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Thousands To Celebrate Birthday Of India "Hugging Saint"

DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

KOCHI, India (AP)--Under a blazing midday sun and thousands of kilometers from home, U.S. business executive Patrick John was reveling in the manual labor he was doing for India's "hugging saint."

"Working hard in this heat is simply bliss. It is all for Amma," said John, who was helping carry bamboo poles to build a scaffolding for the birthday celebrations of Mata Amritanandamayi, one of India's most famous living Hindu saints.

Known as "Amma," or "Mother," to millions of devotees around the world, she is famous for spending up to 18 hours a day hugging her followers. At last count, more than 30 million people had been given her blessing through her hugs.

Hundreds of thousands of people will assemble this week in Kochi, a city in the southern coastal state of Kerala, to celebrate her 50th birthday at a five-day event ending Saturday.

Amritanandamayi was born Sept. 27 in a poor fishing village in the remote coastal village of Parayakadavu. Her humble beginnings didn't foretell her future fame.

The celebration's guest list is a who's who of India's government and business: President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani and Mukesh Ambani, who heads Reliance Industries (P.REL), India's largest private conglomerate.

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, one of her devotees, will be attending the U.N. General Assembly.

"It is going to be India's biggest spiritual meet. We expect that some half a million devotees of Amma would come," said a celebration organizer, Swami Amritaswaroopananda.

Events include a meeting of top executives from around the world, an interfaith meeting and a women's conclave.

John, 36, and married with two children, traveled from his native Houston, Texas, where he sells medical equipment, to attend the celebration. John met Amritanandamayi in 2000 in New York and has since visited her twice in her ashram, or spiritual retreat, in Kerala.

On a recent day, people of many nationalities were helping prepare for the celebration; hauling bamboo, cleaning toilets and carrying wood, paint and plastic sheets to build a makeshift

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auditorium at Jawaharlal Nehru International Stadium in this port city.

"Look at them. All of them are mixing spiritual fervor with manual labor," said Amritaswaroopananda.

Miranda Jones, 32, of the Dutch city of Maastricht, quit her job as a laboratory technician to move to Amritapuri, the saint's headquarters.

"I met Amma six years back in London. I felt heavenly when she hugged me. I then knew the meaning of life," she said. "It is a great experience working for Amma."

Amritanandamayi starting praying as a young girl, behaving "as if she was a child possessed," said Sukumaran Nair, a schoolteacher and a family friend.

At first, she was seen as a problem child by her fishing family. She refused to go to school and spent nearly all her time chanting prayers to the Hindu god Krishna. She went to the seashore to meditate and sleep nearly every night.

Soon, she began to attract devotees.

Originally named Sudhamani, she adopted her current name, which means "full of immortal bliss," in 1981. Since then, Amritanandamayi has addressed international interfaith meetings and set up branches of her ashram in India and abroad. She now has centers in Canada, England, France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, Finland, Argentina, Brazil, Mauritius, Reunion Island, Japan and Singapore.

-Edited by Mary de Wet

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