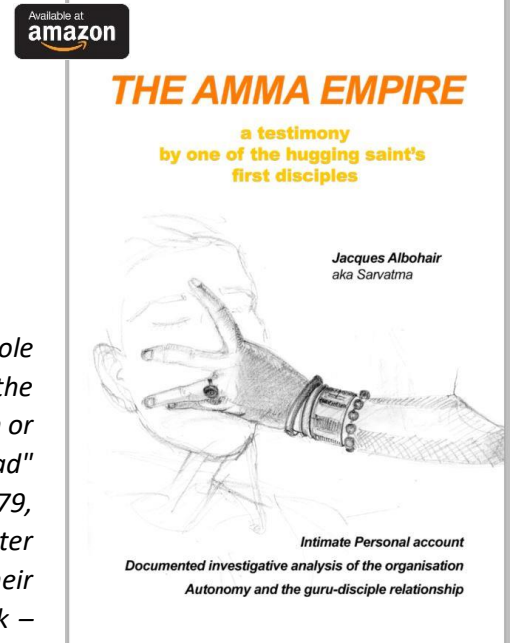


## The biography, a critical review

From the book "The Amma Empire", ch. III.9

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*It is important to understand the foundation on which the whole is based: the character, the message, the organisation, the mission as also if and when there is a shift or superimposition or even blurring between reality and myth. So, I decided to "read" the biography. Indeed, having come to A. in the spring of 1979, then having left to spread the good word in Europe in winter 1984, I am not one of those who came to her, who built their faith or remained because of her history, because of a book – since it was published in English four years after my departure to Europe. In retrospect, I must admit that I am quite disturbed by what I finally read, but I better understand the origin of the excesses of the movement. It is this critical review and reinterpretation that I will try to express here, following the text line by line, without adding any fact or incident.*



The original version was written by Prof. M. Ramakrishnan Nair in Malayalam in 1986. It was almost entirely narrated by A., recorded on cassette tapes, and transcribed. The first English version, written by Balu was largely inspired by the original and was published two years later in 1988. It should be noted that the biography has undergone many subsequent modifications according to the political needs of the organisation - yes, like the powerful people who are rewriting history. Indeed, after my departure in 1993, I was eliminated from successive versions, then reinstated in a minimalist and derogatory manner. Gail had to undergo the same vicissitudes after her departure in 1999 and especially after the publication of her book in 2013. Again, if one goes by the rumours, in the 2012 edition, the same thing happened for Chandru, Pai, myself (Ganga) and Manju, in which we were completely removed. The version currently available to me at the time of writing is from 2011. I do not appear as her former European representative, the one who founded her mission in Europe, having led her satsangs and travelling to this end up to 10,000 kms per month, the organiser of her European tours until 1993, the founder of her first European centre on the French-Swiss-German border, her translator-interpreter and her driver (between the various cities of Europe when she was not flying) during her visits. If such an omission was not outrageous, it would be funny.

A press article was published in the newspaper "Madhyamam" on April 13, 2014 concerning, among other things, these changes including an interview with the biographer professor. The latter was recorded saying that "*a biography [of A.] without Gayatri [Gail] would make no sense*".

Before starting this analysis, I would like to repeat what A. herself said of Gayatri in the original version of the bio. The professor, the very first biographer, affirms that these quotes were dictated to him verbatim:

- "A. predicted [to Chandru] that the person who was going to take care of her was in Tiruvannamalai."
- "Gayatri asked A. for permission to live with her. A. replied that we will die together."
- "A person like Gayatri comes only once in a millennium. She does not need to meditate. She will achieve her [spiritual] goal."
- "She is a perfect sannyāsini (nun)".
- "Her mind is always fixed on A.. Gayatri knows what A. is thinking."
- "A. has 1000 tongues to speak of Gayatri" (translation: has nothing but praise).

From the outset, let us say it bluntly, this biography is a frightening concentrate of indigestible bigotry in which the use of exaggeration, emphasis, excess, and overkill not only makes the story difficult to read, but I would also like to say, almost hard to swallow. The biographer inexorably hammers a narrative at the cost of consistency. But as we will see, thanks to the cocktail of belief and devotion, anything is possible. Starting with the preface, the author warns that the great master, the mystic was born in full consciousness. On this basis, there is nothing more to read, except to be convinced of it again and again. The preface specifies straight away that "*Having undergone or displayed (we know not which) rigorous sadhana (spiritual discipline)*" (...) "*without the guidance of a Guru*", (...) "*at the age of 21, she outwardly manifested her state of God-Realisation*".

For those who come to the ashram today, to imagine what the fishing village was like in 1978 and before, will require an insurmountable effort of imagination, as it has become so invaded and spoiled by buildings and high-rise apartment blocks. Let us just say that it was often dark (under the dense foliage of the coconut grove), filthy and miserable. The houses, when they were solid, were primitive: they were basically constituted of bare walls and a tiled roof without ceiling or insulation. The poor lived in huts of woven palm leaves. The non-constructed footpaths were narrow and muddy. The author, for his part (and here I am referring now to the English version), describes the village as having sanctity and greatness. He refers to a legend which he recounts over four pages and ends by saying: "*Is it a wonder then that this sacred place has again become centre stage for a divine drama?*"

He presents the family as pious, devout, and righteous and indicates that many pious souls and exemplary devotees of God were born in this family. To show how pious A.'s father was, he specifies that, because of his identification with god, he once fainted on stage during a theatrical performance of Kṛiṣṇa. The mother is also bestowed with her title of nobility: the locals called her the *brahmana lady* because she was so pious. It also appears that when she broke her regular fasts, the coconut trees dropped nuts so she could quench her thirst. Magical! In true Bollywood kitsch style, he has a random monk arriving and leaving the premises in a rapturous laughter, predicting that many monks will achieve liberation in this place which will become a holy place, that many ascetics (it must have been in subtle forms?) are already meditating there, and many Mahatmas have been buried there. I know of nothing to corroborate this claim.

