

India's hugging saint embraces a military target

By Andrew Buncombe in Delhi
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She IS the hugging saint – a spiritual teacher who will embrace up to 50,000 people a day. Mata Amritanandamayi is said to have taken more than 30 million people around the world in her arms over the past three decades as she spreads the word of compassion.

Now she wants to take her message to India's soldiers. Concerned about suicide and depression in the sprawling Indian military, the woman who was born in a humble village in Kerala and calls herself Amma, is dispatching her yoga and meditation instructors to help the stressed soldiers.

"There had been a lot in the media about the number of suicides in the military and Amma wanted to help," said Swami Nijamrita, one of her followers, who is overseeing the project.

"The response has been great. We did not expect such a response," he added. "We thought people would take part because they had been told to but they say that the classes make them feel more peaceful." The free lessons involve a combination of yoga and meditation that Amma drew up specifically for the troops. Mr Nijamrita said at least 25,000 soldiers had already taken part in the sessions and more were planned.

Not having fought a full-scale war for decades, India's million-plus army appears to lose more troops to suicide than it does in domestic insurgencies, civil riots and border skirmishes. Experts say the growing levels of stress are probably the result of low morale, poor working conditions, insufficient home leave and bad pay.

Mr Nijamrita said the sessions enabled troops to stay focused on the task in hand. "For us, being peaceful does not mean being unable to react. It means being centred and not being distracted by other things," he added.

Amma, 55, whose adopted name means "Mother of Absolute Bliss", is well known for her humanitarian work. In the aftermath of the Asian tsunami, her organisation donated a billion rupees (£12m) to the relief effort. It also helped the relief effort after the Pakistan earthquake in October 2005.

Born to a low-caste family in a poor fishing community, Amma reportedly refused either to go to school or get married, preferring to meditate. She was still young when she started hugging devotees. In the early 1980s she founded an ashram for her followers and persisted with hugging people as means of easing their woes.



Amma is sending yoga instructors to help stressed soldiers