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The embrace of love



Swami Ramakrishnananda

OSTRACISED BY society and spurned with disgust by the most ordinary passer by, the beggar, his body covered with sores oozing pus and blood, spent his life at the entrance to the temple in the hamlet. Hearing about the loving heart that offered solace to all from the greatest to the lowliest, he came to the ashram and stood in a corner, waiting for the long queue of devotees to move away.

Amma, as they all call her, noticed him from a distance and bade him come near. He hesitated at first, but she insisted. The crowd was repulsed at the sight of the man who was slowly walking up the line, and moved away in a hurry. But she embraced him, wiped away his tears and started cleaning the ulcers. "Come here everyday and you will feel better," she said. But she saw to it that he came at a time when other devotees weren't around. Slowly the man began showing signs of improvement and looks much better today.

"It's not a stray case. People of all faiths and with all kinds of ailments possible come to her for a comforting word and her warm embrace and patient hearing say it all. Mind you, Sri Mata Amritanandamayi does not offer any magical treatment. Neither does she offer solutions to problems. She doesn't indulge in predictions either. It is the effulgence of love that draws people from all over. 'Don't you feel sick when you touch such people,' I once asked her. Would you cut

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off your hand if it had similar inflammation? I see myself in every person and thing. So there's no question of revulsion,' she replied," says Swami Ramakrishnananda Puri of the Mata Amritananda Math, at Amritapuri, in Kerala. He was in the city recently, to oversee the arrangements for Amma's recent visit to Chennai for the second anniversary celebrations of the Brahmasthanam temple here. Advaita philosophy and unshakeable faith in Saranagati are the basic precepts.

Swami Ramakrishnananda is one of the earliest disciples of Mataji — he was then a bank employee from Chennai who had been posted in Kerala.

"That was the time I heard about a lady who had people coming to her from as far as Madurai. One visit and the inner change in me was pronounced. 'Sit down and meditate,' she told me. I didn't know a thing about *dhyanam*. I closed my eyes and the next moment I opened it, three hours had passed. Her powerful presence and motherly touch mitigated the turmoil in me and I felt an inexplicable calm." The monastic discipline soon took deep roots in Ramakrishnananda's mind.

Amritapuri is more like a gurukulam. Yoga and meditation are a part of life there. The incessant flow of devotees at the math, the darshan that goes on for more than 12 hours at a stretch everyday she is at the math (the mother travels the world over and also to various parts of the country) the personal attention she showers on each of them embracing every devotee with warmth, 'Devi Bhavam' and the various interactive events, are activities that ardent followers of Mata Amritanandamayee are only too familiar with.

Intense love for humanity has naturally led to various social welfare and educational projects that the math has successfully taken up. Transcending caste, race, religion and nationality, Mata Amritanandamayee Math, a public charitable trust (www.amritapuri.org) in Kerala, serves mankind. The ashram houses nearly 2,000 devotees today. The Trust builds houses for the homeless, provides medical care for the hapless, gives pension to the penniless and education for the young. "For deserving candidates education is free," says Ramakrishnananda Puri.

Amrita Kuteeram, a project that gives the poor the joy of living in their own homes, has so far built nearly 25,000 houses all over the country. "We adopted three villages in Gujarat in the wake of the quake and built nearly 2,000 homes for the people there," the Swami informs. This apart, free distribution of rice, milk and clothes goes on at the Ashram every month. The "Shower Project" at the California Centre where people can secure clothes, toiletries and also a shower, is sure interesting. "We think the have-nots are found only here. It's not so at all. You find many below the poverty line in the West too and we do our bit there also," says Ramakrishnananda Puri. That the Math also has in its fold, Amrita Anbu Illam, a home for the distressed old people, Amrita Niketan, an orphanage, and the Speech and Hearing Improvement School are pointers to the fact that Mataji is concerned about the welfare of every section of society, he adds. Including Amrita Aranya Jeevanam, the development scheme for tribals, Mata Amritanandamayee Math's outreach projects are many. So are the medical care services that The Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences (AIMS) in Cochin, Amrita Kripa Hospital, Aids Care Centre and the Mumbai's Kripa Sagar Hospice provide. Charitable medical camps and Ayurvedic clinics also come under the Math's healthcare

schemes.

When the Math's social uplift activities encompass such a wide spectrum of activities, education is naturally an indispensable segment. Thus you have its Medical, Pharmaceutical, Nursing, Management, Computing and Science and Technological institutions functioning all over the country — not to forget its Industrial Training Centres. (www.amrita.edu)

Born in a poor fisherman's family, Sudhamani as she was called then, may have had the opportunity to attend school only up to the Class III level, but with her guidance, that stresses on values, and love for humanity that forms the fulcrum, function 45 schools — known as Amrita Vidyalayams — all over the country. "The transformation that the Mother's love brings about in every devotee is striking. Those who have experienced it will understand the veracity of my statement, " smiles the Swami.

MALATHI RANGARAJAN

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