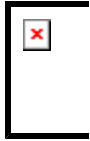




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Power of love

To devotees, Amma is the embodiment of love. She takes their sorrow and gives back love such as no one else wants to give. Kala Krishnan Ramesh tries to understand what makes Mata Amritanandamayi tick and finds herself transformed in the process.



I kept the Hindutva question for last because this wasn't about Hindutva; it was about love, devotion and hard work and how when Mata Amritanandamayi took people into her embrace, all three come together filling them with purpose, meaning and will.

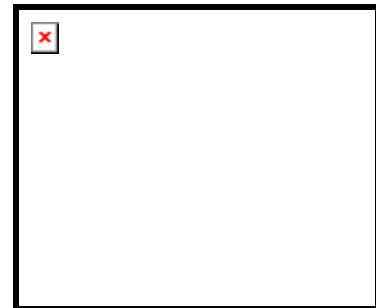
It was also about trying to understand this love, about getting closer and feeling nearer to Mata Amritanandamayi over several years. About hearing of her miraculous embrace and becoming fascinated by peoples' testimonies of Mata Amritanandamayi's astounding interventions in their lives – children for the childless, answers for the confused, direction for the lost, cure for the diseased, but above all else, unqualified love for everyone.

For devotees, Amma is the embodiment of love, and she takes their sorrow and pain and gives back love such as no one else wants to give. "Even our parents will withdraw their love if we don't do as they expect," says Chandrika. "Amma just loves us. And her love is useful for everyday living. It's a guiding love."

Mata Amritanandamayi is reputed to be a practical, sensible person, whose advice to devotees who come crying about impending court cases, family splits or alcoholic husbands, takes the form of precise instructions on what to do, with the added advice to do it with faith in God.

"If I ask her a question, she won't give me an abstract answer, she'll give me a practical answer which will solve my problem," as Chandrika says.

Mata Amritanandamayi's solutions to problems take many shapes – from working with scientists to research tsunamis, organising pension schemes for needy women, setting up an AIDS hospice, orphanages, hospitals, building houses for the homeless, to making arrangements to address the current ills of society.

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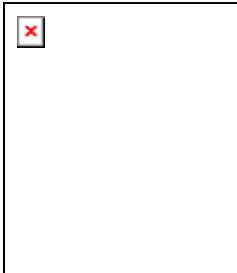
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In the course of our conversation, Amma said, "I don't think of myself as doing things for people, I am not separate, I am like the limbs of the body, if I come to the aid of the unfortunate, it's really like one hand caressing the other when it hurts. I teach my children to be prepared to do anything."

Her 'children' are her many disciples, and the course of life with Amma has taught them to work hard. Amma herself is always engaged in work of some sort or the other, and she will not brook slothfulness.

"We must be prepared to do anything, and we must do according to the occasion. When we act, we express to different levels, the head is used by a porter to carry loads, a scientist uses the same head in a different way. Some can give light up to 100 watts, some to a 1000, but everybody can give light. We must work and be humble, that's what I teach my children; when I do, they also do."

I asked Amma, "You are playing two very important roles - that of guru and mother - is there any tension between them?"

"A mother is the best guru, the true guru. I don't feel any difference in the two roles. A mother teaches her children through love, but she can also discipline them, at least good mothers do. The teacher has to come to the level of the student; it's like setting a thief to catch a thief, you become like the child, be a friend. My own real bhavas are sakhya and matrbhava – the bhava of a friend and mother."

The notion of "motherhood" has a central place in Mata Amritanandamayi's vision for life, not in giving birth but in feeling that everything in the universe is bound by this "motherly" love.

She stresses women's role, as it is and as it ought to be; she not only emphasises that women are the equals of men, but also that the circumstances which chain women down can be reversed, as in her example of investing women as priests in the math's temples.

The world places great importance on Mata Amritanandamayi's role as a woman spiritual-religious 'leader' and there is the feeling that she can lead the people of the world.

Amma has been invited to present her vision to the world at large on several occasions: The Parliament of the World's Religions (1993); the 50th Anniversary of the United Nations (1995;) the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders (2000); The Global Peace Initiative of Women religious and Spiritual Leaders (2002); the Parliament of the World's Religions (2004).

I ask, "Is it impossible for people in today's world to know bhakti? Without spiritual leaders like you as a medium, has this experience become impossible?"

"It's the way the world has changed, it's the values that children learn. Today's children are burdened, not only in learning but also in play. Earlier playing was carefree, joyous, today it is about competition and all the tension comes from the over-emphasis on competition. And as we grow this sense of competition grows with us and so does all the tension. We

don't have time for spiritual things, simple things like lighting a lamp, praying together... how will bhakti come?"

