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This Guru Hugs a Lot, and Gets Lots of Love Back

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By AMY WALDMAN

COCHIN, India, Sept. 27 — In a palatial room, about 100 mostly Indian-born business leaders discussed long-term strategies for uplifting India's masses this weekend. About two miles away, those masses spiraled around a stadium, waiting for a short-term uplift — a hug, and a few whispered words of reassurance — from a small and, some say, divine woman in white.

They represented two faces of the Indian meritocracy, which has proved capable of producing some of the world's most successful technology entrepreneurs and of transforming a woman of humble roots into a global guru worshiped by millions.

This weekend they overlapped, brought together to celebrate the 50th birthday of the guru, Mata Amritanandamayi, known as Amma, or Mother. She was joined by India's deputy prime minister, Hollywood stars, peace advocates and hundreds of thousands of devotees, who lined up for her trademark "darshan" — the hug she has bestowed on what her followers say is 20 million people.

As part of the event, President A. P. J. Abdul Kalam had brought together Indian and Indian-American business leaders to help realize his vision for making India a developed nation by 2020. Some of the executives were Amma followers. Others were new initiates, like Sriram Viswanathan, a managing director at Intel, who described his hug as "pretty dramatic." Others said they would give interviews only if they were not asked questions about spirituality.

But their distance was hard to maintain. Even if he felt distaste for the Amma hagiography, including the regular references to "her holiness," any corporate titan would have to admire her advertising campaign. The chief executives were subjected to repeated showings of videos about her life and good works. In the stadium where the main celebration was held, banners featured her sayings next to the names of commercial sponsors.

The city was blanketed with her image, including larger-than-life posters of her walking on water.

It was an apt image for some of her followers — like Sindhu Nataraj, a 25-year-old housewife who waited in line to see Amma for hours this morning — who say they see her as God. When she vacated a chair, men and women knelt to stroke and kiss it. Her presence, even the mere thought of her, made some devotees weep.

This dark-skinned woman with a glowing smile has a Clintonesque ability to focus intensely on whoever is in front of her, even if she has been hugging for 10 hours straight. Like many empires, hers began small. She was born to a poor, low-caste family, the legend goes, which mistreated her and then cast her out when she began to speak of her visions of God. Eventually, a small, dedicated group of devotees gathered, moved by her compassion.

She has founded an 800-bed hospital, a medical college and a university. She has built thousands of houses for the poor. She has an ashram in Kerala that is home to 1,800 people, and about two dozen ashrams abroad, including a 160-acre complex in northern California. This week

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she was being transported in a white Mercedes.

Much of her financing comes from overseas, but Hindu nationalists, usually wary of foreign support or religion in India, are also among her fans.

Much like the executives, many of whom now live in the United States but commute back to India, she has built a bridge to the West. On her initial visit to the United States, recalled Steven Fleisher, one of her early devotees there and now general counsel of her nonprofit foundation in America, perhaps a dozen people came to see her. But her following grew. In 1997, her followers decided to "launch" her.

Rob Sidon, a marketing consultant and devotee, reached out to media outlets across the country. The initial pitch was tough, he recalled: "She hugs?" But eventually the "hugging saint" caught on, and now she draws thousands in America and elsewhere. She spends half the year on the road, including two American tours. The lines for hugs, which are free, are so long that people are given tokens to keep order.

Her Western following is enormous. The stadium was crowded with American faces, including Linda Evans of "Dynasty" fame and Yolanda King, a daughter of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

But tens of thousands of Indians also lined up for their hug. What is the appeal? Most people had trouble putting words to it. Mr. Fleisher, who is 58, compared it to the unconditional love a mother provides "even when you're bad."

K. G. Jagadish, 74, a retired engineer and executive who was waiting to hear her speak this morning, said he did not see her as God, just as a compassionate woman seeking world peace. "She's very, very pure," he said.

Using simple parables, her talk focused on elevating love over negativity, peace over anger. "Serving others should not be viewed as a tireless endeavor, but rather as an opportunity given to us by God," she said, or rather her translator did, since she spoke in Malayalam, her native language.

The chief executives' discussion, in contrast, was considerably more pragmatic. They agreed to support President Kalam's plan, Providing Urban Amenities in Rural Areas. It calls for government and business to provide jobs and infrastructure to clusters of villages, to stanch the flow of people to the cities.

The collective brainpower — and bank balances — in the room were a reminder of how India, in the 1990's, spawned a wealth of technology entrepreneurs. Sabeer Bhatia, the founder of Hotmail, was among the speakers.

The weekend seemed to pose a question: Does India need more Amma-like love and compassion, or does it need — as some of the executives argue — more wireless technology? Some combination, many suggested, including Mr. Kalam, who combines exhortations for technological progress with entreaties to preserve India's civilization.

Everyone knew the solutions, said B. V. Jagadeesh, the president and C.E.O. of Netscaler. They needed someone like Amma to bring them to the masses.

"It's about marketing," he said, "how we can use the power of Amma to deliver."

That power was evident today, when the lines wrapped around the stadium. Inside, as her Caucasian devotees turned slowly pink in a burning sun, she sat as still as a statue, eyes closed, while devotees bathed her feet in flower petals.



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