The scene being set, the child could make her appearance. The parents had visions during the pregnancy of her mother, who, moreover, dreamed that she was going to give birth to Kṛiṣṇa. Sudhamani was therefore born dark grey-blue (like Kṛiṣṇa, the colour of clouds before the storm), which was surprising given the light skin colour of the rest of the family. They believed it was an illness and were advised not to wash her for six months. Uh..., is there a doctor on board? Can you imagine a baby unwashed for 180 days? (Kṛiṣṇa or disease? Obviously, they were not sure, and this doubt will

punctuate the story throughout.) In short, the parents felt only aversion for this child whom they neglected, because of her skin colour. Thus, pious and righteous, perhaps, but not particularly clever or empathetic. Never mind, Sudhamani began to walk from one day to the next at six months of age, without going through the awkward learning process of ordinary people and began to speak at the same time. At two she recited prayers, at four she sang, and at five, with such devotional fervour for the god Kṛiṣṇa that she was often absorbed and absent. First suspicions of psychological disorders on the part of the parents who, let us remember, neglected the child for whom they felt only aversion. In the process, to make room in the house, they built a small room along the cowshed, and put her up there. Great move for a six-year-old girl one does not like, who is disconnecting herself and that one is already losing. Her mother and older brother are against her because of her eccentric behaviour. Moreover, at seven, her mental absences are more frequent and more intense. One day, her mother sees her dancing "in bliss" but finds that she could benefit from dance lessons. She got it all. The biographer makes her swim in the Ocean of Pure Love and Bliss, all in capital letters. However, this is not the opinion of the villagers who notice that she is constantly in tears.

Her father, relentless inseminator, continued to impregnate his wife when she was already in very poor condition. Indeed, after six children, she was no longer able to take care of the household, yet he inflicted seven more on her. Thirteen pregnancies in all including five deaths. After Sudhamani, who was the third oldest child alive, she had five more pregnancies of which all children survived. It is important to specify this for the context which will follow. Pious and fair from head to toe, the fellow. As a result, all the household chores fell to Sudhamani, supposedly considered the "family servant". Seen how she was treated – as long as the facts related are true – I would find "slave" more appropriate. The kid had to interrupt her education when she was ten years old, after the fourth grade, because she was working from 3 a.m. to 11 p.m. At that age, four hours of sleep when you have exhausted yourself at work the remaining twenty hours, is criminally insufficient: developing healthily, physically, emotionally, and psychically under such conditions is simply impossible, with or without god. Even disabled by her bad health, her mother still had enough energy to viciously bully her. She terrorised and punished her for the smallest mistakes, chastised and tortured her mercilessly (verbatim) – remember, pious and righteous. That her daughter was stealing to feed the needy made her furious. But the worst was that dark complexion: insurmountable and the foundation of her aversion. As a result, Sudhamani said to her: "*I am not your daughter! I must be your daughter-in-law!*", at ten years old... In fact, the child began to consider the ocean as her real mother and took refuge in madness, sorry, devotion. We learn that in such devotion her mind "*soared to the heights of divinity.*" Personally, I do not know what that means, but the biographer seems to know his way around such states. Unfortunately, belief, in principle, does not recognise a limit beyond which the improbable and the unreasonable begins, so for devotees who are convinced in advance, anything is possible.

Then Sudhamani went to work for her aunt for several years. As a result, her mother, the ailing great torturer, had to fend for herself and, obviously, she managed on her own. But somehow that did not make the biographer wonder. When her aunt beats her, Sudhamani is not affected because, having known nothing else, she considers this to be normal behaviour. On the other hand, her vision of the world is naturally particularly negative: "*This world is full of sorrow and suffering. Selfishness reigns supreme. People seek only their own happiness and pleasure.*" This became the foundation of the philosophy of rejection of the world which she later formulated. Meanwhile, when she is not singing, or suffering the agony of separation from her god Kṛiṣṇa, at least twice per page, she cries, sobs, shouts, and calls her Lord. After four years, she is tired of being the abused servant at her aunt's house and, at sixteen, she returns to her mother's to recover her status as persecuted slave. While it would

seem impossible, but her mother had become even more angry and cruel. Charming random example: she was spying on her daughter, and if she caught her chatting with neighbouring girls when she was cutting grass, she would wait for her return and *"hit her with the wooden pestle used for pounding rice"* (imagine a baseball bat, bigger and heavier). When she could not beat her, as she sometimes also did with the machete used to open coconuts (uh..., machete?), she would kick her, and when her daughter dodged her and grabbed her hands, she would bite her – behaviour which Sudhamani will repeat later with Gail, her attendant. All this punctuated by vulgar abuse and death curses (verbatim) – pious and righteous as always, thus. Never mind, the author finds excuses and explains the mother's behaviour by specifying the nature of her devotion: ignorant and formal. For her part, Sudhamani specifies that she considered her mother as her guru. For someone who has not had any (other) guru, it makes one seriously wonder: this child, persecuted and tortured in a despicable and criminal way, had as her only guru this violent, cruel, hysterical, and torturing mother, who disowned her and cursed her because of her skin colour... Sudhamani herself says that her mother taught her *"diligence, devotion and discipline"*. Neither she nor her biographer see the inconsistency. She describes a mother who neglects, rejects, and persecutes her child for the colour of her skin as diligent, devoted and disciplined, while her biographer describes her devotion as ignorant and formal. In any case, this recognition of Sudhamani for the qualities of her unique "guru" cannot bode well for her future role as guru and the fate of her future disciples. The child said [pretended], *"I have never seen my real father and mother"*. In the village, again because of her colour, they joked that she must have been *"purchased in exchange for some paddy husk"* (meaning, she was worth nothing, neglected and ignored).

