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## Mother of the universe

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Her hugs are her healing touch. The stories about Mata Amritanandamayi defy logic and reason. Yet her legend keeps growing. Malavika Sanghvi travels southward in search of the miracle woman.



REVIEW HEADLINES

It is perhaps one of the more damning indictments of the North-South divide that exists in India, that someone like Mata Amritanandamayi, head of a vast international spiritual conglomerate, with a following amongst some of Southern India's most prominent citizens, cuts little ice beyond the Deccan. Tell someone that you have just come back from an interview with Amma, and you will be met with a blank stare.

In the pantheon of contemporary Indian Gods, Sai Baba is hot, Ma Chids cool, Rajneesh had his place in the sun, and Sri Sri has the smart set drooling, but Amma is still to get national recognition.

And yet as you hurtle past slumbering forests of cashew and mango on the 150 kilometres that link Amritapuri, Mataji's abode, with Kochi, in Kerala, the geographical distance is not on your mind. It is the lushness of the land.

The roads bordered by cashew, banana and coconut plantations. The villages dissolving into each other with no barren countryside in between, and the leitmotif of prosperous rural India: tea-shops selling biscuits and groceries.

It is a late evening journey, and as you enter the ashram nestled between the sea and a dark arm of the backwaters, you are in time for the satsang.

In a large covered hall, onto which the nearby beach has dribbled, sits a middle-aged short dark woman, clad in white, with diamonds flashing in her nose. Her distinguishing character is that she greets each and every devotee with a hug.

The crowd, a motley mix of stunning Europeans dressed in Third world chic, earnest erudite Indians, and bundled-up locals, ebb and swirl at her feet.

Mata Amritanandamayi is the cynosure of every eye, as she sits listening to the devotional songs with her eyes shut, only occasionally breaking into a curious jerky movement, that seems not of her own volition, like a marionette with a string attached from the sky.

The stories you have heard and read about this pleasant-faced lady defy anything that you have been so far accustomed to, even in the lore of Godmen and modern-day miracles.

Cows that ran across villages to offer her milk which she drank, as a young girl, straight from their udders, eagles that

dropped fish into her lap to feed her, serpents that wound themselves around her.

Brimming pots of food that she touched that never ran out. And, of course, all the signs of early martyrdom. Her poor fisherfolk parents who tortured her, siblings who resented her, hostility and witch-hunting from non-believers.

The stories are endless, and could be dismissed as folklore, only for one fact: all these remarkable things are not supposed to have happened a long long time ago in a land faraway.

We are talking of a woman here, whose past is well-documented in an age of science and technology. Who grew up in a village of men and women who are still alive. The fact the Mata has not travelled far to start a mythology of a cult, means that the stories of miracles and supernatural phenomena cannot be summarily dismissed.

Neither can the ardent devotion of men like K Karunakaran, former chief minister of Kerala, or of T N Seshan, former chief election commissioner, who says, "When I see Amma, the sloka, which is chanted in the Venkateshwara temple, which says 'prostration to the Mother of the Universe, the Supreme Goddess,' comes to my mind."

Indeed, the Amma's followers are many; the present chief minister of Kerala is also said to be a devotee. Says Ron Gottsegen who serves at the AIMS, a multi-specialty 800-bed hospital run by the Amma's trust, "I feel I was born when I met Mother. I met her in San Francisco. Only after her first embrace, did I understand what real love is."

Or Dr Prem Narayan who used to work in America, who says, "My brother called from India and told me about a saint whom he described as Kali in living form. The moment I heard it, a strange thing happened. It was as if a molecular rearrangement took place and my whole being was transformed."

But little that is said about Amma does her justice. Her answers to your questions say good and worthy things, about loving and accepting divinity and serving the poor. But you suspect that there is more here than language can express. That her energy comes from a deeper, more primal space.

And you leave when you find yourself thinking that even the elephant that she plays with after the satsang appears to be a devotee, as it bows and salutes her. That's when you know it's time to leave the ashram.



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