



Amma and the Tsunami
Pray & Serve

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AMMA AND THE TSUNAMI
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Mata Amritanandamayi Center
P. O. Box 613
San Ramon, CA 94583 USA

Phone: 1 (510) 537-9417
Fax: 1 (510) 889-8585
Website: www.amma.org
Email: macenter@amma.org

Also available at:
Mata Amritanandamayi Math
Amritapuri P.O.
Kollam Dt., Kerala 690525 INDIA

Phone: 91 (476) 2897578
Fax: 91 (476) 2897678
Website: www.amritapuri.org
Email: mam@amritapuri.org

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MATA AMRITANANDAMAYI MATH

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introduction

“RELIGION HELPS TO MAINTAIN A HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIP AMONG HUMAN BEINGS,
BETWEEN THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY, AND BETWEEN HUMANITY AND NATURE”

—Amma





Fishermen haul in their catch on the shores of Alappad Panchayat, the home of Amma's Amritapuri Ashram.

Although there have been many tsunamis in the past 100 years, today when people refer to the tsunami, they are referring only to the one that originated off the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia, on the morning of December 26, 2004. The aftermath of that disaster has been burned into the memory of the entire world. There are a number of reasons for this. First, there was the disaster's aftermath. It was simply gargantuan—230,000 dead, two million people displaced, 370,000 homes damaged or destroyed, 8,000 kilometers of coastline devastated and 3,000 kilometers of roads ruined¹ — not to mention incalculable emotional damage. Then, there was the fact that the disaster was not limited to one city, one state, one country or even one continent. The tsunami destroyed people and property in 12 countries², directly impacting a greater geographical area than perhaps any natural disaster in history. Furthermore, it took the lives of some 9,000 tourists, extending the tsunami's impact far beyond its physical range. And finally, due to the Internet and the then recent proliferation of the digital camera, it quickly became the most documented tragedy in human history. For better or worse, there were no restrictions placed upon the visual facts with which the world at large was confronted. Between newspapers, daily television reports and various Internet sites, the world got to see the undisputable reality that something akin to an apocalypse had taken place.

As unusual as it may sound, Amma had an intuition that something like the tsunami might take place. She said that she felt disharmony between humankind and Mother Nature and that she saw darkness when she thought about the future. Amma first mentioned this publicly in the summer of 2003, saying how she saw dark clouds gathering on the horizon and that she feared that 2005, in particular, would be a time of hardship for the world. WIE Magazine even printed an article about Amma's comments in February 2004, writing, "Let's hope this modern saint, known for her unconditional love, is mistaken." But throughout the year, whenever Amma mentioned this upcoming period of darkness, she would also always add, "Only the cool, gentle breeze of sincere and innocent prayers can lift these clouds and turn them into a shower of grace. Remember, only grace will help us."

¹ Figures taken from the UN Office of the Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery's assessment following the second anniversary of the tsunami.

² Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Maldives, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, Somalia, Tanzania, Seychelles, Bangladesh and Kenya.





On the morning of December 26, 2004, the dark clouds certainly appeared. No one will ever forget them. But the rains of grace followed. Although the tsunami took an unprecedented number of lives, it awoke compassion in the hearts of many, many more, inspiring people the world over to reach out to the suffering in the form of selfless service.

Beginning the moment the tsunami struck India and continuing to this day, Amma's organization, the Mata Amritanandamayi Math (MAM), has been dedicating its heart and soul to rehabilitate and uplift the millions of people whose lives the tsunami, in one instant, changed forever. In the past two years, ashram residents and other volunteers of MAM have constructed 4,500 tsunami-relief houses throughout India and Sri Lanka; distributed 700 fishing boats, boat engines and fishing nets; supplied food, clothing and medical care to hundreds of thousands; provided long-term psychological counseling and wellness camps for children; set up relief camps; built an escape bridge; and economically strengthened entire villages through the organization of cottage-industry cooperatives, education and job-training.

At the forefront of this was Amma. Not only was she the leader of MAM's tsunami-relief work—demonstrating an unprecedented awareness and insight with regard to disaster management—but she was also MAM's most tireless worker. During the year following the tsunami, Amma went weeks at a stretch with no more than a few hours of sleep. She would hardly even eat, so focused was she on relieving the pain and suffering of the tsunami victims. And even when Amma went to the West five months after the disaster for her annual programs there, she was constantly on a cell phone to India, inquiring about the relief work's progress and instructing various volunteers in their work.

Journalists often ask Amma what she considers to be the solution to the world's problems. Amma's answer: Compassion—compassion experienced in the heart and expressed through the hands. And this is what this book is about: How the compassion of one woman awoke love in the hearts of millions and caused the miraculous to happen.

(facing page) Amma in prayer a few weeks after the tsunami.



(above) Amma with tsunami-affected children in Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu.

(facing page) Amma embraces a tsunami survivor from Alappad Panchayat in an MAM Relief Camp on the morning after the disaster.

When people ask Amma about her religion, she replies that her religion is Love. Amma expresses this love in a very direct and immediate way—embracing one and all who come to her. In this way, during the past 36 years, Amma has hugged more than 26 million people from all over the world—wiping their tears and listening to their problems with the concern and attention of a mother.

The simple manner in which Amma presents the most profound spiritual truths, her insightful perspectives and inspired solutions to global problems have made her a much sought-after speaker on the international forum. In the past 15 years, Amma has been invited to speak at functions held at the United Nations and by the Parliament of World's Religions, the World Council of Religious Leaders, the Interfaith Center of New York, the World Movement for Non-Violence and the Global Peace Initiative.

Amma's tireless spirit and dedication to uplifting others has inspired a vast network of charitable activities through which people are discovering the beauty, personal growth and sense of peace and happiness that come from selflessly serving others. Today, Amma's volunteer organization, the Mata Amritanandamayi Math (MAM), runs a vast array of humanitarian projects. Disaster relief, houses for the homeless, financial assistance for widows and disabled people, state-of-the-art charitable hospitals, orphanages, care-homes for the elderly, reforestation, values-based universities and schools... these are but a few of the areas in which MAM is making an impact in the world.

Recognizing MAM as a vital force for positive change, the United Nations conferred "Special Consultative Status" upon the organization with the UN Economic & Social Council in 2005.



A

mrítapuri Ashram, the main center of MAM, is located on a 17.5-kilometer-long peninsula in Kerala, India, called Alappad Panchayat. In fact, Amritapuri was built up around Amma's parents' simple home. Today, Amritapuri has become a village unto itself, home to thousands of monastic and householder residents as well as visitors interested in dedicating their lives to realizing the all-pervasive Divinity through a life of meditation, contemplation and compassionate service.

The residents of Alappad have continued to live their lives much the same way as they have for hundreds of years—making their livelihoods as fishermen and from the various products that can be manufactured from the peninsula's all-pervasive coconut trees.



(above) Life on the Kerala backwaters remains very traditional, continuing, more or less, as it has for centuries.



(left) Alappad fishermen tend to their nets.
(right) Villagers cross the Kayamkulam Backwaters in traditional hand-pole canoes.

disharmony

“AMMA SEES DARKNESS AND A TIME OF DIFFICULTY COMING IN THE NEAR FUTURE,
SPECIFICALLY IN AND AROUND THE YEAR 2005. ONLY WITH THE COOL BREEZE OF
SINCERE AND INNOCENT PRAYERS CAN WE LIFT THE DARK CLOUDS AND BRING FORTH
THE RAINS OF GRACE.”

—Amma
Rhode Island, July 2003





Beginning in May of 2003, Amma regularly began mentioning that she felt the world was headed towards a difficult period—that nature and humanity were out of harmony, that nature was even “angry”. The first time Amma mentioned this publicly was in May 2003, just prior to leaving Amritapuri for her annual programs in the United States. Then, on July 26, 2003, during her program in Rhode Island, Amma repeated this statement, adding that specifically the time in and around 2005 would be a period of tragedy.

Then on December 20, 2004, while giving *darshan* (her hug) in Kozhikode, Kerala, Amma mentioned to some ashram residents that Christmas in particular was going to be a very bad time. On December 24, after meeting with Amritapuri residents, Amma began to sing a slow devotional song in a very somber *raga*. The song ended with the repeated prayer of *Om lokah samastah sukhino bhavantu* (“May all the beings in the world be happy”). As Amma repeated this prayer over and over again, everyone could see a continuous stream of tears rolling down her cheeks. Given Amma’s recent statements, the episode seemed ominous, as if the lack of harmony between man and nature was about to come to some sort of head. But what would actually happen and when, no one knew for sure.

(facing page) Amma looks out at the sky over the Arabian Sea following a severe-weather warning issued by the Kerala Government a few days after the tsunami.

impact

“THE CONSTANT HARM DONE BY HUMAN BEINGS HAS DESTROYED NATURE’S PATIENCE. SHE HAS BEGUN TO REACT. NATURAL CALAMITIES ARE INCREASING GREATLY. NATURE HAS COMMENCED HER DANCE OF FINAL DISSOLUTION.”

—Amma





The tsunami of December 26, 2004 was spawned by an earthquake off the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia that registered 9.3 on the Richter scale. The resultant swell traveled 2,000 kilometers across the Indian Ocean to reach Sri Lanka and the east and west coasts of India. In fact, its effects were felt as far as South Africa—8,500 kilometers away.

(left) This image of the second tsunami wave surging over the beach and into Alappad Panchayat was captured by an ashram resident, standing on the roof of MAM's Ayurveda Research Center.

(previous page) The tsunami turned the ashram grounds into a river of flowing water.

In Alappad Panchayat, the tsunami was experienced primarily in the form of two waves, the first of which caused little damage but flooded houses and buildings close to the shore, including Mata Amritanandamayi Math's Amrita Ayurveda Research Center. The ashram residents working there immediately began shifting all the supplies on the ground floor to the upper floors of the building.

After the first wave, the sea became calm. In fact, it began to recede—the shoreline retreating some 40 feet from its usual position. Many people from the ashram and the village had gathered to look at the unusual phenomenon; some people were even taking photographs. No one knew that this was in fact a telltale sign that another much more powerful wave was on its way.

Amma was giving darshan in the ashram temple at the time the first wave struck. As it was a Sunday and many people from around the world were spending their Christmas vacation in Amritapuri, there were more than 20,000 people in the ashram at the time.

Initially, Amma sent word for people to move their vehicles away from the water and also sent some ashram residents to the Ayurveda Research Center to assist with the moving of supplies. In the ashram, she asked people to clear anything valuable from the ground floor of the various buildings. But after a little while, Amma had the feeling that another, larger wave would soon come and immediately sent word for everyone to come to the ashram and take shelter on the second and third floors. She had announcements made over the PA system in 18 languages.



(above) A shot from the roof of MAM's Ayurveda Research Center, just following the first tsunami wave. The rock sea-wall visible in the picture was constructed by the Kerala Government in the early 1990s in order to prevent the sea from encroaching upon the land.



(left and below) Not long after the first wave, the sea receded some 40 feet. No one knew this was a sign that a second much larger wave would soon arrive.

(right) Ashram residents, visitors and villagers take in the strange phenomenon.





Hearing Amma's announcement, students who were eating at that time quickly ran to the upper floors of their hostel. Devotees in the ashram's main hall sought shelter on the raised stage where Amma sings *bhajans* (devotional songs). And a family visiting their relatives in Alappad—even though they were not devotees—quickly drove across the bridge to the mainland. Later, they told Amma that they had just started crossing when the second wave hit and surely would have been killed if they had not heeded Amma's warning.

(left) Ashram residents, working in MAM's Ayurveda Research Center watch helplessly as the second wave sweeps through the Center's grounds and into the village.

(right) An ashram resident clings to safety.





(above) The cement wall around the Ayurveda Research Center compound was washed away. There was chaos and confusion everywhere. Huts and houses were being washed away. Power lines were down. The air was filled with the sound of men shouting, women screaming.

(right) Two ashram residents seek shelter as the second wave rushes past them. As the water rushed in through the open doorway, they were trapped. Unlike many other buildings in the area, luckily, this structure did not collapse. The residents were later rescued.





The second wave came at 12:52 p.m. Within seconds, the ashram was waist-deep in water. As Alappad is a peninsula running parallel with the coast (the Arabian Sea to the west and the Kayamkulam Backwaters to the east), there was nowhere for the water to go, and all of Alappad remained submerged for several hours. Hearing Amma's announcement, the resident in charge of the ashram's electricity supply ran to the electrical room and threw the main power switch off seconds before the wave flooded the ashram—an act that undoubtedly saved many lives.



(facing page) Villagers waded through the flood waters towards the ashram grounds, seeking shelter.

(above left) An ashram resident in charge of the electricity supply barely managed to shut off the main power switch before the electrical room was flooded.
(above right) Even cars were swept away by the floodwaters.



“When the tsunami hit the ashram, I heard loud and strange sounds, including screaming. I jumped from my room. Then I saw that the wave from the Arabian Sea had just come and covered the ashram grounds. It had happened so suddenly. I remember thinking, ‘Before the power of nature, we are so helpless.’”

—Reiko Imanishi, Japan

(right and left) Ashram residents watch as the ashram grounds turn into a river of flowing water.



response

“AT THIS MOMENT OF DEEP SORROW, LET US LEND A HELPING HAND TO THOSE WHO ARE GRIEVING AND THUS LIGHT LAMPS OF KINDNESS AND COMPASSION. THIS, INDEED, IS OUR DUTY AND RESPONSIBILITY AT THIS MOMENT.”

—Amma





(preceding page) Villagers are taken across the backwaters on skiffs or boats.

(left) One ashram resident tugged a small row boat to the staircase where Amma was standing. He wanted to take her to safety, but she refused go without her children (the devotees and residents).



(right) Having made her decision to relocate everyone to the mainland, Amma had a safety-line strung all the way from the temple to the jetty.

Visitors and ashram residents seek shelter on the roof of the ashram's main temple.



As soon as the second wave hit, Amma began marshalling the rescue operation. At first, she gave instructions from the temple balcony. She started by calling for the evacuation of all the villagers and the people visiting the ashram. As the only bridge connecting Alappad Panchayat with the mainland was far away on the south end of the peninsula, Amma decided that everyone should be moved across the backwaters using the ashram boats and village skiffs. There they could be accommodated at Mata Amritanandamayi Math's Amrita University.

To make it easier for her to swim in case she needed to rescue someone, Amma simplified her dress, wrapping her upper body in a yellow shawl. She then came down into the floodwaters to personally oversee the evacuation process.

