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L'Unita (Italian Daily)

The Giver Of Hugs

By Paola Boncompagni 6.10.2003

It's Mata Amritanandamayi's birthday, the great spiritual Mother of all Indians, better known as Amma, or Mother. Small and round, with dark skin, wrapped in a pure white sari, a diamond in her nose and barefoot, with a great big smile on her face, Amma has the look of a child. Born 50 years ago in the state of Kerala, the southern-most tip of India, Amma is held by millions to be a living saint, a "Mahatma", or Great Soul. It's said her very touch is sacred, her embrace divine.

For her 50th birthday, there have been non-stop celebrations for four days and four nights, with more than half a million people coming from all over the Indian sub-continent and some 191 countries around the world. This great spiritual meeting has taken place in the "Jawaharlal Nehru" stadium in the ancient city of Cochin, an important port of Kerala. Colonised by the Portuguese in the 1500s, Cochin boasts India's oldest Christian church, a historic synagogue and the tomb of Vasco de Gama. During the birthday celebrations, the four days have been declared a public holiday and this lagoon city has been completely transformed and adapted to suit the needs of the visitors: everywhere you look there are posters of Amma, not to mention all the buses, coaches, boats, taxis and rickshaws for those going to the celebrations.

Amma - India's best known and most loved female guru - doesn't promise miracles or any sudden materialisation of jewels, no miraculous healing, no sudden illumination, but simply the gift of her embrace. For all, without discrimination. For whoever wants it. In fact, Amma has spent the last 25 years embracing people, non-stop. It's calculated that she's embraced 30 million people: in India, but also in Europe, Asia, the United States, Africa, South America and Australia.

Born to a poor family of low caste in a fishing village, from an early age Amma dedicated all her time to helping the poor and sick. She was quickly held to be a saint, with more and more people surrounding her, seeking her consoling embrace. Since then she's never ceased to offer her "darshan", her divine embrace. Amma says that she's connected to the cosmic spiritual energy that is God, which we can all experience through her embrace.

The name of this great event launched by the really impressive media of Amma's organisation is, "Embracing the World - Golden Jubilee of the Fiftieth Birthday of Her Holiness Mata Amritanandamayi Devi". From September 24 to 27, Amma has welcomed the highest figures from the Indian government on the huge stage in the Cochin stadium: from the President of India, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, to the Deputy Prime Minister, Lal Krishnan Advani, and the Minister of Defense, Shri O. Rajagopal. "Amma has been my guru for 17 years", says Rajagopal, "I spend three days a month in her "ashram" (place for spiritual practices). Her power is divine. I see no contradictions in the fact that I am the Minister of Defense and that I believe in the values of peace that Amma professes. When there's an attack, the Minister of Defense must ensure peace. I'm not a Minister of War."

The many members of Parliament and the various Ministers all stated in their speeches that they share the same values of peace, declaring themselves to be fervent devotees of Amma. Each of them spoke at length to the 60,000 people crowding the stadium, only being interrupted by the top class exhibitions on the stage: traditional dances from Thailand, Sufi music, powerful African

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songs and old sacred music of India. Then there were many of the much-loved Bollywood superstars on the stage, showing the crowds how much they admire Amma. After kissing her feet, they promised her eternal love. Scores of spiritual leaders from around the world did the same, together with important politicians, personalities from the worlds of culture and entertainment (from Kenya and Singapore, Peru and Finland, the USA and Tibet). Moving around Amma on the stage are gurus with long beards and orange robes, powerful religious figures from the US, Buddhist monks with shaved heads, Rabbis and Great Muftis along with Australian aborigines and Central American witchdoctors.



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What has convinced hundreds of thousands of people to come here from all the continents and spend four entire days under the baking tropical sun in Cochin has been the promise of Amma's embrace. Her long darshan sessions always open with "bhajans", ritual music that she herself sings surrounded by musicians and her trusty "Swamis", her disciples, as well as scores of followers dressed in white. After about an hour of singing, the session starts: the Mother starts embracing her children for long hours, without ever stopping, as though she can't stop.

Each day, Amma finds a row of thousands of people in front of her, whom she embraces one at a time. Where this happens is of no importance: whether it be in her large ashram in Kerala or in the many other ashrams dedicated to her throughout India. Or in the big ashram of San Ramon in California, or that in Paris, in Sydney, in Helsinki or the Mauritius islands. The scene in front of her is always the same, and has been for years: hundreds of men and women whom she'll hug tight, one at a time. Amma has even managed to embrace 20,000 people in a single day. Old women, bare foot and without teeth, dressed in poor dusty saris, American businessmen, AIDS patients, Japanese couples, Jamaican Rastas and Portuguese nuns, Finnish children, Indian lepers, devotees from Paris and Zen monks. A few seconds for each. She hugs you tight, whispering in your ear: "My son, my son., (my daughter) . Amma's always with you., believe me. the Mother loves you." As people leave her embrace, there are those who burst out crying, saying that the emotion is overwhelming, others start praying, some smile and say they're "drunk with love", while yet others say they felt very little or shout with joy.