Her elder brother, Subhagan, a worthy son of his mother, also mistreated her and frequently beat her under futile pretexts. When she visited the neighbours' houses, she realised how much the elders were abandoned and neglected and convinced herself of the transience and the fundamental selfishness of human relationships. When she stole a gold bangle to feed a family on the brink of famine, her father tied her to a tree and beat her bloody. Along with his wife and eldest son, he too could boast of maintaining the dishonour of this unspeakable family. It is easy to understand why the biographer indicates that she was increasingly losing touch with reality, becoming more and more disconnected. The mere thought of Rādhā (Kṛiṣṇa's companion) carried her into ecstasy. On the one hand she reminisced her favourite gods, on the other she identified with them. It became more and more difficult for her to attend her chores, as her lips constantly whispered their sacred names. Her parents forbade her to sing and pray at night after her work and considered her more and more crazy. She never confided in an adult. Finding no validation from them, she turned to the animals and nature and began to talk to them.

She fought with her mother to obtain permission to take sewing lessons at the local parish and managed to follow classes for three years. She would go to the adjacent cemetery to practice embroidery and enjoy the company of the deceased. When she meditated there, she went into ecstasy, just as when she heard the stories of Kṛiṣṇa. She would not sleep and spent her nights crying and sobbing. Her parents tried to marry her several times, but she vigorously opposed it, once even promising that if they got their way, she would kill her husband and return home, which caused her to be even more mistreated. Finding this situation unbearable, she decided to commit suicide by throwing herself in the sea. They were convinced that she had psychological problems. On the rare occasions when she received a colourful garment or wore her sister's silk jacket, they burned them, not without insulting her. As a result, she decided to dress only in old, worn-out, and discarded clothes.

If we are to believe the narrative, it is clear that having suffered continuously since such a tender age, without love, without affection, without validation, by being constantly exploited, abused, beaten, terrorised, insulted and cursed from her youngest age, as she grew older, she built her own world of references and validations, while totally rejecting that of adults. Thus, she turned towards Kṛiṣṇa and her devotion took the place of natural and healthy human love. She did not come out unscathed, as we will see later, which is not surprising. Such systematic and prolonged ill-treatment from an early age could only give way to one or more forms of psychosis. Now the biographer does everything to present these imbalances and deep psychic fractures as spiritual evolution, mystical ascension, and holy madness. Several times he speaks of *mental aberrations*. This is probably a textual translation from Malayalam because such a concept is unknown. He writes that she was "*a lonely traveller in her own world*". Concerning madness versus mysticism, honestly, it is difficult to decide. It is by examining her behaviour over time that we will understand whether it was pure psychosis, a real mystical development, or a mixture of the two. The biographer describes her as "*having attained perfect peace of mind*", "*having found the eternal rest in the supreme*", "*established in pure Being*", among others. When we lift the magical veil of this litany of sacred qualifiers punctuating the story and we observe her behaviour as it is represented in a more neutral way, there is reason to wonder, even to worry, about her balance. Especially since her behaviour becomes even more unsettling as she disconnects more and more from reality.

When she goes to pick leaves for the animals, she sees herself and the children who accompany her as protagonists of Kṛiṣṇa's lifetime. Sometimes she sees Kṛiṣṇa walking beside her, sometimes she identifies with him and wants to destroy all the sacred images. The biographer is relentless and determined to build his narrative. He concludes that she is established in an ocean of pure consciousness and bliss.

She begins to manifest Kṛiṣṇa's bhāva and it is the period of miracles: she must retain her audience. She turns water into milk, milk into candy. The sweet was distributed to a thousand people, yet the pot remained full. Reminds me of something... She levitates lying on a branch. She swallows burning camphor. In short, there was something to suit all tastes and it worked since people began to believe in the divinity of Sudhamani, next to Kṛiṣṇa's. During this time, she heard a voice, that of god of course, which said to her: "*You are one with Me!*". According to the biographer, an astrologer confirms to her that she is a Mahatma. The miracles continue: she makes it rain everywhere except where devotees gather, she kisses a cobra with her tongue, she dances on the beach to fill fishermen's nets, she drinks poisoned milk that has no effect on her, she uses seashells as lamps and the wicks stay lit overnight without oil. Many local detractors did not believe in her miracles, but whatever, in the big picture, this is insignificant. During the Kṛiṣṇa bhāva she announces to her father, among other prophecies, that "*from this day on, the little one is ever pure*". Translation of the prudish expression: she will no longer menstruate monthly<sup>1</sup>. Honestly, what do we care. Considering the youth she lived and what is yet to come, it is neither surprising nor magical that she should suffer from amenorrhea (absence of periods). But here, it is seen as a sign of holiness, not as a disease. Apart from that, as we saw in ch. III.4, she may have been without periods for a while, but while she undeniably regained her health, this element nonetheless remained one of the foundations of the myth.

Her mother respected her during the Kṛiṣṇa bhāvas but persecuted her between the sessions. Her father, a devotee of Kṛiṣṇa, also enjoyed these sessions, while her brother called her schizophrenic.

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<sup>1</sup> Strange that she tells her father, in a society in which this subject is spoken about only among women.

