am Devi.”³² Some of her expressions point to her identification with the Divine. “... to Amma there is nothing but God, the Paramatman. The Atman alone is. Amma sees everything as part of the whole, as an extension of her own self.”³³ In her dual manifestations of Krishna *bhava* and Devi *bhava* she assumes the divinity of Lord Krishna as supreme self and realizes herself, the Universal Mother as *avatara* of Devi commanding worship by the devotees.

History is witness to the tradition of godmen claiming to be gods and hence considering themselves to be worshipful beings. The dethroned leader of the Divine Light Mission Sri Balyogeshwar (Guru Maharaj Ji) known as the “Perfect Master” claimed that he was Jesus Christ come again and Krishna reincarnated. Millions believed him and surrendered their minds to him and considered him to be God. In spite of his denunciations of traditional philosophy, religion, morality and ideals, there are tens of thousands, who have accepted Rajneesh as Bhagavan (God).³⁴ They consider him not as a person but the divinity personified. As an Enlightened One, he is one with Infinity, the Totality.

The process of deification and worship is a reality in the case of most contemporary gurus. However, it is said of Ramana Maharshi of Arunachala, a vedantin of high spiritual ecstasy and enlightenment, that he never allowed anybody to treat him as a special person and worship him. Sri Ramana, widely admired as a ‘realised Self’, taught that God and Self are synonyms for the immanent reality which is discovered by Self-realisation. Thus realisation of the Self is realisation of God. The realisation is not an experience of God, rather it is an understanding that one is God.³⁵ Self is the

³¹ Avdeeff, “Sri Sri Ravi Sankar and the Art of Spreading Awareness over the World,” 332.

³² Amritaswarupananda, *Mata Amritanandamayi*, 143.

³³ Amritaswarupananda, *Awaken Children*, 77.

³⁴ Magalwadi, *The World of Gurus*, 143.

³⁵ Godman, ed., *Be as You Are*, 193.

guru.³⁶ Because one identifies himself with the body, he thinks that the guru is also a body. With the disappearance of this sense of duality, ignorance is removed and one achieves Self-realisation.³⁷ He claimed that from the standpoint of the Self, there is no birth or death, no heaven or hell, and no reincarnation.³⁸ For eternity is in the 'now.'

The claim to be an incarnation of Rama, Krishna or any other deity by the gurus seem to be inconsistent with the Vedanta ideal. The gurus who believe in the oneness of all reality become inconsistent with their teaching and make no sense in the monistic philosophy. In spite of all inconsistencies in their teachings, today Gurus have become popular everywhere as a worldwide force to be reckoned with. Millions of people, young and old, rich and poor, illiterate and sophisticated, bow before them believing in them completely and following their footsteps faithfully. As Magalwadi observes, the popularity of gurus symbolizes two things both in the East and in the West: first, a resurgence of the perennial quest of man and second, a struggle for new form of culture. He identifies it as a struggle for cultural independence in India and as a struggle for a counter culture in the West.³⁹

What the new religious movements in effect are achieving through the rediscovery of Vedanta is the modernization of Hinduism. Most have tended to emphasize conduct or experience over scriptural authority, and to de-emphasize caste and the ritual inferiority of the female. In fact, the new religious movements have induced an upward revision of the status of women. The Hare Krishna Movement tends to be more conservative in this respect while the neo-*Sannyasa* of Rajneesh is very liberal, and in the sect of Brahmakumaris women are considered spiritually superior to men. All these have had the effect of making Hinduism a missionary religion in effect, and most have shown increasing social concern. This evangelistic aspect which was less marked in the pre-independence movements seems to have become the trademark today. Whereas the pre-independence new religious movements were concerned with preventing conversions from Hinduism, many of the post-independence religious movements are concerned with promoting conversions to it, especially from the

³⁶ Godman, *Be as You Are*, 91.

³⁷ Godman, *Be as You Are*, 95.

³⁸ Godman, *Be as You Are*, 186.

³⁹ Magalwadi, *The World of Gurus*, 5.

West.⁴⁰ Meanwhile the inland conversions under the patronage of some of these movements through their political wings are very much active.

Conclusion

In general, the new Religious movements are patronized essentially by the urban middle classes, both lower and upper. Although their membership is not restricted to this class, the bulk of followers do belong to it. The following in most cases is pan-Indian and cuts across regional lines. Many of the new religious movements have made a greater impact in establishing contact beyond India in some way and some have done so in a major way. Movements like Hare Krishna, The Divine Light Mission and the Transcendental Meditation and others have got established in Europe and America and operate from the West. Such internationalization has had a profound effect on the Hindu world view, in the sense that it has speeded up the process of transformation of Hinduism from an ethnic into a universalistic religion.

As a result of interaction with the West, many of the movements themselves seem to respond to and transmit what is called 'demonstration effect' by economists, namely, the imitation of the West in matters of both consumption and production.⁴¹ Catering to the Western and American public, some of these movements turn out to be thriving commercial centres of certain religious leaders.

Similarly, most of the new movements have a major social service component which finds expression in the setting up of schools and colleges. The Sai Baba and Mata Amritanandamayi movements are very strong in this respect. Amrita is becoming a known name in the field of education and medical care. The institutionalization helps dominate or influence the political scene and adopt politico-legal measures such as laws to deny the privileges due to the lower classes to stop them from attraction and conversion to other religions.

The way religious reform movements in India are organised owe much to the impact of European missionary movements. There was a running ballet between Christian Missions and Indian religions in the nineteenth century and to meet this challenge, exponents of Indian religions appropriated much of the style of their militant

⁴⁰ Kinsley, *Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective*, 23.

⁴¹ Kindleberger, *Economic Development*, 140-2.

ideology and their embattled missionary organizations. But, in a more positive way, they also began to imitate the corporate life of Christianity, its community prayer, its monasticism and also some of its religiosity, its concepts of sin, guilt, the need for repentance and grace. It can, of course, be argued that such mimesis was a sign of insecurity and that out of this defensiveness sprang modern Hindu fundamentalism.⁴²

As evident, most of the post-independence new religious movements had their function, answering to the existential needs of people. The need of the period was to make Hinduism relevant and palatable to the educated Hindus and to make Hinduism a living religion. These movements did fulfil this function. Consequently, this diminished the attraction to other religions especially Christianity, and gradually arrested the process of conversion among the elitist and educated groups and the high caste who absorbed the transacted Hinduism.⁴³ These movements express the collective and mental production of a group often under the leadership of the charismatic gurus. They articulate most clearly the efforts of a collective subject to cope with or to transcend its environment. In the process they have achieved a high state of appeal especially with regard to the revival of Hinduism from within and in presenting it as universal religion for all times rooted in the perennial philosophy of Vedanta. These religious movements are, hence, expressions of a revived socio-religious consciousness of the Indian psyche.

⁴² Copley, *A Study in Religious Leadership and Cultism*, 9.

⁴³ Ambrose, "Hindu Religious Movements," 372.

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