Amma made sure that everyone in each family was together before sending them across the backwaters in the boats. She was concerned that if families didn't cross together, they would not be able to find each other once on the other side and therefore not know whether their loved ones were safe. Amma sent the villagers across first, then the Indian and Western visitors, and finally the ashram residents. Amma also had the ashram residents carry all the patients from MAM's charitable hospital to the boats.

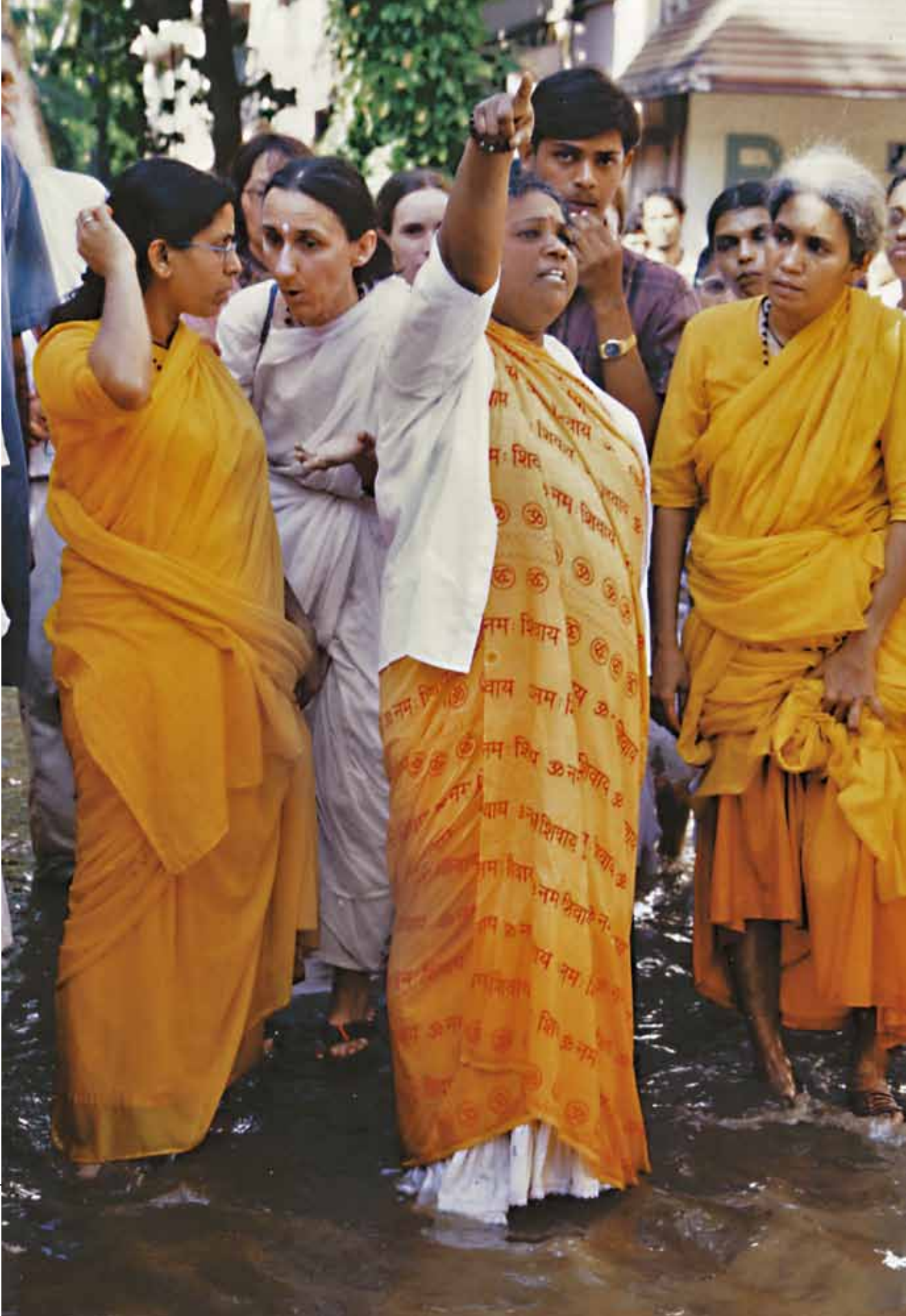


(above) Amma instructs from the temple balcony.
(right) Amma descends into the flood waters



(above) Amma made sure families were not separated during the evacuation, and that all visiting foreign nationals had their passports with them.

(right) Amma went around the entire ashram, giving directions for the evacuation of the ashram and villages, and the set up of relief operations. She sent an ashram resident to the mainland to buy milk, tea powder and sugar in order to prepare chai for the evacuees.



While Amma was overseeing the evacuation, she simultaneously directed the conversion of MAM's university buildings and Amrita School of Ayurveda, Hospital & Research Center on the mainland into relief camps. She told the ashram residents in charge of the kitchen to start cooking for 10,000 people. She also called her ashrams in Chennai, Madurai and Coimbatore and instructed the *brahmacharis* (initiates) in charge to immediately head for Nagapattinam with doctors, student-volunteers, medical supplies and food. (Nagapattinam would turn out to be the worst-hit area in all of India, with more than 7,000 people killed in the district.) Furthermore, Amma called devotees in Andaman Island, inquired about the situation and mobilized a relief team.

Amma was the last person to leave the ashram, reaching the mainland after midnight. She said that she left only because she knew that if she did not do so, some of the ashram residents would also refuse to leave.

MAM's educational institutions accommodated 4,000 families. MAM supplied all of its relief centers, as well those of others, with round-the-clock services, including food, water, clothes, sleeping mats, blankets, soap, toothbrushes and toothpaste. Seven fully equipped ambulances with doctors and nurses from AIMS, MAM's state-of-the-art charitable hospital in Cochin, made regular rounds of MAM and non-MAM relief centers in Kollam District, Kerala. Five more ambulances were sent to affected areas in Tamil Nadu. In the first 24 hours alone, MAM distributed more than Rs. 600,000 (\$13,800 U.S.) in medicines.



(above) Ashram residents carry an old woman from her room in MAM's Charitable Hospital to the boat jetty for evacuation.



The ashram cows (left) and elephants (right) were accommodated in the ashram temple. Later that day, after the floodwaters had receded, the elephants were taken to the mainland by foot over the bridge about 4.5 kilometers south of the ashram.



(left) In total, some 20,000 people from Amritapuri were evacuated, as well as all of the villagers living around the ashram.





(facing page and above) The ashram's motorboats and village skiffs were used to evacuate the peninsula, bringing people to the safety of the mainland.

(above right) Ashram visitors walk to the Amrita University Campus.

The view of the flooded and agitated Kayamkulam Backwaters from the ashram flats immediately following the second tsunami wave.



day after

“MY CHILDREN, PRAY FOR EVERYONE IN THE WORLD. PRAY FOR THOSE WHO ARE DEAD AND ALSO FOR THOSE WHO ARE LIVING. PRAY FOR THE WIVES WHO LOST THEIR HUSBANDS. PRAY FOR THE CHILDREN WHO LOST THEIR PARENTS. PRAY FOR THE PARENTS WHO LOST THEIR CHILDREN.”

—Amma





The following morning, while medical and food supplies were being mobilized all over the region, Amma visited the villagers in Mata Amritanandamayi Math's relief camps and inquired about their well-being. When Amma saw someone with a wound, cut or bandage, she would ask them what had happened. Were they in pain? Did they have medicine? Were all their family members accounted for? Were their neighbors alright?

Many of the evacuees from the villages were Amma's devotees. As Amma walked amongst them, she commented that many of them didn't even know that they had lost their children or relatives yet. Some had died from being knocked unconscious and then drowning in the water; others, when a tree or a piece of a house fell on them. Ashram residents had already removed four dead bodies from the backwaters. Two were those of a mother and her child—the mother on the western shore, the child on the east. They would remove dozens more in the next 24 hours.

The people staying in the relief camps were in a state of utter shock and desolation. Some were silent, almost catatonic; others wailed in emotional pain. As Amma lovingly caressed and kissed their foreheads, tears rolled down her cheeks.

(preceding and facing page) Amma consoles tsunami-affected villagers in an MAM relief camp on the morning after the tsunami.

At one point, Amma came across a family whose father had been killed by a falling wall. The entire family was there—the father who had lost a son... the wife who had lost her husband... the children who had lost their father... At such times, words have no meaning. For 10 minutes, Amma simply cried with them—wiping the tears of the mother, the wife, the grandfather, the children, as well as her own.

Soon the wife started crying to Amma. Her wails came rhythmic and melodic, almost like a song: “Oh, Amma! My Amma! How difficult it is to see Amma like this. Now we are having this chance. But you (her husband) are not here. You are not having this chance with us. Oh, Amma, you are my only salvation. My beloved Amma!”

The tears flowed ceaselessly from Amma’s eyes. The grief of the entire family was reflected therein. Amma had the children on her lap, the wife in her arms, while the grandfather was holding Amma from behind, almost laying across her back.

Amma consoled them and encouraged the young boy, telling him that he had to be strong so he could be the support for his family. “Don’t worry. Amma is there with you,” she told him. The wife eventually seemed to have cried herself out. She then fell into Amma’s arms like a wilted plant. Amma silently held her as she gasped for air, like a child who cannot calm down after crying.





At the camp set up at the Amrita Ayurveda College, Hospital & Research Center, Amma came across many people suffering from small injuries and mental shock. One of the patients was Bhargavan (bottom left), an old man who, long ago, would blow the conch with one hand and ring the temple bell with the other at the beginning and end of Amma's darshan. He had some minor injuries. "Amma, I had been praying you would come and see me," he said. Amma bent down and kissed him on the forehead. From where he was lying on the bed, he lifted up his arm and wrapped it around Amma's neck.

There was also a lady there who lost a child (bottom right). She was in severe shock—not speaking or eating, just sitting, staring with a blank look on her face. Amma made her lie down and asked the doctors if they could give her some medicine to help her sleep. She also told some female ashram residents to watch over the lady's surviving two-year-old baby.



(above left) Amma kisses Bhargavan, a longtime devotee in MAM's Ayurveda College, Hospital & Research Center.

(above right) Amma with a lady in a state of shock after the loss of her child.

(facing page) Amma consoles a woman whose father was killed.

“As soon as the people were across, Amma started telling us to send food. We loaded all the cooked food and vegetables in handcarts. It was quite hard to push them through the mud to the boat jetty, but we had lots of volunteers. It was difficult getting the really big pots onto the boats. In all, we took more than 100 pots and 5,000 plates. Somehow we made *kanji* (rice soup) for dinner, but the kitchen was not fully operational until 1:00 a.m. And that was just in the nick of time, because had it been any later, we wouldn’t have been able to finish cooking the *uppumav* (savory wheat cereal) and curry needed for the evacuees’ breakfast. From then on, it just carried on like that—three meals a day, working around the clock. Finally we made some shifts, so we could at least get some rest.”

—Akshay (Matthias Schneiderhahn)
ashram resident

(right) During the first 15 days after the tsunami struck the Kerala coast, 15 tons of uppumav were prepared and 22,500 liters of milk were distributed to children in Kollam District.

The ashram residents and visiting devotees took care of all the needs of the evacuees staying at the relief camps of MAM as well as those of others. They chopped vegetables, cooked the rice, curry and *sambar* (spicy lentil soup), made the yoghurt and then loaded the big vessels of food onto trucks, drove the food to the camps, unloaded it and served it. Everyone knew that Amma had not slept or eaten since the disaster struck, and this inspired them to sacrifice their own personal needs as well, giving them the ability to work around the clock. Ashram residents even gave up their own straw sleeping mats to ensure that none of the villagers had to sleep directly on the floor.



(facing page) Amma gave instructions for relief camps to be set up at Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham (Amrita University). For six months, some 4,000 families were accommodated in various university buildings. In fact many of MAM’s educational institutions remained closed in order to continue to provide shelter for the evacuees.





In Kollam District, in the two weeks following the tsunami, MAM daily served meals to the people accommodated in its own camps as well as to 15,000 evacuees in other camps. In the relief camps set up in Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu, MAM prepared and served 795,000 meals. When the government allowed the villagers to return to Alappad, there was still no electricity or running water there. To ensure everyone had enough food and water, MAM set up a couple dozen food counters along the peninsula's main road, providing water and meals three times a day. MAM continued this service for more than four months. Sanal Kumar, a resident of Alappad who works as a lawyer in Kerala's High Court, commented, "If it weren't for Amma, there would have been riots among the people."

In the end, MAM served a total 7.5 million meals as part of its tsunami-relief program.

(top left) After the evacuation, Amma's first concern was supplying food to the evacuees.

(middle left) Ashram residents chop vegetables for breakfast in the early hours of the morning.

(bottom left) preparing uppumav.

(below and facing page) Amma oversees the food preparation and distribution at Amrita University.





All meals were provided to the families housed in the Amrita University campuses. MAM also fed many visitors from other camps that had run out of food, including the police, the army and other disaster-relief personnel.





(right) In Alappad Panchayat, MAM provided three meals daily at a couple dozen food counters it set up in Alappad for more than four months following the tsunami.
(left) Serving food in Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu.



“When we reached Nagapattinam, we saw bodies strewn everywhere,” said Brahmachari Vinayamrita Chaitanya. “My first instinct was to help remove them, but then I decided that the living, who were without food, needed our help more. So we started the cooking.”



(left) A team of 10 doctors, complete with nurses and paramedical assistants, was sent to Kollam, Kerala. Another team with seven doctors, nurses and paramedical assistants was sent to Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu.



(left) 12 fully equipped ambulances from AIMS, MAM's hospital in Cochin, were sent to the worst-hit areas in Kerala (Alappad and Vyppin) and Tamil Nadu (Chennai and Nagapattinam).



(facing page) Ashram doctors immediately started making rounds of both the MAM and other relief camps set up across the backwaters from Alappad. Within the first 48 hours alone, they saw 2,000 patients.



As none of the villagers had any clothes apart from the muddy, damp ones they were wearing, Amma's supporters in Dubai and Delhi immediately sent thousands of brand-new saris and dhotis. MAM also cleared out its flooded storerooms and, after washing and drying all the clothes therein (below), distributed them amongst the villagers. The one thing seriously lacking was underclothing—especially women's underskirts. These were sewn by ashram residents, with Amma joining in (facing page).



(above right) Ashram residents distribute thousands of relief kits to people in Kollam District the day after the tsunami struck. The kits included clothing, sandals, sleeping mats, bed sheets and other essential items.

devastation

“‘MY’ HOUSE, ‘MY’ LIFE, ‘MY’ BELONGINGS, ‘MY’ CHILDREN—ALL
DISAPPEARED IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE. UNEXPECTED SITUATIONS LIKE
THIS TEACH US THAT NOTHING IS REALLY OURS.”