Her mother forbade her to speak with devotees after the bhāvas under the threat of severe correction. One evening when Sudhamani heard a neighbour laughing in front of a friend saying that the bhāvas of this girl were just a form of hysteria and that, marrying her would be enough to calm her down, she ran home and implored Kṛiṣṇa for help. This incident tends to invalidate the author's lyrical qualifiers about the teenage girl's superlative spiritual state. But inconsistencies have no hold on belief.

One realises this, three pages later: now that Sudhamani was firmly established in Kṛiṣṇa consciousness and firmly identified with him, the devotional practice of evolving towards her god had become impossible. During a vision of light in which the goddess appeared, the teenager called out: "*Kṛiṣṇa, the Mother has come! Bring me to her! I want to embrace her!*" She felt Kṛiṣṇa raising her in another world, but the Mother could not be found. This is how the one who, let us remember, was "established in the ocean of bliss", "having reached a perfect state of peace of mind", "resting eternally in the Absolute" and "established in the pure state of Being" felt the intense need to worship the Divine Mother and get involved in spiritual practice leading to her merging with her (according to the text), to realise that divine in the form of the Mother of the universe. Thus, there she went again. Only minds believing beyond reason and deeply imbued with devotion will not see the nonsense of this story. Indeed, if one has realised and integrated the Absolute, the quintessence of the god "x", there is no other way to go, and no one left any more to wish to go through anything, the ego having immersed itself in the Supreme Being. The fact that she wishes to restart her agony of separation towards the god "y", another representation of the Same One, shows that she had not arrived at her destination in the first place like the biography wants us to believe. Moreover, this turn of events suggests that the agony, the heartbreak, the separation, the feeling of abandonment, the supplication, the valley of tears is rather what the adolescent identifies with. Indeed, what is described as her new path, will prove to be even more devastating than the previous one. She resumed her favourite pastime: crying, sobbing, and begging while calling out. She saw the Mother in everything yet at the same time constantly sought her everywhere. Affectionally and psychologically starved by the unspeakable behaviour of her biological mother, she regressed by imagining herself to be a baby crawling on all fours and crying in search of her divine Mother in Mother Nature (that's a lot of mothers). Feeling she was a two-year-old, she went to the neighbour who was breastfeeding her infant to suckle herself. This repeated itself to the point that, the nursing woman eventually had to withdraw when she was feeding her child. Sudhamani no longer slept and spent her nights, obsessed with the Mother of the universe, calling out to her and imploring. As she says herself: "*I never had a guru, nor was I ever initiated by anyone; my only mantra was "Mummy! Mummy!"*" (Amma, in the actual text) Mind-boggling. Coupled with her vision of the guru, it leaves one speechless.

The psychotic behaviour she displayed in her quest for Kṛiṣṇa was now manifested tenfold. We see her, falling into human excrement in the lagoon, biting the goddess and tearing her hair out, grabbing the pestle to give the goddess a beating, not realising she was inflicting all that on herself. We can clearly see here, that alongside the infantile regression, she reproduced the only behaviour she knew in a relationship, here in a self-punitive and self-aggressive form, that of her biological mother towards her, hysterical and violent. The biographer continues to want us to believe his implausible story and testifies that these were highly evolved forms of devotion beyond the comprehension of ordinary people. The family believes she is schizophrenic and continues to abuse her. Unable to bear it any longer, she decides for the second time to commit suicide in the ocean, but upon arriving at the shore, goes into a trance. The villagers, who recognised her "*spiritual splendour and all-embracing love*" (the biographer does not miss an opportunity to drive the point home), have pity on the one who has worked so hard for so long for the family who completely abandons her. Her penance is so intense that

her body becomes extremely hot and she has to cool down in the brackish lagoon. Unpredictably, she either rolls on the ground in fits of laughter, or she bursts into tears and screams. When she sings and calls, she loses control, wails, and rolls on the floor, rips her clothes, then gets up laughing hysterically and starts running in all directions. Sometimes the villagers find her in the mud and pick her up, wash her and dress her. One can sincerely doubt here that it is about any asceticism but let us not disturb the narrative.

Then we are served the Franciscan chapter devoted to animals, to their ability to speak, to understand her better than humans: there is the cow waiting for her to come out of her meditation to give her the udder, from which she will drink directly; then this other cow that walked six kilometres to find her and make her drink. Indeed, when humans give her hot milk, she vomits it, and that, the cows apparently, knew. Parrots sympathise and cry when she cries; the buzzards know that she needs to eat and drop fish next to her which she devours raw; the local cat revolves around her; the dog licks her face to get her out of her discomfort and cries with her; the goat dies on her lap etc. Let us note that what the narrator wants to pass off as magical, corresponds in part to the normal behaviour of animals: cats who like us, turn around us and rub themselves against us, dogs wake us up, empathise with us and imitate us. etc. However, Sudhamani brags: *"When one attains equal vision, even hostile animals become friendly in one's presence"*. That is fine but she was not abandoned in the wild jungle. She was just a young girl surrounded by dogs, cats, and goats in the backyard of her native house under the coconut grove.