When disciples come together in your presence are they not subconsciously trying to create an alternative community animated by love and sharing?

"I don't know. Is it possible? Can it happen? Maybe it could, but it's difficult. If we have three people, we have three islands. And it's all about 'I' and about 'Take'. We should learn to look for the goodness in everyone and draw it out and impart values that will stress this. Maybe we can. But it's difficult."

And yet thousands, millions come together, swept up out of the struggle and rush, filled with the conviction that Amma's love can steer their lives into a better way of being.

And people like me come to understand how it works; for sometime we are self-conscious and try and merge into the crowd, but before long we too are in the lines snaking towards her embrace. The third time I was going, I wanted to try and interview Amma; several helpful people reached me to her, she hugged me and said with a smile that there was no time now. I got to sit near her onstage for some time, witnessing the faces of devotees blossom under her gaze.

Swami Ramakrishna, one of Amma's closest disciples told me, "Next year email me early. I will try and arrange something" I did, but no response.

In the meantime, one heard and read many things. They passed through the mind like clouds in the sky.

On the morning of the 9th, which was the day Amma was arriving in Bangalore, my phone rang and a voice said, "Namah Shivaya, this is Swami Ramakrishna. I just happened to look into my email now and saw your message. I am sorry I've been so caught up in the tsunami relief that I have had no time. Now it's too late, Amma's appointments are fixed. But let me try."

I thought, Okay, next year. However, a little later, my phone rings and Swami Ramakrishna says, "Namah Shivaya, Can you be here by 11.30?"

I was. Nervous, self-conscious, anxious. What would I find? Would this be disappointing? How much time would they give me? 10 minutes? Would they ask for a list of questions before I went in? What did I want to ask her? Whether there was a RSS connection?

As it turned out, it wasn't 10 but 45 or more. Amma spoke at length in her very colloquial Malayalam, spiritedly, smilingly, jokingly, naughtily; she often laughed aloud.

She spoke of things too numerous to report here in entirety. But at the end I did ask the Hindutva question, "Is Amma's movement in risk of being swallowed up by Hindutva?" And she said, "That's the same word the other child used, he argued with me for a long time. Sanatana dharma cannot be contained within a box and a single key cannot open all boxes! For me, the whole world is one. I accept everything. My Hindutva is for all Indians coming together, accepting each other. The problem is if someone insists

on saying 'My mother is good, your mother is a prostitute.' One must want to see the good in everything, one must have the bhava of acceptance."

What did I make of the whole experience, people ask me. Had I been transformed? Has my life turned into some trajectory I do not yet know? Despite being conscious of not wanting to think like that, I have to admit that several surprising things happened. Like a sudden rush of water in congested karmic pipes.

Perhaps it's the miracle of love.

Amritapuri

A devotee explained the difference between Amma's ashrams and others: "If you see the male conductors in a bus, more often than not, they are loud, aggressive, and push the passengers around unnecessarily, they swear, sweat and rush around as if the job were extraordinarily difficult. But women conductors do the same job coolly, easily, without straining themselves and also putting passengers at ease. This is what you experience in Amma's ashrams. It is surely the 'motherly' touch."

At Amritapuri, the headquarters of the Amritanandamayi Math, everything runs smoothly, visitors are treated with humble courtesy and minute details for everyday discipline are followed - lines for crowds, tokens for darshan and meals.

Inmates have a rigorous daily routine which includes a stream of activities both physical and for the inner being. Amma can come down very hard on anybody found shirking work of either kind and she herself is a hard worker. When the tsunami struck and water began to rush into the ashram at Amritapuri, Amma changed into a lungi and shirt, ready to wade out if necessary.

She was at the helm of activities, directing everything, and waited up all night watching the sea.

Visitors are encouraged to participate in the daily chores and activities of the ashram as well as to use simple clothing and follow other ashram routines.

As one regular visitor put it, "You don't feel stressed, you don't feel that you don't fit in, you don't get rushed around and there are things that you can do without getting in the way. On the whole, you feel good about being there."

For the visitor, it is difficult not to be swept up in the atmosphere of Amritapuri, with the sea as a backdrop, its towering gopuram, its elephants, and the endless chanting and homams and Amma's presence which exudes love, light and compassion, not to mention good humour, jollity and laughter. Everywhere, there is the eager anticipation of being blessed by her and this creates a sense of community amongst the thousands who pass through Amritapuri every day.

The Math's website gives all the necessary details for contact as well as a constantly updated schedule of Amma's activities and travel.

Mata Amritanandamayi Math

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