

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 9 November 2018



The Hugging Guru: Amma and Transnationalism

Podcast with **Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger** (12 November 2018).

Interviewed by **Sammy Bishop**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/the-hugging-guru-amma-and-transnationalism/>

Sammy Bishop (SB): Hello. I'm [Sammy Bishop](#). I'm here at the EASR conference in Bern. I am here with [Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger](#), who is Associate Professor at Aarhus University. So, thank you very much for joining us.

Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger (MQF): Thank you for allowing me to come here and talk about my subject matter.

SB: How is your conference going so far?

MQF: Oh, Great! There's a lot of good panels and good keynotes. And I think you can see how religion, and the way that we are talking about religion, is changing – and that's a really good thing.

SB: *Ok. So your current research is focussing on [Amma](#), the hugging guru?*

MQF: Sure, yes.

SB: *So for those people who aren't so familiar with it, could you just tell us a bit about who Amma is?*

MQF: Yes. She's a transnational guru. She was born, in 1953, in Kerala, which is in South India. And she is from the fisherman class, a low-caste Hindu family. And she grew up and she had . . . This is very typical, that you look on her story in a religious-centred way. And she has some special abilities all the way. She did things all the way back to when she was about 9 years old. And this has just been developing. So you can talk about her going from being a very local girl with special abilities, becoming – what they say within the Hindu tradition – a kind of a [Shakti](#) representative, meaning that

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she has some kind of special female energy which is related the goddesses, which can incarnate in people. And from that she becomes a local guru you can go to and ask questions. But also – and this is the main thing about her – she also gives healing hugs. And from there, you know, it developed, she developed, the devotees around her became more, until she's also became a guru for Western devotees. And that is where we are now. And what the organisation around her, called [MAM](#) writes on the [webpage](#) – please look into that it's a really interesting read – she has given 35 million hugs all around the world. So what is interesting is that she's appealing both to European Americans, she still appeals to local Hindus as well, and she also appeals to middle-class Hindus from all over India – and even Indians living in diaspora. So she's a trans-local, transnational, global guru of today.

SB: *And when it comes to these different groups of devotees, what's the main appeal? Is there a different appeal for different groups? And does she pitch her message differently?*

MQF: Yes. It's – and this is what we always answer as researchers – it's a both/and! So in one way she is saying the same things, but the ears that hear differ. So I think that what she says is translated and interpreted in different ways, if you look at local Indians, more transnational Indians and European American devotees. And that is what is interesting, that she can say something that in some ways goes into the mind or the brain, and the heart, to devotees from all over the world. And what I think – and this is one of my theses, or hyper-theses – is that she is balancing between being very traditional [Bhakti](#) guru, where she has a special devotionalism related to her And then she has a kind of authenticity, you know? It's very open how you can see she is an Indian guru. And on the other hand she has universal messages. **(5:00)** And also that she's a woman – I think that's important. And she has this idea that she, herself, is incarnating a message. She is incarnating what she thinks is the main way of understanding religion, namely love, she says. “Religion is love, my religion is love.” And she thinks that she should be acting accordingly. So that's why she also gives these hugs which should heal both the person that she heals, but – and this is very important in relation to the way we understand the world today – she will also heal the world which is “bleeding”, as she says. So she also has this kind-of very universal message that appeals to everyone. And when we are talking about this conference, you can hear how many who are referring to how climate changes, the [Anthropocene](#) – that it is the human beings in the world who are the main reason why the climate changes are so rapidly going the wrong way. And she is talking into that kind of discourse – which everybody thinks is important.

SB: *Yes. And you mentioned briefly, there, the gendered nature of her message, and the name Amma obviously meaning mother. Can you say a bit more about that, maybe particularly regarding the*

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climate change aspect, as well?