The narrator finds another opportunity to try to convince us of the *"level of realisation of the one who swam in the ocean of immortal love"*. Yet at the same time, he again describes her uncontrollable fits of sobs and laughter that only dissipated when she fainted. Not sleeping or eating normally, she sometimes swallows glass and even her own feces. In this state of agony, heartbreak, supplication, incessant flow of tears, suffocation, desire for suicide, she finally experienced the appearance of the goddess. In a song, which relates the experience, she says that the divine light of the Mother merged in her and then proclaims the supreme Truth which she obtained directly from Her lips: *"O Man, merge into your Self!"*. Wow! How commonplace can one get? Her song ends with the fond memory of the Mother's words: *"Oh my darling, come to Me, leaving all other works. You are always Mine."* Following this wonderful experience which should have fulfilled her, the narrator tells us that she developed a strong aversion towards the visible world and began to dig holes in the earth to hide in. As he wrote himself, those who already thought she was crazy, were now totally convinced. The narrative tries to make the devotees believe that someone who would have realised the consciousness of God (as Kṛiṣṇa), who would have merged in the Absolute, who would have reached the state of eternal peace in her lifetime, would have developed again the desire to merge into the consciousness of God (as Devi), engaging in a deeply psychotic yearning, the light of the goddess finally immersing itself in her and bathing in the bliss of the realisation of God, continues to behave psychotically by wanting to hide underground. It does indeed take a lot of (blind) belief and (indiscriminate) devotion to adhere to this magical and incoherent narrative when common sense clearly displays a whole different reality. Despite her so-called realisation of the One in all things, she still finds duality unbearable. Finally, she has this inner call to serve humankind, not without wanting to save it from horrible earthly existence. Even if she suffered atrociously, it must not necessarily be the experience of everyone. Thus, rejecting the world as a whole as the only way to turn to god beyond the world is simply how "she" saw things.

At the end of 1975, she manifested her first Devi bhāva, six months after that of Kṛiṣṇa. The narrator describes bhāva as "mood", but also as a manifestation of her intimate identification with Kṛiṣṇa or

Devi, when for the villagers it was just momentary possession. The way in which the transition occurs is peculiar. When devotees were harassed by villagers during the Kṛiṣṇa bhāva, she stood up with a resounding burst of laughter and, leaving the temple, turned into a Devi, feeling like, in her own words, *"destroying the unrighteous people"*. In the wake of this statement, this is what the narrator calls the incarnation of universal love: *"From now on we will call her the Holy Mother"*. Again, obviously, neither he (nor she) sees this form of inconsistency: destroy, love... Even her "mission order from above" does not hold up: she hears a voice from within telling her among other things, *"Worship Me in the hearts of all beings and relieve them of the sufferings of worldly existence!"* Everyone who has read a few pages of philosophy or spirituality has already heard that 1. worldly existence will always be a source of tribulation and 2. it is not worldly existence that is the source of suffering but attachment, identification. These basic principles do not seem at all clear to Sudhamani nor to her biographer, supposedly trained in philosophy. Moreover, on page 81, in the chapter called "The Real Flute", our postgraduate in philosophy writes: *"Thus Sudhamani became established in the Ocean of Pure Existence and Bliss and attained perfect peace of mind"*. What is pure existence? The etymology of the word existence restricts it to be the opposite of Being. Indeed, on the one hand, *existere* means what emerges, what appears, what is visible in the light, what occurs or what is produced. On the other, *exstare*, means what is outside or out of something. In both cases, existence represents what is objectified by consciousness while the second one points to an exit from Being. Existence is therefore "not" Being and certainly "not" synonymous with Being. When it comes to "sat-chit-ānanda", imperfectly translated into "existence-consciousness-bliss", we should rather speak of Being and Consciousness as two sides of the same coin: "I am, and by this very fact, I am aware of being. I needs nothing other than itself to be aware that it is". Existence has nothing to do with this fundamental concept. Besides, the term existence is also used in opposition to life. It is associated with the burden of existence for example in opposition to the beauty or the learning of life. However one looks at this term, it remains associated with the world and not with Being. This is not the only inconsistency of such kind, but the only one that I will elaborate upon.

We finally come to the beginning of her spiritual mission in the world when she says that, since her experience of the Divine Mother, she could *"see nothing as different from my own formless Self, wherein the entire universe exists as a tiny bubble"*. Strangely, even established in the realisation of God, in the Absolute, or whatever else, she continues the spiritual quest – one wonders "who" practices, for "what", who has remained as ego, as an individual, to express this need? – to demonstrate that all forms of God and Goddesses are ever so many facets of the same non-dual reality. She had supposedly already realised the Absolute in Kṛiṣṇa. Once there, there was in principle nowhere to go and no one to go anywhere. But she had the desire to realise the Devi, and now, to achieve everything else. Imagine someone who is in Bombay and who needs to go to Delhi for an administrative formality. Arrived in Delhi, he said to himself, "Hey, let me go to Delhi from Madras." He goes to Madras and from there takes the train to Delhi. Arrived in Delhi, he says to himself, "Okay, now let me go to Delhi from Calcutta." And so on as many times as you want. If he takes care of his administrative business and paperwork on the first visit, what else should he do? Go home obviously and get on with his life. In my opinion, in our specific case, having lost her documents on the way and forgotten her procedures, she spends her time testing whether one can reach Delhi from cities other than Bombay. Could it be to show that all roads lead to Delhi?

Sudhamani and her biographer attempt by all means possible, despite the chaos and inconsistency of her experiences, to hammer home a supreme realisation which visibly does not correspond to reality. It is undeniable that Sudhamani had spiritual "experiences", but in all modesty, whatever she says and