—Amma
February 12, 2005
Tamil Nadu





(left) According to the Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs Report (May 25, 2005), 157,393 houses were destroyed by the tsunami in India. This photo was taken in Alappad Panchayat, very close to the ashram.

(previous page) An ashram resident tries to console a woman whose child will soon be cremated in Alappad.



Before the tsunami
January 10, 2003
Lhoknga, Aceh Province,
Sumatra, Indonesia

This image was taken by
GeoEye's IKONOS Satellite



Three days after the tsunami
December 29, 2004
Lhoknga, Aceh Province,
Sumatra, Indonesia

This image was taken by
GeoEye's IKONOS Satellite

W

hen the tsunami hit India, it caused inestimable damage, devastating the lives of thousands in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Pondicherry and islands such as Andaman and Nicobar. In many cases, those affected had lost their homes, close family and friends, and their sources of income all at once. Their sources of emotional support had also been swept away along with their material belongings—Individual families as well as the wider community were all in the same state of profound shock, grief and anxiety.

Although not one ashram resident or person visiting the ashram was seriously injured, 142 people were killed throughout Alappad Panchayat. Some drowned and others were crushed when their houses caved in due to the force of the waters. The majority of the dead were women and children. In fact, the region had been hit harder than any other place on India's west coast. Thousands of houses had collapsed, fishing boats and nets had been destroyed, and life savings in the form of currency notes and humble amounts of gold jewelry had been washed away from cupboards. Fishermen, traumatized by the violence of the sea, had lost their confidence and felt extremely anxious about returning to the ocean for work. The situation in the east was much worse. In the Nagapattinam District of Tamil Nadu, more than 7,000 people died and 12 villages were completely washed away.



(above) A boy from Nagapattinam picks through rubble left by the tsunami.

(right and above) The Nagapattinam District of Tamil Nadu was one of the worst-hit areas.





(above) Fishing boats smashed by the tsunami in Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu. 83,788 boats were damaged or destroyed in India alone, snatching away the livelihoods of countless people (Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs Report, May 25, 2005).



(above) Approximately 730,000 individuals were forced to leave their homes. 75% of the people affected were women and children. In India, 787 women became widows and 480 children were orphaned. (Source for all figures: Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs Report, May 25, 2005).



“The people are simply shell-shocked,” says one of Amma’s senior brahmacharis who has been helping with relief work in Tamil Nadu. “They didn’t know what to do. Believing that their children were doomed to drown, they even put them in the boats, so at least they would have a chance. Miraculously, some such children were found three km away with only bruises.”

(right) When the tsunami waves pounded the fishing villages near Chennai, hundreds of wooden boats moored on the shore were sent flying. They struck people, destroyed houses and smashed into cars. Some came down, riding waves as tall as 40 feet.





In Alappad, MAM's doctors tended hundreds of patients each day for weeks on end. "All they know is gone," said Dr. Ashok, an ashram resident who serves as a neurosurgeon at AIMS, the Mata Amritanandamayi Math's hospital in Cochin. "Imagine, you have nothing but a small house on the beach for 30 or 40 years and then, in five minutes, that is completely washed away. They have lost daughters, husbands, wives, fathers. Some are suffering from small wounds, cuts, abrasions, pieces of glass lodged in their feet. We treated someone the other day for a fractured rib. But the big problem is depression and anxiety. They really need people to talk to them. We ask them a few questions, calm them down, and then they immediately open up and just start crying. They tell us, 'My house is gone' or 'I lost my child... I lost my wife.'"

Dr. Ram Mohan, another ashram resident who serves at MAM's Amrita Kripa Charitable Hospital in Amritapuri, told a similar tale. "One man came in the other day, and from his demeanor you could immediately tell something was seriously wrong. He was reactionless, completely without emotion, indifferent. Gradually we came to realize that five people in his family had been killed."

(facing page) A woman from Alappad Panchayat sits on the stoop of the remains of her family home.

(right) Many of the houses along the shore were completely destroyed in Alappad.





(above left) Broken dreams: A fisherman sits on the broken remains of his boat. He has lost not only his house but also his means of income. Alappad Panchayat, Kerala.

(above right) Volunteers from MAM reached Nagapattinam soon after the waters receded. Death and destruction were all around. They helped cremate hundreds of dead and served those that were wounded and struggling to survive.



(above left) Many cows and other domestic animals were tethered and couldn't escape. 31,755 livestock were lost in India (Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs Report, May 25, 2005).

(above right) Not just boats were destroyed. Cars, auto rickshaws, buses and, in Sri Lanka, trains too were washed away.



(above) Most of the houses in Azhikkal had collapsed as the waters surged in, taking the people inside along with it.

(below) Instructed by Amma, Swami Amritaswarupananda Puri (MAM's vice-chairman), along with other swamis (monastic disciples), visited every single house along the coastal line in Alappad and collected the exact figures of the villagers' losses—including the damage to their houses, loss of household utensils, clothes, fishing boats, nets and money. They also recorded the number of deaths.



(below) A small village shrine uprooted - Alappad.



(above and right) Brahmachari Abhayamrita Chaitanya, a monastic resident of MAM, consoles residents of Nagapattinam.





(above) A young boy performs the funeral rites for his father in Alappad.

(below) Villagers help carry the dead.



When the sun set two days after the tsunami—its sullen red color streaking across the sky—wails of grief filled the air in Alappad’s Azhikkal Beach. There, cremations were being arranged for the 42 bodies that had so far been recovered. Ashram residents helped move firewood for the funeral pyres, together with people from many other organizations. Even members of rival political groups could be seen working together hand in hand. The tragedy had, at least temporarily, washed away any sense of division amongst the villagers.



On December 28, 2004, ashram residents took part in the mass cremation (above) held in Alappad Panchayat. Before the pyres were lit, they chanted the eighth chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita. (right).





Most households had lost one or two family members, and Amma's female ashram residents consoled the mourners. As the bodies of the dead arrived, the cries of relatives became particularly intense. The bodies were first placed in a tent so that the relatives of the deceased could see their loved ones one last time. When one large coffin was opened, it exposed the body of a tiny child (right). Five different women ran to it, believing it to be their own. Many fainted as they paid their last tributes to their loved ones. Before the funeral pyres were lit, ashram residents chanted the eighth chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita, which discusses the journey of the soul after death, as part of the traditional last rites.

Earlier, when the beach was being leveled for the cremations, the bodies of two more children were uncovered. Parents of children who were still missing—already hysterical with grief—rushed forward to see if it was their own child lying in this sandy grave.





(left) Mourning and shock at the cremation grounds



(below) Ashram residents maintained vigil with the bereaved throughout the night, as the cremation pyres blazed.

(following pages) As the sun set, some collapsed, physically and emotionally exhausted.



pledge

“WE CANNOT RESTORE THE LIVES OF THOSE WHO LEFT US. EVEN SO, EACH ONE OF US CAN DISCHARGE OUR RESPONSIBILITY OF CONSOLING AND PACIFYING THOSE DISTRESSED SOULS WHO ARE ALIVE.”

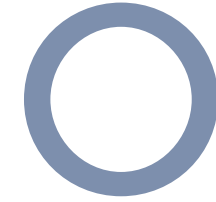
—Amma





(left) Three days after the tsunami struck, MAM erected temporary shelters for hundreds of families in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. In Kerala, five of nine shelters constructed in Srayikkad, Alappad Panchayat, Kollam District, were completed on January 13, 2005. The remaining four were completed by January 25, 2005. All the shelters were equipped with electric lights, fans, running water and TVs.

(preceding page) a girl from Alappad smiles as she eats her lunch, provided by MAM.



On January 3, 2005, Amma pledged Rs. 100 crores (\$23 million U.S.) for tsunami-relief efforts in India. The pledge was one of the biggest pledges by a non-government organization at the time and it quickly made international headlines—appearing in newspapers, magazines and nightly news programs throughout the world. A few months later, an additional Rs. 3 crores (\$690,000 U.S.) was earmarked for relief efforts in Sri Lanka through Healthcare Charities Inc., a not-for-profit organization set up by Amma's supporters in the West.

The funds were to be used for a broad range of relief efforts, including reconstruction of homes destroyed by the tsunami throughout India (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands) and Sri Lanka. Initially, Amma pledged that the Mata Amritanandamayi Math would rebuild all the houses destroyed in Kerala, but as there were other organizations wanting to contribute, MAM eventually committed to build 6,200 houses in total. These would be built according to state-government specifications.

Amma also announced that she would provide a total of Rs. 1.5 crores (\$345,000 U.S.) to affected families living in the Kerala districts of Kollam, Alappuzha and Ernakulam to be used for buying essential household items—approximately Rs. 1,000 per affected family.



(left) Amma announces MAM's Rs. 100,00,00,000 (\$23 million US) tsunami-relief package during a press conference in Amritapuri.



(above) Hoping to get MAM's construction plan approved by the Kerala Government, Amma met with Kerala Chief Minister Oommen Chandy in Amritapuri on January 30, 2005. MAM's tsunami-house plan called for the coastal villagers to have the option of a second story, as many children were now too afraid to sleep on the ground floor. Eventually the plan was accepted with the government making a few additions.



(left and below) Unaccustomed to banking, most villagers had kept all their money in their houses. When everything was washed away, they had no money for even basic necessities. MAM helped thousands of villagers get back on their feet by distributing cash..



(facing page) In Arattuphuza, Alappuzha District, Kerala, Swami Amritaswarupananda Puri distributes cash allotments to villagers.



The next day when reporters asked Amma how she could commit such a vast sum, Amma praised the hard work of her ashram residents and the compassion of her devotees throughout the world. “There are some 3,000 ashram residents here,” Amma said. “They work day in and day out, and they don’t take any payment for their work.”

“I have many good children,” Amma continued, referring to her millions of devotees around the world. “They all do what they can.” Amma went on to explain how even some small children make dolls or small statues and sell them so that they can give the earnings to Amma for her charitable activities. “Some children—when presented with money on their birthday or when their parents tell them that they can have an ice cream—say that they would like to give that money to Amma instead, telling their parents how Amma can use it for supporting poor children. Other children come up to Amma and offer their savings, saying that it can be used to buy pens for poor students. Amma doesn’t want to accept this—as other children who have nothing to offer may then feel sad—but when Amma sees the goodness of their hearts, she has no choice. The government alone cannot do everything. Would these children give this money to the government with the same love as they would give to Amma?”

Amma went on to explain how, when the government allocates money for relief projects, much of it is dissipated in wages. “At the hands of people doing service as a salaried job, one million dollars becomes only 100,000 dollars by the time the money reaches the people who should benefit from those funds. It is like pouring oil from one container into another and then into another and so forth. After doing this many times, there is no oil left because some of it sticks to each container. But with those who are engaged in selfless service, it is quite different. Such people may receive hundreds of thousands of dollars but will deliver the equivalent of millions to people in need. This is because their motives are selfless; they simply desire to benefit society. Rather than take any pay for themselves, they give all they can to those who are suffering.”

Amma concluded, “In today’s world, people experience two types of poverty: the poverty caused by lack of food, clothing, and shelter, and the poverty caused by lack of love and compassion. Of these two, the second type needs to be considered first—because, if we have love and compassion in our hearts, then we will wholeheartedly serve those who suffer from lack of food, clothing and shelter.”

“I don’t lay any claims to having done anything,” Amma said, going on to add that without the volunteers the relief work would not have been possible. “My children are my wealth.”

(facing page) Ashram residents along with others labored day and night to quickly erect temporary shelters to house the villagers made homeless by the tsunami in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.



Before the construction of the permanent houses could begin, it was necessary to build some form of temporary lodgings for the people. The people could not stay in the government camps forever. And many families were being housed in schools and colleges where classes were scheduled to resume. In order to solve the problem, MAM rapidly constructed temporary shelters in an area of Alappad known as Srayikkad, where it owned 11 acres of land. The shelters—which consisted of concrete floors, tin roofs, electricity, ceiling fans, TVs and separate bathrooms—were started within one week after the disaster and were finished within 10 days after Amma’s announcement. Nine such shelters were built in Srayikkad and 100 in Samanthampettai, a village in Nagapattinam. Between both sites, shelter was provided for 550 families. MAM also provided land in Srayikkad for the Kerala government to construct temporary shelters upon as well.

(below) Temporary shelters in Srayikkad, Alappad Panchayat, Kollam District, Kerala.



(below) Kerala Revenue Minister K.M. Mani inaugurates MAM's shelters at Srayikkad in Alappad Panchayat. The shelters were equipped with bathrooms, running water, electricity and TVs.



(above right) Ashram residents provide food for the villagers residing in the temporary shelters constructed by MAM in Srayikkad, Alappad Panchayat.



(above) Br. Abhayamrita Chaitanya distributes gas-stoves to residents of the Nagapattinam temporary shelters.

(Facing page) Constructing the temporary shelters in Samanthampettai, Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu. The shelters were completed by January 13, 2005.





After returning from the mainland, ashram residents and visiting devotees started to clean up the ashram. All the ground-floor rooms were full of water and sludge. Books, CDs and tapes from the bookstore, paper from the Ashram's printing press, as well as chairs, tables, utensils and other debris were strewn all over the ground, and needed to be cleaned or thrown away.



(top and middle) Salvaging books and photos.



(bottom) Cleaning the main hall in Amritapuri.

(facing page) "If you don't smile, you'll cry."
An ashram resident cleans waste in Amritapuri.





Within days, ashram residents began cleaning up the entire Alappad coast—a job that would last months. The villagers were paralyzed with shock and completely overwhelmed. After clearing load after load of rubble and sludge and burning the rubbish, they began cleaning all houses left intact—walls, floors, clothes, utensils, toilets and furniture.



(facing page) The ashram residents work tirelessly to clean up tsunami-devastated villages in Alappad.



(above left) Ashram residents and visitors from around the world help dig holes for waste at relief camps throughout Kollam District, Kerala.
(above right) Riding the bus to help clean relief camps.



(left) Amma distributes sacks of raw rice as she gives darshan in Nagapattinam.



(left) MAM distributed more than 75,000 new pieces of clothing and 30,000 blankets in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.



(left) In Kerala, 20,000 kilograms of rice were distributed to evacuees when they left the relief camps.

In Tamil Nadu, MAM distributed 185 tons of raw rice, 4.5 tons of dhal, 2.1 tons of powdered milk, 1.5 tons of flour, 1.5 tons of sugar and 1.1 tons of cooking oil.