MQF: Yes. You can talk about this being a female . . . or representative of a kind-of female energy, on different levels. You can talk about it in relation to a deity worship, a goddess worship where the goddess is incarnated in that person in the world: someone thinks she is like that, and then she is a deity, and then they called her *Devi Amritanandamayi*, which is her name. And sometimes she's *Mata* – mother – which . . . devotees I've interviewed have said, “She is like a mother to us.” You know? And she talks about her devotees as her children that she wants to take care of. And that is, you know, what you can do being a female. In another perspective she's also related to mother earth, you know: that, being a female, she is kind of entangled in the understanding of the earth as a mother – which is the main reason for her life on earth – and, on the other hand, is also a mother who is bleeding. So she can be inscribed in different ways of understanding what a female, or the female, can do in relation to . . . also, to appealing to people in another way than if it was a male.

SB: *And just thinking about her representing different things, as well, in this very kind of international span that she has: you mentioned, in your presentation yesterday, how she's been representing Hinduism at the UN. Could you say a bit more about that?*

MQF: Sure. Yes. It was back in 2010 when she was invited to the United Nations. And maybe she didn't play the major role there, but she was invited and there was a speech that she created that gave her time to come and represent Hinduism there. And there was a man, he was the representative for public and private partnership in New York. And in the end of his talk he said, “What you do brings happiness to people. You are truly a saint.” And this is interesting, because he's using the notion and conception of saint, which has Christian connotations. **(10:00)** So she, in that way, she was also inscribed in Christian, or a more universal understanding of her. She can be part of all kinds of denominations and relations to the world.

SB: *So, taking it down to your current research at the moment: as I understand it, it's been on her ashram in Kerala. So could you tell us a bit about the groups of people who are there and what goes on there?*

MQF: Yes. Kerala, her *ashram* in Kerala is called [Amritapuri](#), and I visited it for the first time all the way back in 2006- 2007, when I did fieldwork in Kerala about goddess worship. And I thought, “I need to go there!” And I was kind-of struck by the way it was organised, because it was organised by European American devotees. And I was kind-of “Well,” you know, “Is it a new way of colonising –

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not the land, but the tradition?” And I went to have a hug. I needed to see what she was doing. I didn’t feel that much, I must admit! But then I had to take a kind of token. You take a token and you queue up. And I was sent to queue up. There were two queues: one for the Indians and one for European Americans. And you think, “No! We can’t do it like this!” But it seems like the Indians actually didn’t mind. And what I saw was, also, seeing how she was doing very big [darshans](#) where 40,000 people, at least, came from all through India. And I saw how the European American devotees were organising everything. And they were sitting in front in white gowns, when all the different Hindus were sitting in the back. But, you know, and then I was thinking about, “How come it is like that? Is it a good or bad thing for the traditions of India?” And what I can see today is that this kind of translation – the European American devotees are trying to translate the local Indian tradition to a more global one – this is now appealing to the growing Indian middle-class in India, which is really interesting. And it has not only to do with guru worship or guruism, but it also has to do with the relationship between what we can call . . . it’s wrong to call it between East and West. And what you can see is that it’s an example of this dynamic: how I think it’s very important that you understand religion not as rooted in one context, but that we follow its route around the world. And I think it’s [Clifford](#) who says that you look at not roots, but routes – you know, how it’s travelling. And in the travelling the tradition is changing. But what is interesting, when it comes to the globalised world, these kind of changes are not only good for . . . not only a way that devotees in European countries understand the tradition, but now, also, because this translation of the tradition is turning back to India. And suddenly, middle-class Indians – Hindus, who are in many ways secularised and feel disconnected from the tradition that they grew up in – get reconnected to the Hindu tradition again. So this is interesting, I think. And it’s a new way of looking at how ideas, which are circulating very quickly, are translated in such a way that the appeal is wider than you believe it would be, thinking from a first order perspective.(15:00) And I think that’s interesting. And I also did a fieldwork in Mauritius among Hindus there. You know, in Mauritius, Hindu’s are a majority, but they also, in many ways, are secularised – understood as making a compartmentalisation between being religious. And in other ways they are very much secularised. And I think *Amma* was visiting for the first time in 1987. And a lot of people suddenly understood the tradition that they didn’t understand any longer, through her way of . . . And also, the European and American devotees who were travelling along with her, they were kind of reconnected to the Hindu tradition again. So this is, you know, a way of understanding this kind of entanglement of different ways of translating or understanding religion. And it’s a crucial example of religion as context-related but also a very dynamic phenomenon.

