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ASIA-PACIFIC: Financial Times

Sep 29, 2003, By Khozem Merchant in Kochi

Indian Business Leaders Drawn To Hugger's Love

Technology industry icons, management gurus, business leaders, India's president, and 100,000 devotees from around the world this weekend celebrated the 50th birthday of India's "Hugger", a woman who wields considerable influence over the world's second most populous country. Sri Mata Amritanandammayi, an unmarried woman known as Amma or "a mother to millions", sends a simple but powerful message of "unconditional love" by hugging men, women and children. Over four days ending yesterday, she hugged people endlessly in Kochi in the southern state of Kerala, a tranquil region previously called Cochin and known as "God's Own Country".

Amma's appeal is strong among ordinary Indians as well as those in Silicon Valley, California, where many southern technologists live. A healing centre has even been built in her name in Malibu in California.

At the vast Jawaharlal Nehru football stadium in Kochi, devotees from scores of countries walked to intoxicating, devotional music, demonstrating Amma's non-denominational, cross-cultural appeal.

Earlier, leading business figures lobbied her to improve India's investment climate.

Amma told them that her only contribution would be love because she was not qualified to advise on business. She said: "That would be like telling a squirrel how to climb a tree." But she said "value-based development" could deliver growth in spirituality as well as in the economy.

"I admire her principles and model. She sticks to her core competence," said software engineer B. V. Jagadeesh, co-founder of Exodus, the internet infrastructure provider.

One of the emerging themes of Amma's developmental work and a highlight of the event was Pura (Providing Urban facilities in Rural Areas). The idea is to strengthen village infrastructure to support job-creating enterprises. Villages would then create more opportunities for young people who currently migrate to cities, robbing rural India of productive capacity and adding to urban poverty. "It's a lose-lose situation," Sabeer Bhatia, the entrepreneur who founded Hotmail, told a meeting at the event.

Dr A. P. J. Kalam, India's president, said rural-based development would ensure the country grew in a way that embodied "Amma's values". India's economy is growing at 6 per cent but needs to achieve a faster pace of economic activity for poverty to be reduced.

C. K. Prahalad, professor of corporate strategy and international business at the University of Michigan, told business leaders that "traditional models of development" had failed to deliver, and that a "disruptive change is taking place that is giving hope".

That hope is embodied by Amma, and India's, "20-20 vision" designed to achieve developed economy status in 17 years. The strategies to achieve this aim would be studied at a new "20-20

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centre" to be managed by an arm of Amma's organisation and co-sponsored by Intel, the chip manufacturer.

Sriram Viswanathan, managing director of Intel's broadband and wireless networking division in California, said Amma's village cluster strategy could lead to "a national infrastructure of linkages and that is good for India and Intel, so we are with her on this".



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