In addition to the widespread emergency medical assistance that MAM provided in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, long-term medical care was also provided in the weeks and months that followed. Treatment was free for all the affected villagers, and villagers were sent by bus from Amritapuri to AIMS Hospital in Cochin every morning for months on end. MAM's AIMS Hospital treated 900 victims of the tsunami, and of those, 510 were admitted as inpatients; 450 of them underwent major surgeries, which included 15 cardiac operations. MAM doctors also set up 20 eye camps throughout Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and performed 115 cataract operations. Sixteen women who were pregnant at the time of the tsunami were cared for throughout their pregnancies and deliveries, and were also provided with postnatal care.

(left below) MAM distributed 400 spectacles to those who lost their eyeglasses during the tsunami.



(right below) 3 of the 16 women sent to AIMS for prenatal check-ups and eventual deliveries (pictured with their family members).



At MAM's temporary shelters in Alappad Panchayat, a telemedicine center was set up to connect the doctors stationed there (below), with the doctors stationed at AIMS Hospital via satellite (left).



In Alappad there were a number of women who had not only lost all of their children in the tsunami, but were also incapable of having any more in the future. Their infertility was due to fallopian-tube ligations they had previously elected to undergo as a form of permanent contraception. The shock and depression of these ladies was so great that they were hardly eating and many of them were contemplating suicide. In fact, they did not tell Amma about their situation, but Amma understood regardless. Amma called these women to the ashram and told them that she wanted to do everything she could for them, and that she would gladly sponsor the reversal of their contraceptive surgeries at AIMS Hospital so that they could once again know the joy of being a mother. In the end, six women elected to have the surgery. MAM paid for everything—their trips back and forth from AIMS, their surgeries, their pre- and post surgical care, even special fertility drugs from Switzerland for those having difficulty conceiving. Eventually, four of the women delivered children—two of them having twins. (See page 248 for more details.)



(above) A survivor of the Kumbhakonam schoolhouse fire
(right) Amma meets with parents from Kumbhakonam in her room.



MAM sponsored the tubal-ligation reversals of these six women from Alappad who not only lost all their children in the tsunami, but who were also infertile due to elective contraceptive procedures.

In the summer of 2005, a schoolhouse caught fire in Kumbhakonam, Tamil Nadu, killing nearly 100 children and injuring many others. Soon after the tragedy, the parents of the children who died and were injured came to Amritapuri to have Amma's *darshan*. Also there at the time were villagers affected by the tsunami. Both sets of parents cried to Amma, explaining how their surviving children lived in fear—some of water, some of fire. The mothers from Kumbhakonam told Amma that their children would scream and throw water on the stoves when they were lit for cooking. The mothers from the tsunami-affected areas told Amma how their children could not sleep if it was raining or if the sea waves were too loud.

In the week following the disaster, under Amma's guidance, MAM started the Amrita Tsunami Rehabilitation Project, comprised of a team of doctors, psychologists and social workers from AIMS. Its goal was to provide free assistance to tsunami victims suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as well as other physical, psychological, social and financial problems. Amma was particularly concerned about affected children. She sent ashram residents to regularly play and sing *bhajans* (devotional songs) with the children at the relief camps, and arranged for AIMS psychologists to provide counseling. At Amma's request, the doctors had the children draw pictures of their experiences. Amma said that it was vitally important to offer the children a means of expressing themselves and opening up about their tragic experiences. Many of them drew pictures of flooded villages and people clinging to coconut trees in order to save themselves.



Psychologists from AIMS, counsel a tsunami-affected child. Although some children showed signs of emotional problems, for the most part they fared the best, said the doctors. "Being in the relief camps has actually been good for them," said Dr. Siju. "They are playing all the time, so they are very happy. The camps have really helped them."

(facing page) As part of psychological counseling, children were asked to draw pictures of their experiences. An ashram resident encourages children to express themselves.





(facing page) Nidhiraj drew himself clinging to the top of a coconut tree while his family struggles in the water below.



(right) Jayasatha, 14, drew her life as she knew it—submerged.

(below) Siva Ranjini, age 13, drew a picture of her mother and herself safe inside their house. The figure in yellow depicts those who had drowned.





A volunteer teaches music classes to children living in MAM's relief camps.

MAM was dedicated to seeing that the education of the affected children did not suffer due to the tragedy. Brahmacharis and ashram residents shared uplifting stories and value-based teachings with the children, and buses were provided to assure the children were able to get to their schools regardless of where they were being temporarily housed.



A Japanese resident plays with children living at MAM's temporary shelter in Srayikkad, Alappad Panchayat.





On a number of occasions Amma herself got into the pool and played with the children, helping them learn to swim.

It was only a week after the tsunami hit that Amma first mentioned her idea of providing swimming lessons for the village children in the ashram pool. So many had become petrified of “Mother Ocean” since the day she washed away their homes, family and friends. “Only through water will they be able to overcome their fear of water,” Amma said. Regular lessons began at the ashram in March 2005, and became a part of MAM’s successful camps held for “tsunami kids” in April and May. On a number of occasions Amma herself got into the pool with the children and played with them, helping them learn to swim.





(above and pages 138-139) Amma and all 3,000 ashram residents walk to the cremation site in Alappad.

Sixteen days after the tsunami hit, Amma walked three kilometers north, together with thousands of ashram residents and devotees, to the site where the mass cremation had taken place on Azhikkal Beach. Along the way, it was one long litany of sorrow: roofs caved in, walls collapsed, a church destroyed, a temple washed away. Half a boat hull, half a house, half a family. It was a road of ghosts, with women sitting on stoops holding their heads in their hands and men half-heartedly burning rubbish in their front yards.

In the Hindu tradition, the 16th day marks the end of the daily death rites. Amma was going to pray for the peace of the souls of the dead and for those they had left behind. As the procession moved forward, the participants chanted aloud the peace mantra *Om lokah samastah sukhino bhavantu*—"May all the beings in all the worlds be happy."

Small clay oil lamps in hand, the ashram residents walk to the cremation grounds.







When Amma reached Azhikkal Beach, she asked everyone to light and hold small clay oil lamps, and then to stand in a formation spelling out the peace mantra in the local language of Malayalam.

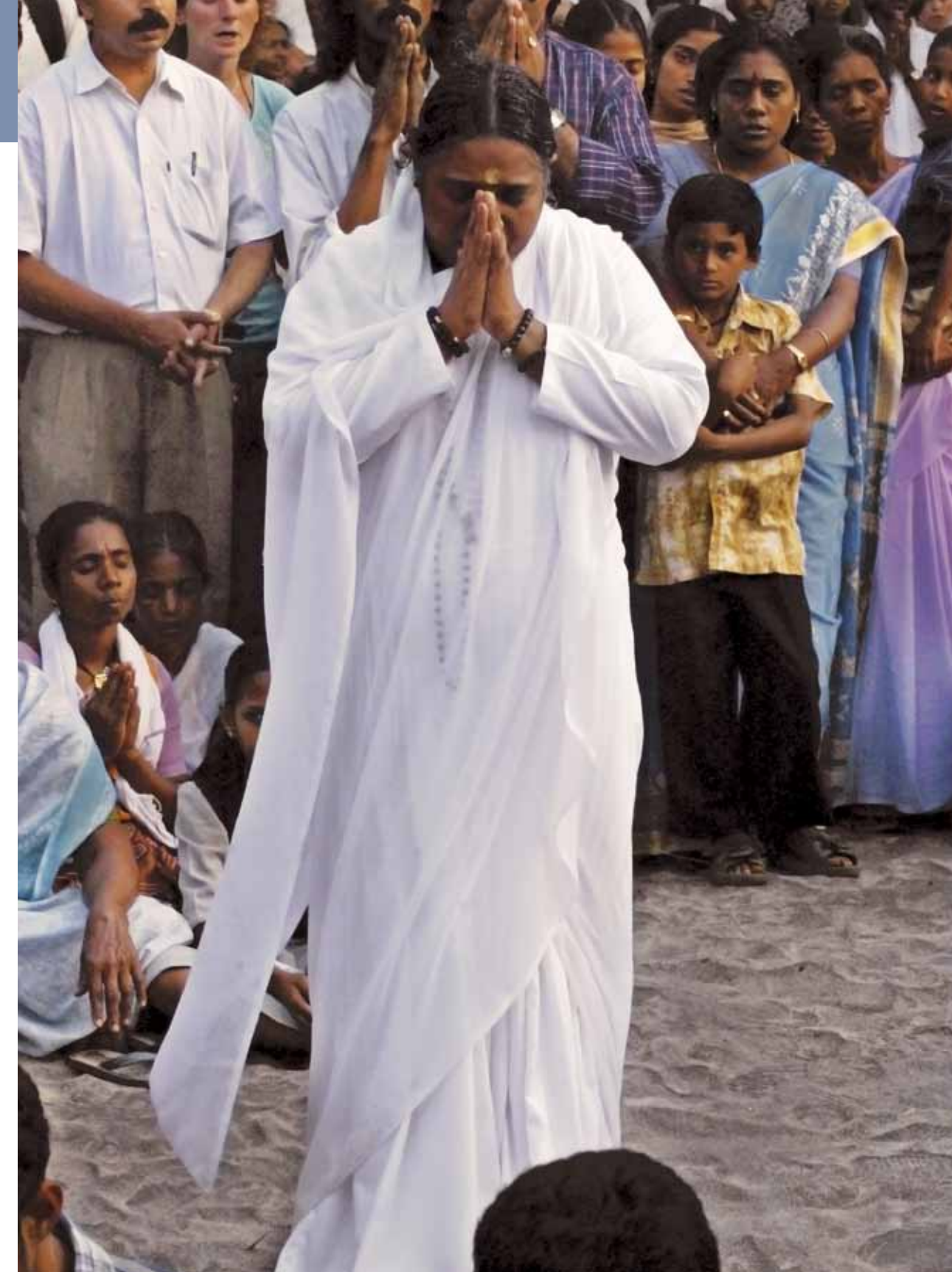
“My children, pray for everyone in the world,” Amma said. “Pray for those who are dead and also for those who are living. Pray for the wives who lost their husbands. Pray for the children who lost their parents. Pray for the parents who lost their children.

“We may claim that we are the ones who are doing everything, but before we could even blink our eyes, the waves came and destroyed everything. We now understand the limitations of our efforts, and that science too has limitations. It is grace that helps to make everything complete. Our only protection is in surrendering to God. We may claim we are living in the moment, but even the next breath is not in our hands. Living in the moment is stressed by the Masters to help us embrace eternity.”

“One thing we can do in this situation is to invoke love and compassion in our hearts. Pray with your hearts. Act with your hands. The dead are gone. To bring them back is impossible. Let us use this situation as an opportunity to share peace and love with the living. Become an embodiment of peace and service—both internally and externally.”

The physical unity of the villagers and ashram residents was a symbol of peace, which can only come through oneness.

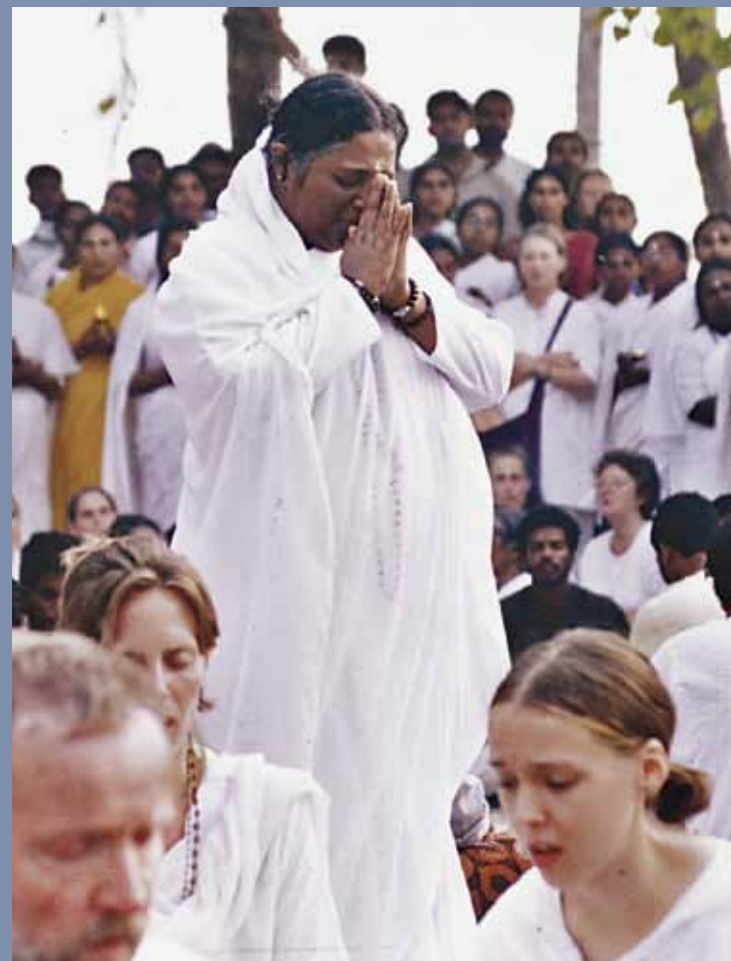
At the prayer gathering, Amma meditated, spoke to the villagers and arranged the oil lamps.



Amma leads everyone in offering prayers for the dead and the ones they left behind during the prayer ceremony.



Amma and the ashram residents, villagers and devotees stand in a circle around the cremation grounds and chant the peace mantra for the souls of the departed.





When Amma had finished speaking to the villagers, she sat down in meditation for several minutes while everyone chanted the mantra. When the chanting was finished, Amma's cheeks were stained with tears. To conclude the ceremony, everyone walked with their lit lamps in a circle around the cremation grounds, and then offered their lamps into the Arabian Sea.



(left) Oil lamps of remembrance were offered into the Arabian Sea; (right) The lamp offered by Amma floats out to sea.

neighbors

“WE SHOULD FEEL COMPASSION FOR THOSE WHO ARE STRUGGLING IN LIFE. THEN
OUR MINDS WILL BECOME PURE. OUR COMPASSION WILL BRING US CLOSE TO GOD.”

—Amma



“When we ourselves face sorrow, we should contemplate upon it and accept it. But if it is the sorrow of others, we should try and go to their level, understand the situation from their standpoint and try to see what we can do to relieve them.”