SB: *And when it comes to European and American devotees having a great influence in the*

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organisation, do you find certain people kind-of laying claims to the tradition, and other people critiquing the involvement of these Western devotees as well?

MQF: Yes, of course you'll find someone who thinks that we need to take the tradition back to the Indian roots again. Or some conservative Hindus think that she is too inclusive. And some are criticising the way that she is dealing with some of her right-hand people who are representing the MAM tradition, when they are doing things which is – in their perspective – not part of the Hindu tradition. So what you'll see . . . and it's the same when some Hindus think, or are arguing, that we need to get yoga back to the Hindu or Indian tradition again. So, you will always see that, you know, when things are changing someone wants it to stop. And they want to root it back in a tradition which can also be difficult to define. So you see this kind of . . . the way people want to get hold of it again and not make it open for the whole world.

SB: *Yes. It seem that a lot of the discourses around it are fairly similar to the ones that happen around yoga, as well. Do you find it helpful comparing the two?*

MQF: Well, yes you can do that. But the difference between them is that Amma is a guru, she's a person, and yoga is a phenomenon. And so I mean it's easier to get hold of, or grab onto, the messages of a person who's still alive, than get a hold on yoga which has been changing since it was And people even don't know when it started. Should we go back all the way to pre-*Vedic* tradition when it comes to yoga? Or should we kind-of place it in the *Upanishadic* tradition? And things like that. So, I mean, here you can actually take her messages and you can try to decipher it and try to criticise it because it's there. (20:00) And yoga's a [floating signifier](#).

SB: *Yes. Are there are certain ways in which Amma was able to claim authority as a guru?*

MQF: Yes. And I think that's very important as well. So it's good that you asked me that question. Because on the one hand, she has this kind of universal message. On the other hand, she's very much inscribed in Hindu guruism, in *Bhakti* devotionism, and she also understands herself as a *karma yogi* – as a *yogi* who acting in the world. So I mean, in one perspective she's inclusive, in another perspective she's also exclusive. And that, I think – this kind of balancing between inclusivism and exclusivism – makes her so appealing both for Indians and also for Europeans and American devotees. And in relation to that, I think it's so interesting to see You know, I've been interviewing devotees especially in Denmark where I'm from. And they are telling me how they are really trying to stick to the Indian tradition. So in some ways, and understand me correctly, in some ways they are trying to be

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kind-of more traditional than a lot of Hindus are, living in India or around Persia. They are telling me they would like to learn some mantras in Sanskrit; they are having a [guru purnima](#), where they have a special day where they are devoted to their guru, which they do in the month of June, everywhere. And I was participating in one of these *guru purnimas*, and they were very anxious to do the [puja](#) in the right manner. And because I was there, they were kind-of, you know, “Did we do it the right way? Or should we do it like that with flowers?” And things like that. So I mean that is also interesting, right? So . . . that she's never changing her behaviour as being an Indian guru I think is important, as well. And it's appealing to America European devotees.