whatever her biographer claims, she never seems to have come to the end of her journey, which we will understand following his account. While India is a cradle of practical philosophies of unequalled richness making it possible to determine precisely at what stage of spiritual evolution, we find ourselves and at what stage is the one we would like to follow as a master, one cannot simply claim any old thing. Frankly, one has the impression of a constructed narrative. Unfortunately, this is the case with many Indian or indianising gurus: one or a few striking experiences of an aspirant no doubt sincere and intensely devoted to the practice, then a narrative built around it. By this time, her brother has frankly had enough of her mystical-delusional antics. He lures her into a neighbour's house where she finds herself surrounded by boys who threaten her with a knife and want to kill her. In the purest popular theatrical style, the one who brandishes the knife, when he is about to strike her in the chest, collapses in pain before touching her. Her mother comes to look for her and, on the way back, for the third time, Sudhamani, our Realised Soul in whom the ego is no longer even a memory, wants to commit suicide in the sea. It makes perfect sense... Her mother becomes hysterical and manages to dissuade her. A while later, the cousin who threatened her has been admitted to hospital and Sudhamani visits him. She explains to him that she has no feelings of revenge but that the subtle beings around her are angry and they will take revenge for her. He mysteriously dies while vomiting blood. We will see in her history that this kind of phenomenon is repeatedly reported – what better way to instill fear and submission in one's followers! It is never she who takes revenge and punishes. She remains white as snow: it is always third parties who do the dirty work for her. Unlike the subtle beings in the biography, nowadays it is human third parties who take care of that.

Deeply disturbed by the phenomenon of bhāvas and the crowd of devotees in the courtyard of his house three times a week, her father comes to her during the bhāva of Devi and asks the goddess to return his daughter to him. In response, she collapses before him lifeless on the spot. As it is, she is dead, and the narrator says her body stiffened within moments. Another opportunity for a little magic speech because in the real and boring world, *rigor mortis* does not begin to intervene until three hours after death and reaches its maximum about nine hours later. But since these are probably tales and legends, then reality does not matter. The pater familias apologises, cries, prays, faints from distress and his daughter comes back to life... as Kṛiṣṇa: "*Without Shakti there can be no Kṛiṣṇa!*", she said. Honestly, I do not understand the interest of this gibberish or the particular meaning of this pseudo-wisdom but never mind.

In chapter 9, one learns that "*the spiritual aspirant's greatest weapon is the sword of truth*". We take note of this here because we will need it later. The narrator continues in his logic and associates Sudhamani with Kṛiṣṇa, Rāma, Jesus and Buddha. Why not? It costs nothing to try. We are in 1978. Her fierce opponent of a brother is more and more depressed and suicidal: he has gout. The narrative makes her tell her mother that her brother will not be around for much longer. One day, he harasses and violently insults a devout Muslim woman, who comes for darshan. The latter, deeply shocked, comes to the Devi during darshan, crying. Sudhamani's blood boils, the Devi rises from her seat and curses: "*Whoever caused this grief will die in seven days!*" As it is, you will be hard pressed to find Mahatmas in India who curse and kill with their curse – and, directly or indirectly, this kind of unfortunate event will be repeated. The biographer says later: "*she is unparalleled in the spiritual history of India*". Our Mother of infinite compassion and embodied love, specifies that she does not punish anyone, but that when her devotees suffer, even God does not forgive their abusers, each one having to enjoy the fruit of their actions. Whatever she says, it was she who cursed him. The brother was warned of the prediction (the narrator should have said, of the "curse") and he ended up committing suicide by hanging. Another unofficial theory circulates on the death of her brother, which

I will discuss at the end of the chapter. She predicts in an unverifiable way that he will reincarnate in a few years as a boy in the neighbourhood, which will reassure the parents. Then obviously comes the magical narrative that, from birth, the child repeated the sacred syllable OM and practiced meditation.

Throughout her public history, Sudhamani was constantly harassed by neighbours, known as rationalists and disbelievers, who never ceased to want to reveal the deception. We learn that she danced on thorns spread by them and on broken glass, without consequences. Obviously, we were not done with miracles. It is also interesting to note that rationalists are described as ignorant, rude, unrighteous, disbelievers and evil. Equally remarkable is the sharp discrimination against non-believers. As if it was criminal or evil not to believe in her. Finally, the narrator notices that the rationalists are trying to put a damper on her by trying to influence the police and politicians. It should be noted that Sudhamani and the organisation, were later able to draw inspiration to their advantage from this very instructive and useful example and to magnify it in unequalled proportions.

Then, the narrative establishes her in a state of perfect peace of mind. Her life should demonstrate that god-realisation can take place even under the most difficult circumstances. In one of these quotes, she says of herself *"Always understand that Mother is Omnipresent. Have the faith that Mother's Self and your Self are one. Children, the mother who gave birth to you may look after matters relating to this life; nowadays this is very rare. But Mother's aim is to lead you in such a way that you can enjoy bliss in all your future lives"*. The problem with this delusional omnipotence is not only to make people believe that you are something or someone that you are not, and to risk making them waste their life, their energy, their money, their family, their career, among others, but also the fact that it is based on ignorance. Indeed, the soul which would have reached bliss is a liberated soul whose identification with the ego is broken forever, and which will therefore not be reincarnated, because there is no more karma to experience since no one else is there to identify with it. So inevitably, bliss will only be experienced once, in the life in which it was achieved. Apart from that, I am not sure that mothers will appreciate the sweeping negative judgement.

In chapter 10 entitled "The mother of immortal bliss", page 177, he lets Chandru, one of her first disciples appear, while hiding his name and describing him as a simple "university student". It is a shame because this character was important: it is he who, coming to Tiruvannamalai, discovered her first Western disciples, the American Nealu, the Australian Gayatri and the French Madhu and Ganga (myself). Chandru is not only the one who came to look for us, but also the one who taught us the recitation and the interpretation of the sacred texts. He was also the one who passed on to me the initiation into brahmacharyam (yellow robes) in the name of A. He played a large and crucial role in the origins of the organisation only to be almost removed from the biography. That is how this institution works.

The biographer claims that the four of us offered her our fortune, in all devotion, but that A. generously refused it considering that our spiritual evolution was her only wealth. In fact, what he does not specify is that of the four, three were penniless and lived almost on alms. Seen from the coconut grove, it is probably the persistent myth of white skin and wealth.