- Amma
February 12, 2005
en route to Nagapattinam



Fifteen villagers from Nagapattinam came to Amritapuri to beg Amma to visit their tsunami-ravaged district. The fishermen had become afraid of the sea and were hesitant to return to work. Although their basic physical needs were being taken care of in the relief camps and temporary shelters created there by the Mata Amritanandamayi Math, they still craved Amma's consoling presence and touch.

A few weeks later, Amma made her way to the region, staying in Nagapattinam from February 13 to 14, 2005. She visited people in a number of temporary shelters, gave darshan and distributed rice, clothes and other provisions. She personally dried the eyes of thousands, listening compassionately as family after family told her about those who had died. Amma consoled them and gave them courage. She told the men not to be afraid of the sea, saying how the sea was their "Mother" and would always take care of them. Amma also reminded those grieving that it was time to focus on those still living. "Once a petal falls off a flower, it cannot be reattached," she said. "Without crying, we should try to go forward and continue." Amma encouraged them to support each other and live as one family.



(left) Amma holds a small child in the relief camps in Nagapattinam.
(facing page) When Amma visited Nagapattinam, the response of the villagers was overwhelming.
(previous pages) Amma consoles villagers in Nagapattinam.





One woman from Nagapattinam, Krishnaveni, said, "Amma has fed us. She gave us shelter and clothes. We want to see those hands that gave us life once again."





In Nagapattinam, Amma walked door to door, visiting all the people staying in the temporary shelters constructed by MAM. Touring eight villages in two days, she listened to tragic story after tragic story, and wiped the tears of thousands. When a child is hurt, sometimes he doesn't cry... until he sees his mother. However many tears the men and women of Samanthampettai had been holding back, they all seemed to surface when Amma came to check on them. Although they had never met Amma before, they seemed to know her to be their own the moment they looked into her eyes—unhesitatingly rushing forward to experience the asylum of her arms.





(above) A woman from Nagapattinam tells Amma how the tsunami took her mother.



(left and opposite page) Amma distributes bundles of rice and other necessities.



Amma consoles a heartbroken villager.

When Amma saw this boy in MAM's Nagapattinam shelters, she told his mother that his cast had been done incorrectly, and that he should go and have it corrected at AIMS Hospital in Cochin. MAM provided free medical treatment as well as the travel expenses for the boy and his mother.





After visiting Tamil Nadu, Amma left for the island country of Sri Lanka on February 16, 2005. She had been invited by Cabinet Minister Douglas Devananda “to bless Sri Lankans of all faiths and races and to bring peace and prosperity to their lives.”

On her three-day tour through Sri Lanka, Amma saw a trail of destruction along the coastline. More than 35,000 Sri Lankans had been killed by the tsunami, a half a million had been displaced and 65,000 homes had been destroyed.

Overwhelmed by the enormity of the devastation, Amma said that if it were not for all the tsunami work pending in India, she would stay there for three months, doing whatever was needed to help the people get back on their feet.

(facing page) At approximately 05:15 UTC, NASA's Terra Satellite captured this image of deep-ocean tsunami waves about 30-40 kilometers from Sri Lanka's southwestern coast. The image covers an area of 208 x 207 kilometers.



(top) Destruction along the eastern coast of Sri Lanka; (center) Relief camps in the Tamil area of Ampara; (below) Amma distributing saris in the Sinhalese area of Hambantota.



Amma gave the people of Sri Lanka a message of hope and the need for faith. Here, her words are being translated into Tamil by Swami Ramakrishnananda Puri.

Amma visited relief camps in the predominantly Tamil district of Ampara and predominantly Sinhalese district of Hambantota, giving darshan and distributing 15,000 saris and dhotis. It was going to be expensive, flying with all the clothing, but Amma would not consider going without it. She said, “Can a mother visit her children without bringing them something?” In the end, Amma’s supporters in the West sponsored the purchasing of the clothing, and Sri Lankan Airlines allowed MAM to carry the extra baggage free of charge.



Putting aside their enmity, Sri Lankan Government Soldiers (bottom), LTTE soldiers (top) and the police all came for Amma’s darshan.





(right and facing page) Darshan
in Ampara, Sri Lanka.





During her visit, Amma met with both the president and the prime minister. She made her second pledge, this time of Rs. 3 crores (\$690,000 U.S.) for tsunami-relief efforts. The pledge would cover the construction of communities for 100 families in the Tamil village of Periyaniavanai (Ampara District, Eastern Province) and in the Sinhalese village of Thekkawatta (Kalutara District, Western Province). The funding would come through Healthcare Charities Inc., a not-for-profit organization run by Amma's supporters in the U.S.

(left) Amma meeting with Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunge in Colombo, on February 18, 2005.

(facing page) Amma and the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapakse, at a Sinhalese tsunami-relief camp in Hambantota. Rajapakse was soon after elected as the nation's president.

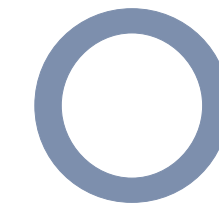


construction

“THIS IS THE MOMENT TO AWAKEN THE LOVE AND COMPASSION WITHIN US.
THIS, INDEED, IS THE TIME TO PRAY WITH OUR HEARTS AND WORK WITH OUR
HANDS.”

—Amma





nce the construction began, it went on day and night without stop. Houses were being completed at a record pace. On April 18, 2005, Mata Amritanandamayi Math became the first NGO in India to complete government-approved

housing for those displaced by the tsunami. Every couple of months, MAM would turn over another batch of 500 or so houses to the government. Within six months of the government approving MAM's construction plans, MAM had built 1,200 houses.

An aerial view of the housing colony built by MAM in the village of Samanthampettai, Nagapattinam District, Tamil Nadu. The Tamil Nadu Government required NGOs to not only build houses, but also roads, community centers, waste-management systems and water supplies, as well as to provide property insurance, fishing boats and engines. MAM complied with all these regulations, not only in Tamil Nadu but everywhere. From start to finish, the pictured colony only took six months for MAM to build. For most of the beneficiaries, it was a dramatic improvement over what they had before the tsunami.

(previous page) MAM volunteers and villagers pass bricks from the backwaters to the construction site.

As soon as the government gave the go-ahead, MAM began construction. The first allotment of houses given by the Kerala Government was for 18 homes in Mayabazar in Edavanakkad, Ernakulam District. Construction began on March 11th and finished exactly one month later. In fact, the completion of these houses made MAM the first non-government organization to complete tsunami-relief houses according to government standards, not only in Kerala, but in all of India. MAM soon became the first NGO to complete houses in Tamil Nadu as well.

This was only possible due to the tremendous hard work of the ashram residents and other volunteers of MAM. Truly, only because of the example set by Amma—who was forgoing sleep and food in her focus on alleviating the pain and suffering of the tsunami-affected—were they able to complete the work so quickly.

“We need to see ourselves in others and act accordingly,” Amma said. It was with this central philosophy—that the suffering and happiness of others is verily our own suffering and happiness—that the work was undertaken. Certainly the ashram residents’ faith in this simple but profound concept enabled them to dedicate themselves to the work at otherwise impossible levels.

With regard to the construction, Amma had once commented, “The ashram residents worked all day and night. Amma would often call the *brahmachari* in charge and ask him how the work was going, and no matter what hour she would call, he would be there working—midnight, two a.m., four a.m.” Amma said that at one point she told him to make sure to get some sleep, but that he had said that he could not, as he knew that every hour that the shelters remained incomplete was another hour the evacuees had no place to rest their heads. “Because he was so identified with the suffering of others, he was able to transcend his physical and bodily needs,” Amma said. “Paid workers will not be able to work like this. They will work only eight hours a day, stopping three times to eat, two or three more to drink tea and to smoke. But a mother never tires of taking care of her children because she considers them her own.”



(left) A tsunami-relief home constructed by MAM in Alappuzha District, Kerala.

(facing page) As most of the building sites were not accessible by road, most of the materials—bricks, sand and gravel—had to be transported by hand. Sharada, a little girl from Switzerland, spent one morning helping carry bricks for a new house—one at a time.





In Alappad Panchayat, many of the houses were to be built in inaccessible areas, even on remote islands. As such, one of the main jobs was transporting the cement bricks, sand, gravel and other necessary materials to the building sites. For months on end, the ashram residents would begin this work at sunrise and stop only at sunset.

Initially, the villagers were not interested in helping with the work. But slowly, as they watched the volunteers toil day after day, they began to help, until it became a common sight to see villagers belonging to rival political groups working hand in hand. All differences were cast aside in the spirit of selfless service.

In fact, many organizations came forth to build, including the Church's Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA), World Vision, Malayalam Manorama and the Communist Party. It was the later who in fact finished the first house in the Alappuzha District; this house was followed by a large batch of houses constructed by MAM.

After inspection, the Kerala Government verified that each tsunami house in Kerala had cost MAM Rs. 375,000 (about \$8,625 US). Other organizations, building the same model homes, spent as much as Rs. 450,000 (\$ 10,350 US) per house.

Impressed by MAM's ability to do quality work in record time, the French Red Cross and Christian Action Research & Education (CARE) financed the construction of a combined total of 900 MAM tsunami-relief houses.

(facing page) Ashram residents, brahmacharis and swamis transport loads of bricks to out-of-the-way construction sites in Alappad Panchayat.

(right) Building materials to construct 28 new houses were taken by Ashram boats from the mainland to Edachira, an island four kilometers from the ashram.



(left) Everyone from small children to old people, to the ashram elephants Ram and Lakshmi, joined in the relief work.



“In this world where selfishness prevails, to see such selfless children is a delight for the eye,” Amma said in reference to the hard work of MAM volunteers. “It is proof that the world has not totally forgotten the language of compassion and selflessness. It is through the mirror of selfless service that human beings are able to behold their own true beauty.”



(above) On December 18, 2005, the keys to one batch of houses in Alappad were handed over by the President of India himself, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam.

It was truly inspiring to see so many people—of all ages, nationalities and social strata—coming together to work side by side. Soon houses were underway in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry, Sri Lanka and Andaman Islands.



(above) Amma with Nagapattinam District Collector Dr. J. Radhakrishnan, who is holding the symbolic key to a batch of tsunami houses in Nagapattinam.

(facing page) The President of India, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, visited the Samanthampettai construction site in Nagapattinam on June 30, 2005. In his address he expressed happiness at the project's progress.





(top right) Smoothing the foundation for one of the tsunami relief homes.



(middle right) In order to be cost-effective, MAM constructed its own bricks, as shown here at a tsunami-relief construction site in Akkarapattai, Tamil Nadu.



(facing page and right) The first tsunami-relief houses were finished in Edavanakkad, Ernakulam District, Kerala on April 11, 2005, making MAM the first NGO to complete tsunami-relief houses according to government standards. As the houses were built considerably inland from their previous locations, there was no need to make them two stories.

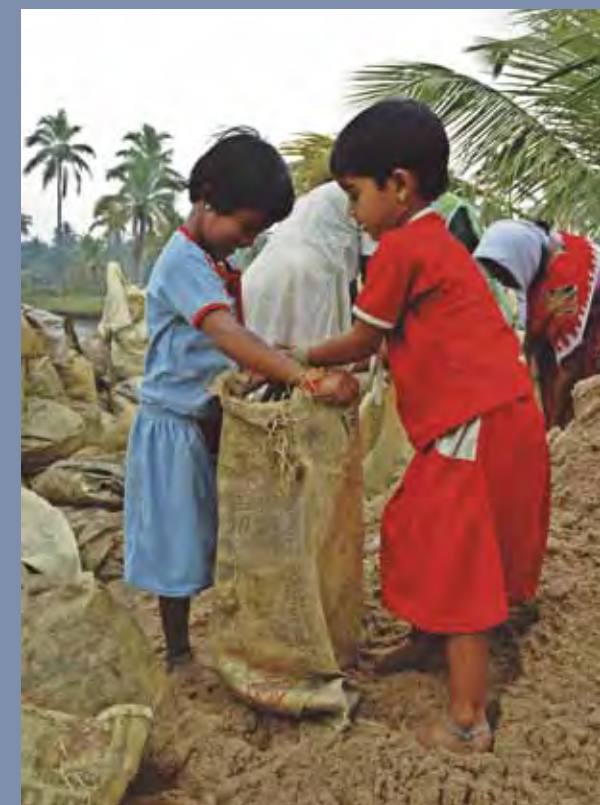




(right) Students from Amrita University help with house construction. For many, it was their first time doing heavy labor.



(left and right) Villagers mixed with ashram residents and volunteers from around the world to transport sand and building materials to the construction sites.





Amma encouraged all the female ashram residents to participate in the tsunami-house-building projects. Both young and old helped in whatever way they could.





(right) When the sarpanch (village chief) of Mokhana, one of the villages that was destroyed in the 2001 earthquake in Bhuj, Gujarat and subsequently rebuilt by MAM, heard that “Mataji’s” village had been hit by the tsunami, he and nine other villagers boarded the train and came to help with the tsunami-relief efforts.



“They worked so hard,” said an ashram resident who helped coordinate the Japanese volunteers. “They have fun, but they find the fun in working. They are so enthusiastic. They would start work around 8:00 in the morning and then go on till sundown.”

(left) About 100 students from Japan—part of the International Volunteer University Student Association (IVUSA)—unload cement blocks and dig foundations for the one of MAM’s tsunami-relief housing projects in Edavanakkad, Ernakulam District, Kerala.

growth

“WHEN YOU UNNECESSARILY DEPEND ON OTHERS LIKE A PARASITE, YOU BECOME MENTALLY WEAK AND THE IMMENSE POSSIBILITY TO GROW INTERNALLY AND EXTERNALLY IS ALSO LOST. SO, WORK HARD FOR THE UPLIFT OF ONE’S OWN SELF AND SOCIETY.”

—Amma





(left) MAM's housing colony in Samanthampettai, Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu.

(right) MAM provided sewing machines and tailoring classes for hundreds of tsunami-affected women, helping to empower them through new sources of income.



Amma has strived to improve people's lives through long-term comprehensive solutions that not only fix what is broken, but also provide better houses, education, employment opportunities and medical care. Witnessing the success of Amma's comprehensive tsunami-relief programs, a number of Indian Administrative Service (IAS) Officers commented that although they had conceived of disaster-relief plans like Amma's, until now they had never seen one executed.

Amma’s intention was not to merely repair what the tsunami had broken, but to improve upon the situation that had existed long before that fateful day. For example, the relief houses were not replicas of what had been destroyed, but vast improvements. Mata Amritanandamayi Math also connected villages in Alappad Panchayat and in Nagapattinam with its AIMS Hospital in Cochin via a satellite run by the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO). In Alappad, this satellite system is now also being used to disseminate information regarding fish locations in the Arabian Sea. MAM also helped tsunami-affected villagers start cottage industry cooperatives, with the hopes of creating financial independence and of multiplying the village’s economic supports.