SB: *Just to change the topic slightly: you raised the idea, there, of your presence as a researcher kind-of affecting the behaviour of devotees slightly, as well. So, talking about research methods, were there certain problems that you came up against? Could you say a bit more about that?*

MQF: Yes. It's always difficult just to be a fly on the wall when you are there. And when you have presented yourself as being a researcher and not an *Amma* devotee, people are very much concerned about “How do we, then, represent the tradition that you want to write about?” And also, you know, “In what way will you . . . Are you having a critical point of departure, or do you want to kind-of do it in a way that could promote our tradition?” And I think it's very important, as a researcher, that you tell them, you know, the reason for being there. And also I think it's very important that when you write, you write the things in relation to being a researcher. And it has to do with the big discussion: [emic or etic](#)? Or also, the big discussion around this kind-of phenomenological relation to the tradition, which I know a lot of anthropologists think is important: that you can't do research on something that you haven't kind-of been part of yourself. I think it's important. And people could criticise that. And I try to stand three steps behind what I'm actually doing. (25:00) And I think people are accepting that. I might not get all the answers that a person who will be part of the *Amma* group. But I get some other answers. And I put it into . . . And I think that's important, too – and that's the way I'm brought up, in academia – that you have some kind of theoretical point of departure when looking at empirical phenomenon. And I'll always do that. And it can give some backlash, but as long as you as researcher are very clear in your mind in the way you're writing, and also towards the one you are going forward in relation to, I think you do what you can do. Someone will disagree with that, but I think from my perspective, it's important.

SB: *So, going forwards as well, where do you see your research going in the future?*

MQF: Well, I think it will go in a different direction. I've always been interested in Hinduism

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diaspora. And the reason for being interested in that field, particularly, is firstly to see how religion is changing in relation to the social and cultural context, but also because Hinduism is so difficult to define. And I'm not going to tell you. But I'll just say it anyway, that I've promised my students I will retire if I get to know what I'm actually an expert in!

SB: (Laughs)

MQF: But I think it's very important that Hindus in diaspora are trying to put some words on what is the Hindu tradition. Being away from where the tradition has been part of culture for ages, suddenly you try to figure out, you know, what do we want to keep? And what do we want to leave behind? And I think that's interesting both in relation to Hinduism, but also in relation to understanding religion as a dynamic phenomenon. So my research will keep on trying to look on Hinduism diaspora but also I've done a book with one of my colleagues called *Eastspirit* about how ideals, concepts, notions are circulating between what we call East and West. And what I think is so interesting is to see also how this is changing the way that Europeans are looking on their lives in the world, but in a way that . . . I have also written an article where I'm not talking about the process of Easternisation of the West, but what I'm trying to argue for a new concept called the "Weasternisation", meaning that the Eastern concept and notions are translated in a Western way, so they give meaning also in Western countries. And I've also been researching, and I would like to do a bit more about it, about how Indian or Hindu tropes are getting new meanings in a European context. Especially, as an example, you can talk about *karma*, which in many ways in European context is a kind of a feel-good notion. And if you compare what *karma* actually means in India, it has totally changed. Also, in relation to the understanding of reincarnation as "another go" – a new possibility – I think that's interesting too. And you can't say that the way you understand reincarnation or *karma* is wrong. It's just embedded in a new European context, which makes it possible for the concept to change. So I think that's really interesting. (30:00) And I think that's so important. But also, in the discussion of how notions from Hinduism and Buddhism . . . it's not the kind-of worldviews "coming to Europe", it's not kind-of "now it is taking over another worldview". It is more like something . . . a part of a new way of understanding yourself. So it's not that you have to choose between your old worldview and the Eastern one. But you can combine it. And I think it's interesting how come that concepts from India . . . it's much easier to be entangled, or be kind-of a floating signifier that could be rooted in a Western tradition as well. So that's some of the things I would like to work on. And there's a lot of things to do, so I hope someone else will take up these ideas!

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SB: *Yes, I look forward to seeing that as well. Marianne – thank you so much for your time.*

MQF: Thank you for allowing me to talk a little about something I'm really interested in, in a research perspective.

SB: *Thank you.*

If you spot any errors in this transcription, please let us know at editors@religiousstudiesproject.com. If you would be willing to help with transcribing the Religious Studies Project archive, or know of any sources of funding for the broader [transcription project](#), please get in touch. Thanks for reading.

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