"She's got an indelible mark on Her right cheek, due to embracing so many people", says one Swami with a saffron-coloured tunic and who's been following her for more than 14 years. "She sleeps two hours a night on average, but She's never tired. None of us has ever seen Her yawn: She's always smiling." Amma offers her darshan without ever leaving the lotus position, for several hours at a time, without ever getting up. As her disciples and devotees say, including Dhyanamrita, one of the Swami's closest to her, "Amma is completely without ego. Her only joy is to give, and this She does the whole day long. She Herself says that She can't help transmitting the flow of spiritual love that's within her to all Her children".

The huge Mata Amritanandamayi Math organization, that's been working for months to manage the "Embracing the World" event, has been appreciated by all for its impeccable efficiency. A press room with 60 computers and a large centre dedicated to managing the various websites that have reported on the event, accommodation for scores of television companies and journalists from across India and the rest of the world. Amma wanted the food to be free for all: hundreds of volunteers have helped cook and distribute 2.5 million meals. Over the course of the four days they've used some 115 tons of vegetables, 85 tons of rice and 6 tons of salt. Dozens of toilettes have been set up in the area around the stadium, plus restaurants and 200 dormitories, dozens of charter flights have been organised, and special trains and coaches put on.

It's hard to find anyone willing to criticise or accuse Amma of abusing her spiritual empire: the substantial donations she receives from around the world, most coming from the West, are directly re-invested by the Math in numerous, highly efficient charitable institutions throughout India. There's the big, hi-tech "AIMS" hospital (Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences) in Cochin, a centre for AIDS patients, homes for 50,000 widows and abused women, pensions for women living on their own, orphanages and colleges for students from the lower castes. Everyone works for Amma on a volunteer basis.

As for her, she lives in her ashram in Kollam (Kerala) with more than 1,000 followers, dozens of Swamis and hundreds of volunteers. She spends her days embracing people, while in her few spare hours she prays, sings and manages her charitable works. The pattern's the same during

the six months every year she spends "on tour" around the world, receiving more and more invitations each year, with new ashrams being set up in her name.

"Mother", as her Western devotees call her, has often been compared to Gandhi for her work and the way she supports the lower castes. "Amma is a person with extraordinary humanitarian gifts", says, Yolanda King, the daughter of Martin Luther King and guest of honour at the celebrations with a big grin. "Her example of non-violence as a means of raising the human condition reminds me very much of my father and Gandhi." In 2000 Amma took part in the "Millennium United Nations Peace Summit", and there are those who say that Kofi Annan is one of her devotees. Amma is a Hindu, but she welcomes all the major religions, reminding people that all these promote love and peace among mankind.

Today, 27th of September, is the last day of the celebrations and Amma's actual birthday. Before sitting down for the long session of embraces, the Mother celebrates a mass wedding for 108 Indian couples, meets 1008 lawyers whose legal unit has just been set up to defend the needy, announces future projects and a great conference on the female condition. Then there's a musical ritual and finally the darshan starts. It's 9.30 a.m. Surrounded by Swamis in orange and saffron-coloured robes and devotees in white, a mass of photographers and cameramen from all the major papers and TV companies, Amma sits in the lotus position on her big stage and faces an endless line of people. There are 4 huge fans around her, as it's so hot. Devotees stand behind her with baskets of "prasad", small gifts that Amma offers to each person after the embrace: a boiled sweet, a piece of coconut milk fudge, a small apple.

The Minister of Defense, Rajagopal, helps keep the lines moving: he gently guides the head of each person approaching Amma to her shoulder, to avoid knocks or unpleasant contact. Many people have gifts or place garlands of fresh flowers around Amma's neck. Sometimes, Amma throws a small shower of rose petals over people's heads. She smiles. She caresses the old and sick as though they were children. She whispers something in everyone's ear, caresses some or laughs out loud. A truly genuine and warm hug for everyone. A large sign on the left of the stage keeps a count of the number of people Amma's hugged, going up with every hundred. At the same time, for many long hours, at the side of the great stage, there are many different musical performances and aboriginal dances, devotional Hindu songs, traditional Kokiriro dances from Japan and local Kathakali dances. Amma seems to have entered a spiral that can't be stopped. She smiles at all, her dark hands stroke people's faces, their hair, their backs. The devotees around her pray, enraptured by her presence.

And so it continues through the long hours of the night, until dawn, then it's 7.00, 7.30, 8.00. At 8.30, after an infinite festival of embraces, without a single pause or hesitation, Amma releases her soft body from the lotus position and after 23 hours of darshan, she gets up to leave the stage. The signs reads 50,000 people. Surrounded by her children, the Mother goes: amid a host of tears, joined hands and smiles, she reaches the white car that takes her off from below the stage. Flower petals are scattered along the red carpet she walked upon, incense is burnt and some people kneel down and kiss the ground the Great Mother's feet trod upon.



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