When Amma visited the temporary shelters that MAM had set up for hundreds of families in Samanthampettai, Nagapattinam in February 2005, she made it clear that her idea of “adopting a village” was more than just reconstruction of damaged or destroyed houses. As she walked from room to room, inquiring about the people’s needs, she immediately began to address them, providing jobs and education, recommending methods of therapy and arranging for various people’s medical treatment at AIMS. Amma was giving the people there everything she possibly could. The villagers of Samanthampettai were excited and in tears. They thanked Amma for coming and blessing their village. Amma told them, “There is no need to thank Amma. Amma is not a guest. Amma is a member of your family.”



(above) Brahmachari Guruprasad Chaitanya distributes educational kits to students in Tamil Nadu.



(above) Free educational classes for tsunami victims were conducted in Nagapattinam. After their classes, senior students tutored younger ones.



(above) In Nagapattinam, MAM arranged free tutoring for tsunami-affected children. Other activities, like the painting competition pictured above, were also conducted.



In coastal areas like Alappad and Nagapattinam, fishing is the primary source of income—one boat can support approximately seven families. In India, the tsunami damaged or destroyed a total of 83,788 fishing boats—not to mention engines and nets. Understanding the economic and emotional importance of getting the men back working on the sea again, Amma had MAM build and distribute a total of 700 fishing boats for fishermen in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. MAM distributed an equal number of new fishing nets and top-quality boat engines. 350 other boats and engines were also repaired. Amma had MAM employ fishermen from the very villages where the boats were destroyed to build the boats. This way, not only were the boats built according to the fishermen's specifications, but also many out-of-work fishermen suddenly had a source of income.

(facing page) Constructing boats for tsunami-affected fishermen in Alappad Panchayat.

(right) Newly constructed boats for tsunami-affected fishermen in Nagapattinam.





Boats constructed for tsunami-affected fishermen from the Kollam and Alappuzha Districts of Kerala. Each boat is equipped with a 9.9 horse-power Yamaha outboard engine, 110 kilograms of fishing net and accessories such as fuel.

With each boat MAM provided, many families were helped. The fishermen, their families and the communities as a whole found themselves finally able to begin again.





Amma's vision has reached its fruition through a program called *Matru Gramam*—Mother's Village. "We want to help the villages become self-reliant," says Swami Jnanamritananda Puri, the project coordinator. "First we take a survey to determine what the village's needs are, then accordingly we create an action plan, and from that we start providing the needed awareness camps, education and job-training. We want the villages to be able to produce all of the main items they need by themselves, rather than depend on outside resources."

In order for the villages to accomplish this, MAM has helped them establish self-help groups. "The self-help groups are really just groups of families," says Swami Jnanamritananda. "The goal is for every family to have at least one member that makes 100 rupees (approximately \$2.30 U.S.) every day. This will cover the families' basic needs. This can happen through the self-help groups."

As of September 2007, MAM had helped villagers create more than 600 such groups throughout Alappad. The majority of the self-help groups' members are women. Cottage industries include organic-banana farming, handicrafts fashioned from coconut fronds, and making shoes. MAM has also trained some 1,500 women in the art of tailoring and provided them with more than 1,000 sewing machines.

(left) MAM held tailoring classes in both Nagapattinam and Alappad.
(right) Weekly lessons in embroidery were also provided.



(bottom left and facing page) Amma examines items created by members of one of the self help groups nurtured by MAM.

(bottom right) Self help group members pose with their newly made leather footwear.



It was only one month after the tsunami when MAM offered free vocational training to over 2,500 young people from Kerala and Tamil Nadu. In order to expand their financial horizons and free their families from total dependence on the sea for income, the youths were trained in carpentry, driving, electrical work, masonry, mechanics, nursing, paramedic assistance, security and a few were even sent to MAM's teacher's training college in Mysore. Not only were they given free education, room-and-board and stipends, but MAM also found them work, either with outside businesses or within its own organization upon the successful completion of their courses. Some of the youth trained as electricians and plumbers were even given jobs in Dubai.

(below) Tsunami-affected youth sent to MAM's AIMS Hospital for free training as paramedical assistants.





(right) In Nagapattinam, computer classes were held for those affected by the tsunami.



(facing page) Amma spends time with the youngsters at Amritapuri before they depart for their training at AIMS.



(right) This photo was taken upon the successful completion of paramedical training.



(left) A thousand young men were trained as drivers.

(right) Amma meeting with the youth of Alappad.





In April and May of 2005, Amritapuri was flooded once again, but this time with children, not water. Two five-day camps were held and attended by approximately 10,000 children from the Alappuzha and Kollam districts of Kerala. The camps included classes in yoga, spoken English, Sanskrit and personality development, and were aimed at stimulating the children's minds in positive ways in order to help them overcome their traumatic experiences. The camps also included lively spiritual question-and-answer sessions with Amma.

The children were simply in love with Amma. It was as if she were both their mother and one among them at the same time. Amma joked with them, inquired about their feelings and family situations, encouraged them to express themselves and held them tightly in her arms. She asked them probing questions to spark their intellects with regard to spiritual matters, and also offered illuminating answers to their questions about their own culture. By the time the camp ended, it was clear that Amma had come to live in their hearts. In the words of 12-year-old Kannan from Alappad, "We lost everything in the tsunami. And then Amma gave us everything back. In addition to that, we also got Amma. Amma is the real wealth."

Observing the children, one could clearly see that their interest and curiosity in spiritual matters had been stirred. Amma's words uplifted and inspired them. "Everybody wants to become the king of the village, and then they all fight. You have to become the king within. Serve everyone selflessly, then you become a real king," she explained. Amma added that the potential to accomplish this lies within everyone, but that it is up to each individual to invoke it.

Yoga classes were an integral part of the camp. Classes were held for all the children in the ashram's main auditorium.





(left) As part of the camps, the children put on cultural programs for Amma, the ashram residents and visitors.



(right) Amma taught the children to swim. She would offer slight support to their bodies as they propelled themselves forward with kicks and strokes. Amma had the smaller children hold on to her back as she swam back and forth. She taught them how to hold their nose as they went under and showed them how there was no need to wipe their face each time they lifted their heads from the water.





(above) The children instantly bonded with Amma, feeling her to be one among them.
(right) Amma conducting a question-and-answer session with the children.

(right) At the end of the camps, Amma and E.T. Mohammed Bashir, the Minister of Education for Kerala, handed each child a certificate of completion.

(below) Amma talking with the children in the main temple in Amritapuri.





The question-and-answer sessions with Amma provided the children with a chance to clear their doubts about spirituality and to gain insight into their culture's traditions and rituals. No matter what the question, Amma's words went straight to the heart.

In India, many families have to save for years in order to pay for their daughter's weddings. As many villagers savings, in the form of gold and cash, were washed away in the tsunami, MAM began financing and conducting marriage ceremonies for tsunami-affected couples in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry. Traditional Indian weddings are performed with gold necklaces, brocade saris and other essential items. For hundreds of couples, MAM provided all the traditional requirements, including wedding jewellery, saris, dhotis and some cash to wish them well in their new life.



Sindhu, of Azhikkal, lost her mother and sister in the tsunami. Her father, Shivanandan, is handicapped. Her wedding was sponsored by and conducted in the ashram.

(facing page) Amma conducts weddings of tsunami-affected couples.





Weddings in Tamil Nadu.





(above) MAM also distributed saplings to area youths and instructed them to nurture the trees, seeing them as divine gifts.



(right) Kerala Minister of Forestry and Irrigation, T. Radhakrishnan, planted the first sapling in a function on June 5, 2005. Swami Jnanamritananda Puri looks on.



Harita Teeram—Green Shores—is a unique project aimed at protecting the coastal area of Kerala through tree planting. The inspiration for this project came from the casuarina saplings that Amma and ashram residents planted on the beach in front of the Amrita Ayurveda Research Center in May of 2003. The trees served as breakers, reducing the impact of ocean waves against the shoreline while holding the sand in place. Working with village leaders, MAM has planted 90,000 casuarina saplings in Alappad. Following MAM's lead, Kerala's Department of Forestry has distributed two million saplings for planting along the entire coastal belt.

The trees are fast-growing and provide protection for the coast.



triumph



Despite the tragedy of the tsunami, the human spirit is resilient. Today, thousands of people, once dispossessed by the tsunami, are living in new homes and have started life afresh.



The entrance way to MAM's housing colony in Samanthampettai, Nagapattinam.

(facing page) Amma with Aparna, a baby born to one of the mothers who had lost their children in the tsunami and then underwent tubal-ligation reversal in order to conceive again.

By September 2007, the Mata Amritanandamayi Math had completed 4,500 of its pledged 6,200 tsunami-relief houses. In every location, the houses were built according to government standards and have been given away free of charge to the affected people. By then, Amma's initial pledge of Rs. 100 crores had doubled, and MAM's relief work was amounting to a value closer to Rs. 200 crores (\$46 million U.S.)

The apartment buildings for 100 families built by MAM in Thekkawatta (Kalutara District) and Periyani-lavanai (Ampara District) were handed over to the Sri Lankan President, Mahinda Rajapakse, by Amma herself on February 23, 2007.



(left) Apartment-building-style tsunami-relief houses constructed by MAM in Thekkawatta, Kalutara District, Sri Lanka.

(right) On February 23, 2007, Amma handed over the key to the houses for 100 families that MAM constructed in Sri Lanka to President Mahinda Rajapakse.





(above) Amma hands a house key to a one of the recipients of MAM's tsunami-relief houses in Sri Lanka.



(above) Apartment building-style tsunami-relief houses constructed by MAM in Kalutara, Sri Lanka.

Situated about 1,000 km off the east coast of India, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands bore the brunt of the tsunami. MAM is building 200 homes in Bamboo Flat and Austinabad in South Andaman. As all the building materials—an estimated 1,000 tons—have to be shipped from mainland India, the cost is coming to about Rs. 20 crores (\$4.8 million U.S.). The houses are duplexes, with each half measuring 500 square-feet and having its own attached bathroom with toilet. The steel-framed structures are earthquake resistant. The houses are scheduled to be completed by the end of 2007.



Tsunami-relief houses in Bamboo Flat, South Andaman, Andaman Islands.

(facing page) The steel frames were fabricated in MAM's Kolkata ashram and shipped to Andaman.





(left) An MAM's tsunami-relief housing colony in Kanyakumari District, Tamil Nadu.

In Kerala, houses have been completed in the districts of Kollam, Ernakulam and Alappuzha. In Pondicherry, MAM has built houses in the Karakkal District. And in Tamil Nadu, houses have been finished in the districts of Chennai, Cuddalore, Kanyakumari and Nagapattinam. In many places, MAM has built not just houses, but also roads, wells, schools, community halls and healthcare centers. For example, in the Nagapattinam village of Samanthampettai, MAM built an entire self-sufficient colony that covers seven acres.



(right) Young boys participate in a bike race put on by MAM in MAM's housing colony in Samanthampettai, Nagapattinam.



(top) Amma inspects the housing colony in Samanthampettai, Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu.



(middle) Children at play in one of the newly completed villages.



(bottom) The community hall in Samanthampettai.

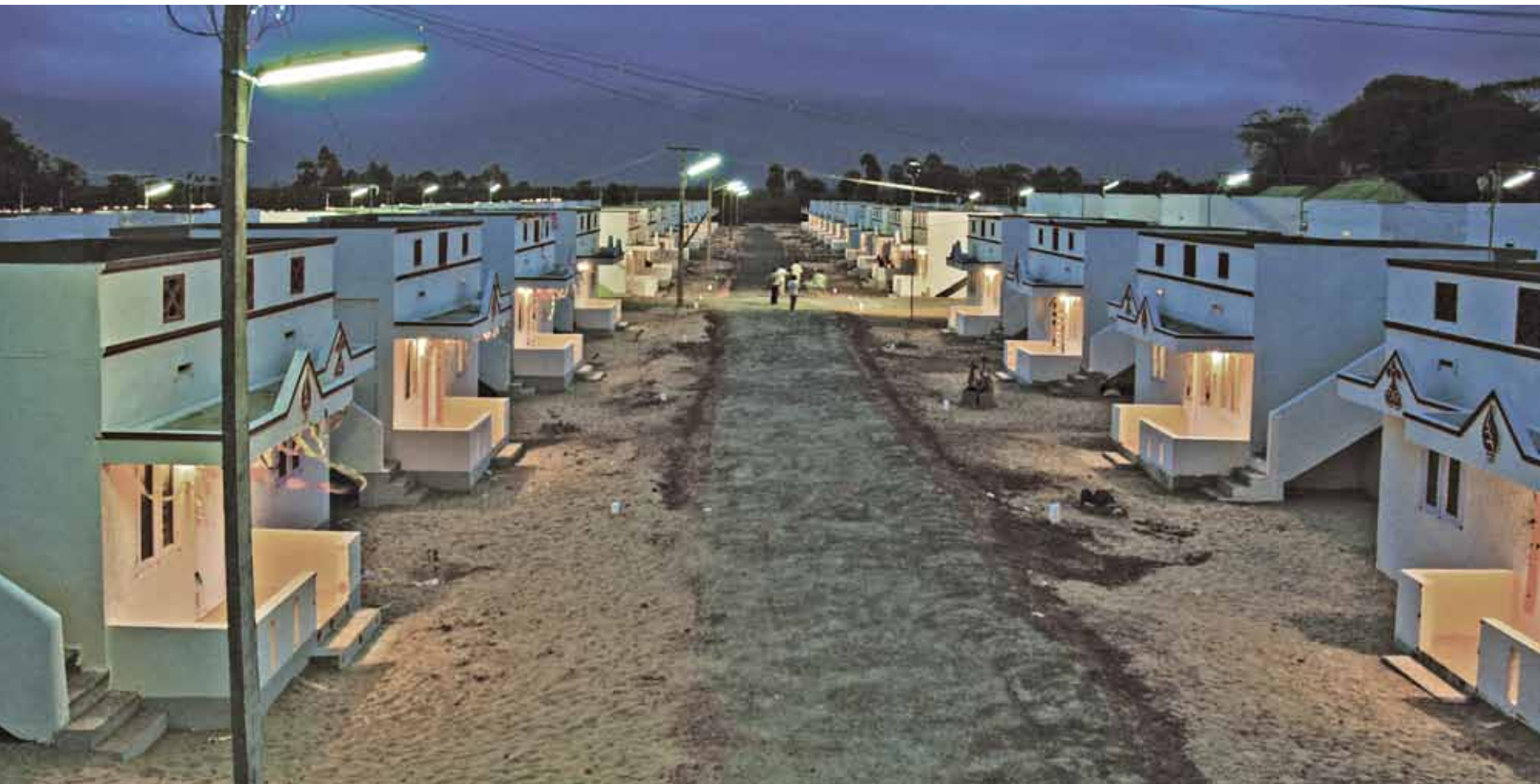


(right) Amma hands a key symbolic of the hundreds of homes recently completed in Keezhe Pattinacherry, to Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Karunanidhi on January 31, 2007.

