

'Americans are more sensitive to the sufferings of others'

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Rediff.com's George Joseph speaks to 'the hugging saint', Mata Amritanandamyi in New York, about spirituality, compassion and human values.

The questions were slightly controversial. But the answers were simple and straightforward, may be possible only for someone who lives a life of holiness such as Mata Amritanandamyi or Amma for millions of her devotees worldwide.

Amma, who visits the United States regularly since 1987, spoke extensively to *rediff.com* on many subjects at a posh penthouse owned by one of her devotees in New York city.

One question was about the treasure, worth more than Rs 50,000 crore, unearthed in the Sree Padmanabha Swami Temple in Thiruvananthapuram, the family temple of the erstwhile kings of Travancore. Amma's family,

which belongs to Quilon district, were the subjects of the king, before India's [[Images](#)] independence.

She saluted the wisdom and values of the kings who preserved such a treasure. The kings and their relations could have moved part of it to their places. "I have seen people from the royal family living in abject poverty. Yet they did not take the treasure to help the family members."

She says she has no right to comment about the treasure. It is for the government and courts to take a decision. "But it is part of our heritage and they should be preserved as much as possible or needed. In Europe I have seen such places. An ancient agriculture land in Italy [[Images](#)] remains the same way and people are not even allowed to put a stone there."

"If there is still more left, it can be used for common good. It is temple property, she says."

Another question was about the money and gold found at the chambers of Satya [[Images](#)] Sai Baba of Puttaparthi after his samadhi. She says her 'math' (monastery) does not keep gold worth more than Rs 15 lakh. If more is to be kept, the math has to pay Rs 1,000 as tax for gold worth Rs 100,000.

"Whenever we get more offerings it is used for the marriage of poor girls. I only use an old crown worth Rs 500 given by a devotee long ago."

She says that the math follows all the laws of the country. It follows the rules of monastery (sanyas math), and it is on the model of Ramakrishan Mission ashrams. She says she is not sure what rules Sai Baba's temple followed.

The math is ruled by a trust consisting of 11 people. She says she does not handle the money, but always keeps an eye on the accounts to make sure they are maintained properly.

Many of the maths in India are owned or operated by families. But her math follows the 'monastic order' which means that the charge goes to the next *sanyasin* in line.

Coming to the spiritual side, she says that spirituality is increasing worldwide. Love for the nature is also going up. At the same time, numbers of those who plunge in to worldly pleasures and selfishness is also increasing.

Asked about the belief that the world may come to an end in 2012, she says that it's ending every day. "When people lack love and care for others, the world is ending. Mere population does not make the world," she says.

Though she speaks mostly in her native tongue, Malayalam, she never had a problem because of that anywhere in the world. "A child can understand a mother's language, and vice versa."

She is unhappy that there are around 10 times more people in the jails in the US than in India, she says Americans are generally more compassionate to the sufferings of others.

"We can doubt if there is a God. But we cannot doubt the sufferings of the people. If we show compassion to them, it is the best evidence for belief in god. The culture may be different in the US, but people are the same everywhere, like fire or honey."

She also spoke about her father, who had several businesses. When he died he had six boats, and bequeathed one to her. She says she comes from a village where girls were not allowed to go out alone after they were 12.

There were restrictions. Some people opposed or attacked her initially, but they too softened over the years. "For me, both stones and flower are the same."

Though she has been hugging people for the last 40 years, she says she was not exhausted by it. "Love does not get bored." She never felt tired, she says, but adds that the body shows its wear and tear, as years go by.

"Even gold and iron get withered over time," she reasoned.

When asked about her expectations 10 years from now, she says she only lives in the present.

"If we live properly in the current moment, tomorrow will bring the right results," she says. For her, no day is a bad day. She says her life flows like a river and she has not thought of where it would end.

"The work or institutions were not the result of any planning. They came into existence as a response to specific situations," she says.

When the tsunami occurred, she did not ask for help. But the help came, regardless, from many parts of the world. "Even the poor sent produce from their lands," she says.

When a journalist questioned her about living in a posh pent house, she says she lives in ordinary places without amenities too. She never thought of the abode or how big or small it was.

"After all, life itself is like a lodge. Bigger houses may not bring peace or sleep.

Everything in the universe is interconnected," she says.

Image: Mata Amritanandamayi

George Josep in New York

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