Apart from the first time when Chandru met us, I find myself mentioned in this biography only once, in an unflattering anecdote, in chapter 10, page 183. The story is not even reported truthfully. I had not come to A. as a virgin on the path of devotion. I had already made my first experiences for a few

years in Tiruvannamalai where I was inspired by the devotion of sage Ramana Maharshi. I had translated his "Marital garland of letters" into English, from the original in Tamil, in the same meter, so that it could be sung indifferently in Tamil or English, which I did regularly during the fourteen kilometres circumambulation around the mountain, barefoot, accompanied by other bhaktas. I studied the life of mystics like the Paramahansa Rāmakṛṣṇa, the saint of Bengal and the holy bhaktas of Tamilnadu among others. I remember having accompanied inspired and inspiring worshipers of Muruga who had stopped for a few days during their pilgrimage. I was together with Madhu and their example had touched us deeply. That said, in the context of this biography, reworked many times according to political needs, being an artificial construction and a narrative riddled with inaccuracies and unbearable bigotry, the fact that I am not correctly represented is irrelevant. Let us say that this absolves me of any complacency and leniency in my present critical assessment.

Neither Gayatri nor I find favour in this biography, quite a feat and frankly totally ridiculous. Gayatri has re-established her side of the story, and for my part, that is what I am doing in part in this book. When we rewrite history, we emasculate its educational virtues and turn it into a propaganda tool. In fact, in short, if I have all but disappeared from the historical landscape, it is because I have decided not to become a clerical lie, as many among the elders I left behind have become. It is because I decided to live in a humble, fair, and honest way, in relation to who I was, without complacency, without lying to myself and without lying to others. What did I do that displeased the organisation? Nothing. Being honest and simply leaving is enough an offence for them. I was therefore accused under false pretences in order to silence me in advance. I was cut off from my network and effectively ostracised. In this organisation, if you are not a liar, rapist, or impostor, you are wiped out of history.

In chapter 10, page 188, A. advises her aspirant disciples not to take part in wedding or burial ceremonies. Because she says, "*the vibrations of the preoccupations of the world will penetrate the spirit of the aspirant in spite of himself, he will be agitated and will desire unreal things (ephemeral, futile)*". She is not wrong. At the same time, it would take too long to go into the details of this deplorable misunderstanding because her philosophy of life is based on the rejection of the world, on the rejection of earthly experiences, on the beauty and the sacredness of terrestrial life as inconceivable, on earthly life as another effective means of evolving spiritually, in contrast to renunciation, as unimaginable. Considering this woman's dire experiences in her youth, she thinks the world is just as she experienced it.

Further in chapter 10, page 192, the narrator writes about a Vedanta school (Vedanta Vidyalaya) which would have been founded in 1982 to teach philosophy and Sanskrit. Honestly, in 1982 I was there permanently. We were among ourselves in relatively small committee, and I have never heard of such a school. Two teachers had come, one of philosophy and the other of Sanskrit, who was also a private yoga teacher to one of us. But they were all pretty boring. They were then replaced brilliantly and to our great pleasure by our brother Chandru who returned from the Chinmaya Mission. For his classes, we initially sat on the veranda of the original mini temple. Then we used a new hall which was also used for a lot of other things. We attended the classes and left to go about our business. I have not seen any "Vedanta Vidyalaya". But maybe this is the narrator's way of exploiting every detail and bloating them into a glorious and more gratifying tale.

The narrator talks about the change in the ashram and the constantly increasing number of visitors. He mentions A.'s parents and dares to say that they had become a deserving and exemplary family, which played its role of father and mother to all the seekers who resided in the ashram, considering

them as their own children. I find it shocking because he seeks to absolve them from their criminal behaviour towards their daughter which made her who she is, which we are seeking to understand here. It is revolting also because, it is one of the last elements of this constructed narrative in which he inexorably strives to make people appear in the eyes of the world for what they are not.

Another pious lie concerns the first visits to the West. He writes that in response to repeated requests from her children abroad, the Blessed Mother made her first world tour in 1987. The impact was wonderful, he says, and on a large scale. Sorry, but the reality is that there were NO "children" abroad. It was A. who encouraged us to go into exile – in my case, already in 1984 – to return to our countries of origin in order to make her known, to find and retain future devotees and encourage them to pay for her journey, her stay and the expenses of her group. To launch her first world tour, her approach was so proselytising in character that it made me uncomfortable. I preferred to adopt a low profile and let them get excited among themselves with this project. Precisely it was Chandru, the great absentee from the biography (cited forty-four times in Gail's book), who left with Nealu and an American devotee, Kusuma, to go fishing for devotees. As for the large-scale impact, for most programs there were around forty participants. As a result, the living-dining rooms of the apartments in which we were accommodated were sufficient for the programmes. One simply needed to pushing the furniture around. There you go, much less glamorous, but true.

Later in the story, A. explains how a realised being (she includes herself of course) sees the world and the beings around them and she ends thus: *"Likewise, my children, only after you yourselves become morally and spiritually perfect and behold Divinity in all, can you teach others to become so"*. Let us note again this particularly relevant quote in the context of this testimony. For those who might not have understood, I would point out here that A. would do well to apply this teaching to herself in the very first place and might venture to pass it on only after verified results.