“Amma paid for our marriage. She gave me a boat and an engine, and this house. Our baby has arrived and I have work. Our family life can now go on.”

—A resident (below) of
MAM’s housing colony in Nagapattinam.

(below) An MAM tsunami-relief housing colony
in Cuddalore District, Tamil Nadu.



In the housing colonies constructed by MAM,
life is now returning to normal.

At the time the tsunami struck there was only one bridge along the entire peninsula, located on Alappad's southern tip. After observing how it took three hours to evacuate the peninsula following a night-time tsunami warning issued by the Kerala Government on March 28, 2005, Amma decided that relying on boats for evacuations was too slow and too dangerous. She wanted a bridge built over which 15,000 people could pass in 30 minutes should Alappad ever face another disaster.

On August 28, 2005, the foundation stone was laid for Amrita Setu, a footbridge that would be designed, constructed and financed completely by MAM. Sixteen months later it was finished at a cost of only Rs. 6 crores (\$1.38 million U.S.). Had the work been done by an outside contractor, it would have cost at least twice as much. On December 20, 2006, the President of India, Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, came to Amritapuri to inaugurate the bridge. During the function, the President praised the work of Amma and MAM, saying, "Friends, I want to share with you what I have learned from Amritapuri: *Giving*. You go on giving. You can give. It's not only money. You can share knowledge. You can remove the pain. And you can even go to the person who is suffering. Every one of us—the rich and poor—can give. That is the message I get from Amritapuri, friends. There is no greater message than Amma's giving to all the people of this region, and Kerala, and India, and to the world."



(above) On March 29, 2005, when the government issued a warning of a possible second tsunami, everyone from the villages surrounding Amritapuri rushed to the ashram, knowing it to be the only true place of refuge. With so many people dependent on MAM to cross the backwaters, it took more than three hours to transport everyone to the mainland. It was at this time that Amma decided a bridge had to be built.



(above) Ashram residents and visitors from around the world worked tirelessly to complete the bridge in a mere 16 months.



(above) Amma helps create a road for the new bridge built by MAM, connecting Alappad Panchayat with mainland Kollam.

(facing page) The President of India, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, inaugurates the bridge on December 20, 2006 in Amritapuri.

(below) The bridge serves as an evacuation route, over which 15,000 people can pass in 30 minutes, should another emergency ever occur in Alappad.



In December 2004, the dirt road that parallels Alappad's coast was full of broken things—broken houses, broken boats, broken people. It was a place where hope had yet to take root. In contrast, the two-and-a-half-kilometer walk that Amma led from Amritapuri to the Azhikkal cremation ground a year later, on December 26, 2005, was marked with normalcy: a man pumping air into the tire of his son's bicycle, the sound of someone's grandmother chanting devotional songs over a temple speaker, boys playing cricket on the beach, chai shops conducting a day's business, a young girl using the wall around her house as a balance beam.

Most noticeably, the road was lined with new houses peeping through the coconut groves—homes for thousands of people. That day, 10,000 people, including villagers from Alappad, ashram residents and devotees from all over the world, walked once again to the site of the cremation grounds on Azhikkal Beach. Each of them held a small clay oil lamp in their hands: *smriti deepam*—lamps of remembrance. It was a time to remember the dead, but more importantly, it was a time to remember life.



(above) A year after the tsunami, Amma walked again to the site of the 42 cremations in Azhikkal, Alappad Panchayat, in order to offer prayers of remembrance for the dead.



Amma plants a sapling at the cremation site and offers her prayers.



As Amma passed by, everyone followed her, chanting *Om lokah samastah sukhino bhavantu*—May all the beings in all the worlds be happy. The villagers stood with folded palms, offering prostrations to Amma for all she had done for them. “All of us must face death today or tomorrow,” Amma said. “The important thing is not how we die, but how we live.”

On September 13, 2006, a special baby girl was born at MAM's AIMS Hospital in Cochin. Her name was "Aparna." The baby's mother was Priya, one of the six women from Alappad Panchayat who had undergone surgery to have their tubal-ligation surgeries reversed.

Prior to the tsunami, Priya and the other women had allowed doctors to "tie their tubes" as a form of permanent contraception, after they had given birth to two or three children. But the tsunami had taken those children away, leaving Priya and the other ladies to face a life in which they would never again know the joy of motherhood. When Amma came to understand these women's plight, she had offered them the opportunity to attempt to have the procedures reversed (see page 126). Aparna was to be the first of what was to become several "tsunami babies."

As of this book's publication, four of the women had given birth to a total of six children, and one of the two other women is still trying to conceive, taking advanced fertility drugs from Switzerland—all of which is being sponsored by MAM.



(above) The first tsunami baby, "Aparna," born to Priya and Baby of Azhikkal, Alappad, on September 13, 2006.

(facing page) Dr. Sarala Sridhar (white dress), who performed the re-canalization surgeries at AIMS, came to Amritapuri with Priya and Baby when they brought their new daughter, "Aparna," to Amma for naming and blessing on September 17, 2006.

Priya & Baby

Priya and Baby lost their son Kiran and daughter Kinkini to the tsunami waves. Priya's re-canalization surgery was performed at AIMS on March 9, 2005 and she soon conceived naturally. Just prior to going to AIMS to deliver via caesarean on September 13, 2006, Priya and Baby came to Amritapuri for Amma's blessing. At that time Priya said, "Amma has done a great thing for us, something even our own relatives could not do." Their daughter weighed three kilograms upon birth. When Amma received news of the birth, she commented, "It happened because of grace." Priya and Baby brought their child to Amma for naming and blessing on September 17, 2006, where upon Amma named the child "Aparna." "Amma is so happy to see you smile," Amma told Priya.



Asha & Pradeep

Asha and Pradeep of Azhikkal, Alappad, lost their two daughters, nine-year-old Sri Kutti and six-year-old Sri Lakshmi, in the tsunami. After going through tubal-ligation re-canalization, fertility drugs and *in vitro* fertilization, Asha gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Feeling that without Amma they never would have again known the joy of parenthood, they named the child “Amritesh.” After taking the child to Amma for blessing, Pradeep said, “After we lost our children, we had no life. When Amma told us that she would do everything possible to help us have a baby, those words gave us half our lives back. Now it’s full.”



Liji & Sreejit

Liji and Sreejit of Azhikkal, Alappad had lost their two children in the tsunami—an eight-year-old girl named Alishajit and a four-year-old boy named Kalidas. After undergoing re-canalization surgery at AIMS, taking fertility drugs and an *in vitro* fertilization, Liji conceived twins—a 2.5 kg boy and a 1.94 kg girl. The children were born at AIMS on October 30, 2006 and were taken to Amma for blessing and naming on December 12, 2006. Amma named the boy “Eknath” and the girl “Kripa.” “Amrita Kripa?” Liji said, asking if it was alright to amend the name from “Grace” to “Immortal Grace.” Amma agreed, telling Liji, “Today is the first time I’ve seen you smile.”



Lini & Paul

One day when coming for Amma’s darshan, Lini related the story of her and her husband Paul. “We were living in Azhikkal, and my husband was supporting us through fishing,” Lini said. “We had two children—Prince, who was two and a half, and Nikhil, who was one and a half. After Nikhil was born, I underwent an operation so that I would no longer get pregnant. In the end, Mother Sea, which had provided us so much, took everything back, including our happiness. When the tsunami waters receded from our home, we found Prince and Nikhil lifeless—the Prince who used to run about our small courtyard smiling and the Nikhil whom he would always want to take from my arms and carry. “



“When we were staying in the military shelter camp, waiting in line for our food, all we could think about was the children that had been taken from us. Where were our little ones! Where were our angels! From the stories we had been taught in church, our children had gone to live with the angels. But we could not really believe this.”

“It was when we were living in the camp that someone recommended we go to the ashram and see Amma. So one day my husband and I went there and had Amma’s darshan. We never had any worry about Amma not accepting us because we were of another faith. Amma took us into her arms and we both started crying, telling her, ‘Amma, our children are gone.’ Amma blessed us saying, ‘Don’t worry. Soon you will have children again.’ Amma then told us to go to AIMS Hospital in Cochin. There, under Amma’s instructions, Dr. Sarala looked after us.”

“Many more couple like us were there. Some of the people we met were Pradeep and his wife Asha, Baby and his wife Priya, and Sreejit and his wife Liji. Previously, all of them had undergone the same procedure that I had. And like us, all of their children had been killed by the tsunami. In the end, the operation that took place with Amma’s blessings was successful. And on March 22, 2007, I gave birth to two children. We named them “Alvin” and “Atul.” Now the day we came to see Amma crying about our lost children has faded into the distant past.”

“Today we came to Amritapuri. Amma took Alvin and Atul into her arms and kissed them. Alvin was crying loudly and Atul sat nestled in the crook of her arm.

“Mother Mary is full of compassion. In our minds we see a picture of Mother Mary holding baby Jesus who is wearing a crown of thorns. It was Amma, the Mother of the World, who removed our pain. So now, in that picture in our minds, the face of Mother Mary is that of Amma.”

(facing page) Amma holds Eknath and Amrita Kripa.

(below) Parents with their babies: (l-r) Priya and Baby, who gave birth to Aparna on September 13, 2006; Lini and Paul who gave birth to Alvin and Atul on March 22, 2007; Asha and Pradeep, who gave birth to Amritesh on March 23, 2007; Liji and Sreejit, who gave birth to Eknath and Amrita Kripa on October 30, 2006.



unheard warning

“ BY DESTROYING NATURE, HUMANITY HAS BECOME ITS OWN ENEMY. WE DO NOT KNOW THAT WE ARE DIGGING OUR OWN GRAVE WHEN WE BRING AN AXE DOWN ON THE FOOT OF A TREE.”

—Amma





Amma reflects on the disaster as evening comes on the day of the tsunami.

“The tsunami was a warning, but nobody heard it,” Amma said not long after the disaster. “It is easy to wake up someone who is sleeping, but difficult to wake up someone who is pretending to be asleep.”

Amma was talking to the ashram residents about humanity’s continued exploitation of Mother Nature and the resultant disharmony that has been created. “We are taking three times more than what we need from nature,” Amma said. “We cut down trees, dig bore wells, build dams against free-flowing water, cut stones from the mountains—thus the list of exploitation goes on.”

At that time Amma even offered a remedy to the problem—putting in efforts to curb the world’s population explosion. “It is enough to have just one child. In case a couple needs more, perhaps they can adopt an orphan,” Amma said. “The population has increased by hundreds of millions, but the size of the earth remains the same. Because of this, man has started exploiting the eco-system. Trees that purify the atmosphere are mercilessly cut down in order to cater to our ever-increasing needs.”

Indeed, if the world is able to control its population, its demands on the planet will be less. But the root problem, Amma says, is that humanity has diverted from the path of dharma—a way of living that takes into account not only what is best for one’s self but also for the entire world. As Amma says, “These days, if a family is comprised of three people, all three of them

live like isolated islands. In fact we are not isolated islands but inter-connected like the links of a chain. But today everybody wants to grab as much as they can. Readiness to give is most needed.”

After the tsunami, many TV reporters and newspaper journalists asked Amma about its cause and how to prevent such tragedies from repeating. Amma’s uniform response pointed to this loss of dharma. “Go back to your dharma,” Amma would say. “When we lose our dharma, we lose our harmony with nature.”

Amma said that in essence this world is an enormous extended family, and that just as one makes sacrifices in order to support and protect their biological family, so too should we sacrifice for the sake of the global community.

Once in 1994, when being interviewed by an American environmentalist, Amma spoke very candidly about the perils being created by humanity’s disregard for the world. “Now there is no longer any rain when it is supposed to rain,” Amma said. “If it does rain, there is either too little or too much, and it comes too early or too late. It is the same with sunshine. Nowadays humans are trying to exploit nature. This is why there are floods, droughts and earthquakes, and everything is being destroyed. There is a tremendous decline in the quality of life. Many people have lost faith. They do not feel any love and compassion, and the spirit of working together, hand in hand for the good of all has been lost. This will have an adverse effect. Nature will withdraw all her blessings and turn against humanity. Unimaginable will be Nature’s reaction if humanity continues like this.”

As it would turn out, the tsunami was not the only disaster to come humanity’s way in 2005. As Amma had foreseen, the year was fraught with one sad story after another: bombings in London, the war in Iraq, floods in Mumbai, hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the United States, an earthquake on the border of Pakistan and India that killed 75,000 people... Instructed by Amma, Mata Amritanandamayi Math came forward where possible to help the people affected by these disasters—providing food, clothing and medicine in the cases of the earthquakes and floods, and donating one-million U.S. dollars to the Bush-Clinton Hurricane Katrina Relief fund. Such actions are needed in order to uplift those affected by the disasters, but the core issue—living in harmony with Mother Nature and all of humanity—must also be addressed if the human race wishes to see the end of such tragic episodes.

(below) MAM donated \$ 1 million U.S. to the Bush-Clinton Hurricane Fund, following 2005’s hurricane Katrina.





(left) Amma leading a prayer for peace and harmony.

For years, Amma has been leading the people attending her programs in the ancient peace prayer *Om lokah samastah sukhino bhavantu* (“May all the beings in the world be happy”). Amma says that this mantra encapsulates the essence of spirituality and is the core philosophy behind all of MAM’s activities. Since the tsunami, Amma often prefaces the prayer’s recitation with the following warning: “When Amma looks into nature, she sees that nature’s fury is not yet abated. Nature is still turbulent, agitated. Only the cool, gentle breeze of prayers can shift these dark clouds. So, let us pray with melting hearts.”





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The Amrita Tsunami Relief & Rehabilitation Project of the Mata Amritanandamayi Math (MAM) is a massive 200-crore rupee (\$46 million U.S.) undertaking, covering a broad range of relief efforts in India and Sri Lanka. Of this, Rs. 3 crores (approx. \$690,000 U.S.) has been earmarked for Sri Lanka through Healthcare Charities Inc., a not-for-profit organization run by Amma's supporters in the U.S. This overview presents what MAM has accomplished through this undertaking as of September 2007, which is when this book was sent to press.



