



**Breaking her silence** Former devotee Gail Tredwell

MATA AMRITANANDAMAYI

**GAIL TREDWELL | 56**

AUTHOR

## ‘Many people who possess information against Amma are terrified to come forward’

**WHEN AUSTRALIAN** writer Gail Tredwell's book *Holy Hell: A Memoir of Faith, Devotion and Pure Madness* was published last November, it sent shockwaves among the devotees of Mata Amritanandamayi, popularly known as the 'hugging saint'. Based on her 20-year experience at Amma's ashram, Tredwell's book exposed some ugly truths about physical abuse and embezzlement of funds. The book triggered a chain of reactions, which resulted in the Kerala Police filing cases against some Facebook users for allegedly "posting and sharing defamatory materials against Amma". In a candid chat with **JEEMON JACOB**, Tredwell talks about her tell-all book.

EDITED EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW

**Q** You have come up with the book almost 15 years after leaving Mata Amritanandamayi's ashram. Why did it take so long?

**A** It took me many years of rest, good nutrition, support from friends and a healthy, balanced lifestyle to gain perspective. The first few years after I left the Amritanandamayi Math were very hard. Physically, I was in a very bad shape, I was also suffering from an enormous amount of emotional pain, confusion and feelings of betrayal and loss. During those early years, it was impossible to speak about any of the harm done. I did not have the clarity of mind nor the strength to face the retribution that would inevitably follow if I shared even a fraction of what I knew. I needed to heal first. During those initial years, I wanted to forget everything and

move on with my life.

Eventually, despite my fears, I felt I had no choice but to publish my story; that I morally owed it to the public and the numerous devotees to share what I knew. So, I spent the past four years working on my book.

If you had written the book earlier, don't you think it would have helped hundreds of devotees who flocked to Amma's ashram? I could not have written the book earlier. In order to write authentically, I had to relive all those experiences. I was not emotionally strong enough to take on such an enormous challenge and the inevitable backlash so soon. I needed time to heal. I had also a lot of soul-searching to do for myself. In order to be of true service, I knew it was imperative I write my story with detachment. I had to write from my heart with a conscience free from anger and revenge. If I had attempted this book any time before I did, I would have been doing a disservice.

**How do you respond to the allegations by the ashram that you tried to kill Amma?**

**‘I could not have written the book earlier. I needed time to heal. I also had a lot of soul-searching to do for myself’**

I deny all allegations that I tried to kill Amma who, at the time of these supposed murder attempts, I loved with all my heart and to whom I had devoted my life. To destroy my character and credibility, there have been numerous false stories about me posted online, including three completely dishonest accounts of innocent incidents, which were wrongly portrayed as attempts to harm Amma. Here is the truth of those incidents:

One day, I found some mushrooms growing in the ashram compound. Out of my innocent devotion, I excitedly cooked a dish out of them for Amma. She ate it but later became gravely ill. The resident Ayurvedic doctor then informed me that they were poisonous. Naturally, I was devastated and full of remorse.

Another tale was about a boating incident in Sweden. Amma and I were in a tiny paddleboat in a small pond. I innocently stood for a moment, which accidentally tilted the craft slightly and caused it to take in water. Within seconds, it capsized. Thankfully, Amma being very comfortable in the water immediately rose to the surface. Even though the accident was uneventful, it briefly frightened me and some devotees watching from the shore. But after a nice hot shower and a change of clothes, we were both fine.

I believe the other false story is about my giving Amma an alleged intentional overdose of medicine. Amma is diabetic and it was my duty to administer her insulin. Such patients are advised to eat regular meals low in starch and monitor their glucose often. All of these factors were out of my control when Amma sat for long hours with the public and ate white rice and coconut-based curry for lunch and dinner. Her glucose levels were in a constant state of fluctuation and at those times, it was impossible to accurately administer the appropriate amount of slow and fast acting insulin. Over a span of 20 years, such accidents are bound to happen. None of these incidents were attempts on Amma's life. But they are now being used dishonestly to try to destroy my character and credibility.

**Amma runs mega charity shows all over the world. Are they for real?**  
It is well known that Amma does a lot of



charity. What is not clear is the amount of donations received and where the money actually goes. When I was living in the ashram, donations meant for charity were given to Amma's family, and exaggerating claims of charity was a common practice. Several years ago, a former ashram head of accounts reported a 50 percent exaggeration rate on the number and cost of homes built for the poor. He was swiftly silenced and has remained quiet ever since.

I left 14 years ago, so I cannot say what is happening nowadays. But, there have been credible reports that large amounts of donations have been hoarded away in foreign bank accounts, instead of being used as the donors desired. And I have heard reports about politicians and top officials receiving free medical treatment, including expensive surgeries, at her hospital. Whereas very little is actually done for the poor. Because of the vast wealth involved, these are matters should be investigated by the government and journalists. Can Amma's family document how they became so wealthy?

**You have alleged that Amma and other senior disciples were involved in smuggling gold and transferring donations to the accounts of her relatives. Do you remember any incidents in which the government monitored her shady deals?**

I don't recall any government investigation on smuggling gold or use of donations to create personal wealth for Amma's family. But there was one incident of possible government audit, which I have written about in my book, when Amma became concerned about the threat of an audit. We were touring Gujarat when Amma received a message via the head of accounts about a possible financial audit and raid. I don't know if it actually took place. But a woman known to me who was then living at the ashram recently posted on my Facebook blog that "what you have written is so true and powerful and I thank you for that. I remember myself having to burn, upon Amma's specific request, all the accounting books of the café".

Again, I have been gone for 14 years, so maybe things have changed over the years. With proper investigation, some of



❖ **Spiritual past** Tredwell spent two decades at the Mata's ashram

**'Politicians receive free medical treatment at her hospital, whereas very little is actually done for the poor'**

the financial questions may come to light.

**Your book tells a great deal about the unholy affairs in the ashram and tries to expose a cult figure. Do you have more evidence to support your book?**

There are already numerous testimonials posted online about Amma's physical and emotional abuse and other private behaviour contrary to her public image. I know several people who can corroborate various elements of my book, as was done for the *Rolling Stone* article in August 2012. For example, there are women who can attest to the fact that Amma menstruates like a normal woman even though her biography claims that she was "pure", a supposed sign of her claimed divinity.

Many people who possess informa-

tion are terrified to come forward. They may live in India or have relatives close to the ashram, which could subject them to harm. Others simply want to get on with their lives and prefer to avoid the emotional stress that speaking out would create. Many have already suffered great persecution from which they have not fully healed. Others fear the damage it would do to their professional lives.

**Have you received any threats after the book was released last November?**

I have received numerous hate mails incited by the ashram campaign to destroy my character.

**Do you fear Amma's mafia?**

Amma has devotees all over the world. Most of them are very good people. However, I am sure there are also the fanatical types — like those sending me hate mail — who might go to any length to protect Amma's image.

**Do you think the book will be banned in India?**

My memoirs are completely truthful but unwelcome to Amma's devotees. So, there may be desperate attempts to ban the book.

**The police have filed criminal cases against those posting in favour of your book on Facebook...**

This demonstrates the political and monetary influence of Mata Amritanadamayi and her organisation in Kerala and elsewhere in the world. I am very disturbed by the use of police power to try to silence freedom of speech of the many voices that obviously agree that something is very wrong. Such an action could not only intimidate freedom of speech but also incite violence and retaliation against the people who speak out.

jeemonj@gmail.com