In chapter 11 on the meaning of divine bhāvas, the narrator, let us put it bluntly, tries to make us accept Sudhamani as an avatar. He describes three categories of avatars, *pūrṇa*, *amsa* and *āveśha*, ie. full, partial, and circumstantial and gives examples from Hindu mythology. We hear about *Viṣṇu*, *Narasimha*, *Rāma*, *Parasurāma*, *Kṛiṣṇa*, *Hanuman*, among others. Classically, avatars are gods in other forms, such as *Kṛiṣṇa* or *Rāma* as avatars of *Viṣṇu*. The contemporary gurus' race for *avatarhood* is ludicrous. In the final analysis, as Ramaṇa Maharshi said, on the one hand, we would all be avatars and on the other hand, according to the path of knowledge, there are no avatars but just The Reality. The concept of avatars is puranic, not Vedic. But in the Purāṇas, anything is possible. In his narrative, he associates subtly this concept with Sudhamani. His five-page peroration finds no conclusion: we will not know in which category he classifies his divine mother. But the impression which remains is that she is an avatar of god, which is probably the intended effect. Moreover, his *avatar*, when explaining the bhāvas expressed herself as follows: *"Mother is not manifesting even an infinitesimal part of her spiritual power during the Bhavas. If it were to be manifested as it is, no one could come near!"* Her son, the narrator, goes on to say that the bhāvas are *"beyond the reach of human intellect"* and that they express *"the Holy Mother's infinite spiritual power"*. He explains that this is the way for the Blessed Mother to serve *"humanity, plunged as it is in the deep quagmire of worldliness"*. The *quagmire of worldliness...* I hope you appreciate the profoundly judgemental philosophy – not to speak of hypocritical, when having nooky in secret is part of your routine. In the end, the main thing is who we, the seekers, are not the number of medals and stripes pinned to the guru's shoulders.

Further in the explanation of the meaning of the bhāvas, we read that they are the expression of her uninterrupted union with the Supreme and that this great soul possesses an inexplicable spiritual power. She is everything people can imagine she is. The biographer promotes the glory of his holy Mother and her psychic powers. Putting himself in the shoes of a devout believer, he enumerates: *"She is an extraordinary woman who can cure terrible and incurable diseases by a mere touch or look; She can also solve your worldly problems and can easily fulfil all your desires. (...) She can bestow on you many psychic powers. She is a master in telepathy and clairvoyance. It is nothing for her to transform water into panchamritam (a sweet) and milk. All the eight mystic powers are under her sway (...). The Mother is the Ultimate Goal to be realised by an aspirant. She is the source and support of true seekers and helps them to cross the ever-changing Ocean of Transmigration. Her very nature is love and compassion; she is a veritable witness to the truths expressed in the Vedas and all other religious texts of the world. If you take refuge at her feet, definitely the Goal is at hand. She is a Perfect Master and a Great Mother as well. From the standpoint of a person who is following the Path of Devotion (Bhakti Yoga), the Holy Mother is a true devotee par excellence. (...) When one who pursues the Path of Knowledge (Gnana Yoga) observes the Mother, he can perceive a perfect Knower of the Self in her words and deeds. For a person who is sincerely following the Path of Action (Karma Yoga), the Holy Mother is unsurpassed among Karma Yogins. These are all partial views born of each one's limited experience and understanding. But through close association and observation devoid of prejudice and presumption, one could clearly comprehend that the Holy Mother is an integration of all these. (...) She bathes them [her disciples] in her selfless love forgiving all the errors which they may commit."*

Then she is made to take up the narrative and says that a satguru (a perfect master) *"simply loves him [her disciple] [and] will bind him with his unconditional love. (...) Mother expects nothing except your spiritual progress."* You will notice the association she makes herself: Mother (Ammā) / satguru. The biographer also specifies that *"she instructs and at the same time sets an example by her actions"*. Another very important statement in the context of this testimony.

During a dialogue she speaks of *"worldly persons"*, an untranslatable expression designating people who live in the world, who have families, who have to work, in other words, everything except renouncing monks. What she says is discriminatory and condescending, but she probably also says it with conviction and love: *"Children, as far as a worldly person is concerned, it is enough for him to look after his wife and children, but a real sannyasin on the other hand, has to shoulder the burden of the whole world. Therefore, you must grow stronger."*

The biographer closes his narrative by saying that, *"In the spiritual history of India, she stands unparalleled in her limitless manifestation of Grace and Compassion for erring humanity. May her divine life serve as a guiding star for all those who aspire to realize Supreme Peace and the Bliss of Self-Realisation."*

What is troubling in this biography is the interest and the almost desperate need that the author seems to express to place his master, his Mother, against all odds, sometimes against all logic, on his hagiographic pedestal. Obsessed by the hammering of her alleged status, he seems to miss the problems of coherence in the logic of his approach. What could be his interest? The co-dependency that emerges from this interaction is interesting because the biographer is also the one who writes down her so-called "teachings". Even though the work of A. is undeniable, the role of her second in charge remains remarkable: to put it simply, one has the impression that it is Balu who, in a way, contributed to make his Mother what she is. In return, she compensates him well. In the section

"Seeker Experiences", chapter 12, page 209 of the biography – a section which seems to have been removed from later versions – the biographer takes the opportunity of the narrative to earn his place in the sun, for all intents and purposes, telling an anecdote of which I quote an extract here: *"The next day after participating in the bhajan, I entered the shrine with this resolve: Mother, if I am your child, please accept me.'* Placing my head on her shoulder, Mother lovingly said, *'Son, when Mother heard you singing, she understood that this voice is meant to merge in God. At that moment Mother came to you and made you one with her. You are my very own.'*" These mutual services rendered, this co-dependency, obviously relativise the scope of the message as a whole.

Following this critical reading, I am including some additional biographical elements, extracts from the clinical study of the French psychiatrist and sannyasin monk, Dr. Jacques Vigne, some observations on bhakti and my general conclusions and reflections.