Swami Amritakripananda Puri handed over keys for the first houses completed in Clappana (Kollam District) and the first houses completed in Valiya Azhikkal (Alappuzha District, Kerala).



Houses in Alappuzha District, Kerala.

Free Housing

- MAM has completed 4,500 tsunami-relief houses, including 100 in Sri Lanka. It will build a total of 6,200. The houses have been built according to government standards and have been given away free of charge to the affected people.
- MAM was the first NGO to complete tsunami-relief houses according to government specifications in India—both in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.
- In Kerala, houses were constructed in Kollam District (Cheriyazhikkal, Azhikkal, Srayikkad, Parayakkadavu, Pandaraturathu, Vellana Turuthu, Kuzhithura, Clappana and Kozhikode), in Ernakulam District (Edavanakkad) and in Alappuzha District (Valiyazhikkal). In Pondicherry, in the Karaikal District, and in Tamil Nadu, in the districts of Chennai, Cuddalore, Kanyakumari and Nagapattinam (Samanthampettai, Akarapettai, and Keezhe Pattinacherry, Mela Pattinacherry, Pandaga Salai).
- In Sri Lanka, buildings containing flats for 100 families were constructed in Thekkawatta, Kalutara District, Western Province and in Periyaniavanai, Ampara District, Eastern Province.
- 200 houses are being constructed in Bamboo Flat and Austinabad, South Andaman Island and should be completed by December 2007.
- In many places, MAM has built not just houses, but also roads, wells, schools, community halls and healthcare centers.



Houses in Edavanakkad, Ernakulam District and Valiyazhikkal, Alappuzha District, Kerala.



Those living in homes previously situated on the land between the sea and the coastal road in Alappad Panchayat were given houses in Kulasekarapuram, Clappana, as per government regulations.

Houses in Putukuppam, Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu.



Childcare center in Samanthampettai, Tamil Nadu.

Houses in Samanthampettai and Mela Pattinacherry, Tamil Nadu.



Houses in Kalutara, Thekkawatta, Sri Lanka.

Houses in Vadukku Vanchiyoor, Pondicherry and Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu.



Houses in Periyaniavanai, Eastern Province, Ampara, Sri Lanka.

Houses in Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu.



The first phase of 200 homes being constructed in the Andaman Islands. Bamboo Flat and Austinabad, South Andaman.



Free Education & Employment

- In order to uplift those affected by the tsunami, MAM provided free vocational training for 2,500 young people from Kerala and Tamil Nadu. According to their educational qualifications, they were trained to be teachers, nurses, paramedical assistants, electricians, security officers, drivers, masonry workers, carpenters and mechanics. During the training period, the students received a monthly stipend of Rs. 500, as well as free food, uniforms, and accommodations. Upon completion of their training, MAM helped the youngsters find employment, hiring many in its own institutions.
- MAM provided free tailoring courses to 1,500 women and sewing machines to 1,120 tsunami-affected women in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Graduates are now making at least Rs. 2,000 per month stitching clothing.
- Through a program called Matru Gramam (Mother's Village), MAM has helped villagers living in Alappad to form more than 600 independent cooperatives and self-help groups in areas such as tailoring, agriculture, sandal-making, soap-manufacturing and other trades. The concept is designed to help small villages become self-dependent and to help them find new means of generating income.
- MAM distributed to students various educational aids, such as 10,000 textbooks, 5,000 pens, compasses, rulers, dictionaries, and notebooks.
- In Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu, MAM is providing tsunami-affected youth with free education and hostel accommodation for 24 college students, free computer training for 200 youth and free general tuition (1st - 12th standard) to 900 others. Spoken English classes are also being taught free of charge.
- 35 tsunami-affected children are receiving free education and hostel accommodations at MAM's school in Parippally (Kollam District, Kerala).

Girls enrolled for their bachelors in education degrees at MAM's University in Mysore. They have since graduated.



5,000 pens, compasses, rulers, dictionaries and notebooks were distributed, and 900 students received free tuition.



Computer training was provided for 200 college students.

Trainees at AIMS get their uniforms.



Paramedical training was given to hundreds of young girls and boys.



Matru Gramam, self help co-operatives, are teaching village women to be financially independent.

On January 29, 2005, MAM started a stitching program at its temporary shelter in Srayikkad. More than 75 women attended the classes, using sewing machines that were provided free.



The classes included sessions on embroidery.



Swamini Krishnamrita Prana inaugurated the tailoring lessons.

Amma distributed sewing machines in Ramanathapuram during one of her visits to Tamil Nadu.



MAM sponsored driving and carpentry lessons for the youth of Alappad. Kerala Labour Minister Babu Divakaran distributed driving licenses to the first batch of 60 trainees. Kerala Chief Minister Oommen Chandy looks on.



Assistance For Fishermen

- In Tamil Nadu and Kerala, MAM has given away 700 fishing boats, boat engines and fishing nets.
- Repaired 350 boats and engines.
- In coordination with ISRO (Indian Space Research Organization), MAM is providing fishermen in Nagapattinam and in Alappad with fish-school locations in longitude and latitude. The locations are updated every three days and displayed on boards.



Boats distributed to fisherman in Kerala. Each boat came with an engine, a fishing net and additional accessories, including fuel.



Each boat provides work for 7 men.



Distributing boat engines in Alappad.

Distributing nets in Alappad.



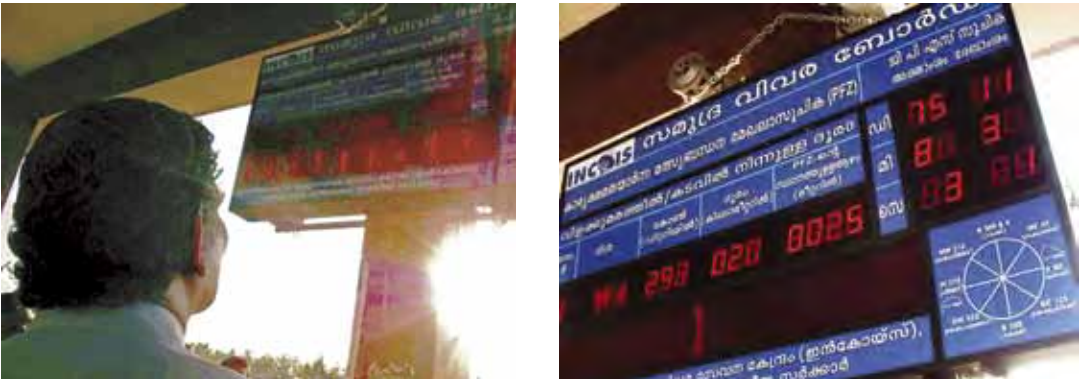
In Pattinacherry, hundreds of boats damaged by the tsunami were repaired and reconditioned with fiber reinforced plastic.



Boats in Nagapattinam.



Fishermen with new fishing nets, in Tamil Nadu.



The Amrita ISRO Village Resource Center launched a Tele-Fisheries Program and Tsunami Alert System in Alappad Panchayat, Kerala. S. Sharma, Minister of Fisheries, Harbour Management & Registration of Kerala, inaugurated the system. Mr. Sharma looks at the display board.



In Tamil Nadu, the beneficiaries of the brand-new fiberglass boats included fishermen from Samanthampettai, Tharangambadi, Nambiar Nagar and Nagore-Pattinacherry.



The fishermen are now getting a daily catch of between Rs. 6,000 and 14,000.



A fisherwoman sorts through the day's catch.



Safeguarding Against Future Tsunamis

- Through its Harita Teeram (Green Shore) project, MAM planted 90,000 casuarina saplings on the beaches of Alappad in order to serve as a barrier against surging water from storms and tsunamis.
- MAM constructed a bridge over the Kayamkulam Backwaters, connecting Alappad with the mainland. In the event of another tsunami, the bridge will serve as an escape route over which 15,000 people will be able to cross in 30 minutes. The bridge was built at a cost of Rs. 6 crores (\$1.32 million U.S.). The bridge was inaugurated by Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, the President of India, on December 20, 2006.

As part of the Green Shore project, new saplings were planted along the beach in Cheriya Azhikkal, just south of Amritapuri.



The bridge required 18,250 man hours to be completed.

This support pillar is 1.2 meters in diameter.



Amma picked up a shovel and filled baskets with dirt to help build the approach road to the bridge.



The fine touch of an artist on the Ashram logo on the central arch of Amrita Setu.

Inauguration of the bridge: the President, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, climbed up the steps of Amrita Setu to have a look over the side at the waters below.



Amrita Setu is designed to allow as many as 15,000 people to cross in 30 minutes.



Free Medical Care

- Within hours after the tsunami struck, Amma marshaled medical resources from the MAM's AIMS Hospital in Cochin to the worst-hit areas in Kollam District. six ventilator-equipped ambulances and medical teams headed by 10 doctors, including anesthesiologists and cardiologists, nurses and paramedics, made rounds of the tsunami-affected areas and relief camps for four months, initially visiting each camp every two hours. A similar medical unit comprised of an ambulance and doctors was immediately dispatched to Vypin, Ernakulam District, Kerala.
- In Tamil Nadu, five ambulances, seven doctors, five paramedics, a full ICU team and dozens of volunteers swung into action soon after the disaster struck.
- MAM's Ayurveda College provided medical treatment to 200 inpatients immediately after the tsunami.
- Medicines worth Rs. 600,000 (\$13,800 U.S.) were distributed within the first 24 hours. In the weeks after, Amma's charitable hospital in Amritapuri distributed medicines worth more than a million rupees (\$23,000 U.S.) to the tsunami-affected.
- AIMS Hospital treated 900 tsunami victims, of whom 510 were inpatients. Of those, 450 underwent major surgery, including 15 cardiac operations.
- Several women who had lost all their children in the tsunami underwent re-canalization surgery at AIMS Hospital. So far, four have given birth to a total of six children. Everything was provided free of charge: medicine, pre-examinations, surgery, follow-up examinations, etc.
- MAM provided appropriate care for 16 women throughout their pregnancies and deliveries. MAM also provided them with postnatal care.
- MAM set up 20 eye camps, performed 115 cataract operations and distributed 400 spectacles to those who lost their eyeglasses during the tsunami.
- A Telemedicine Center was set up at MAM's temporary shelters in Alappad, connecting the doctors stationed there with AIMS via satellite.

A large number of students and staff from Amrita Institutions were involved in the relief work.



In Kerala, ventilator-equipped ambulances and medical teams headed by 10 doctors, including anesthesiologists, cardiologists, nurses and paramedics, made rounds of the tsunami-affected areas and relief camps for four months.



In Tamil Nadu, five ambulances, seven doctors, five paramedics, a full ICU team, and dozens of volunteers swung into action as soon as the disaster struck.



Initially, they visited each camp every two hours, around the clock and distributed medicine costing hundreds of thousands of rupees.



Doctors from AIMS and Ettimadai treated patients in make-shift camps.

Amma dispatched ambulances to all affected areas immediately.

Amma consoles a man who was pinned under a cement wall that fell when struck by the force of the water. He was rescued by ashram residents.



Free eye examinations and eyeglasses were provided for those who lost theirs in the tsunami.

Ashram residents sort through many boxes of free medicines to be distributed in the relief camps.

A nurse dresses a young boy's wound in the Amrita Institute, soon after the tsunami struck.



This couple came to Amma fainting with grief. They had lost both children to the tsunami. Eventually Amma sent them to AIMS hospital where the women underwent re-canalization surgery.

The visiting Western doctors helped in the relief operations.



Priya was the first of these ladies to conceive successfully. She gave birth to a baby girl, whom Amma named "Aparna."

MAM took responsibility for three mentally challenged children whose primary care givers had died in the tsunami.

Students from the AIMS medical college pitched in.



Shani was pregnant when the tsunami struck. Amma sent her to AIMS for pre-natal checkups and to give birth. She came back to Amritapuri with her newborn daughter. Amma named the baby Durga.



Free Psychological Counseling

- In the days and weeks after the tsunami struck, a team of child psychiatrists and psychologists made regular visits to the relief camps, actively interacting with the children and providing assistance and counseling.
- Trained experts used music therapy to help the children and adults recover from their trauma.
- At shelters and other local gathering areas, the children received classes in harmonium, tabla, singing, dancing, sports, yoga, spoken-English, Sanskrit and swimming. They were also encouraged to channel their talents through storytelling, poetry and drawing. These activities kept their minds active and helped to distract them from their traumatic experiences.
- In Alappad, AIMS doctors regularly visited relief camps and homes of victims, and provided counseling for thousands. After months of daily visits and continuous counseling, the doctors diagnosed 160 as suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); these individuals received long-term counseling.

The doctors sent to the relief camps did thorough check-ups, as many of the victims suffered from PTSD.



This young girl was asked to draw a picture of her feelings regarding the tsunami as a method to help her overcome her fears and anxiety.



(left) Activities such as storytelling, writing, drawing and yoga helped to keep the childrens' minds active and helped to distract them from their traumatic experiences.

(right) In an effort co-ordinated by devotees, children from around the world sent their wishes and prayers to the kids affected by the tsunami.



At the temporary shelters in Srayikkad, programs were held at night, and the children danced and sang for the community.

Ashram residents took time to play with the children at the shelters.



Ashram residents played games with the children and taught them prayers and meditation. They also encouraged the children to talk about the tsunami, to help them process their trauma and express their feelings.





Free Food

- In total, as part of the post-tsunami relief work, MAM served more than 7.5 million meals throughout Tamil Nadu and Kerala.
- 15 minutes after the tsunami struck, MAM began preparing food for the evacuees, and immediately sent 40 trucks of raw rice and food supplies to affected regions all over Kerala.
- In Kerala, MAM distributed 30,000 kg of rice during the first 15 days. Another 20,000 kg of rice were distributed to the evacuees on the day they left the relief camp.
- In Alappad, MAM provided three meals daily for 135 days. These meals were served at a couple of dozen counters along the 17.5 km stretch of coast.
- In Kollam District, MAM served three meals a day to more than 4,000 families being sheltered at the Amrita University campus. In addition, three meals a day were provided to 15,000 refugees in other relief camps in the district.
- In Kollam District, during the first 15 days, 15 tons of uppumav were prepared and 22,500 liters of milk were distributed to children.
- MAM provided lunch at the schools in Kerala for children who were from the relief camps.
- At the Nagapattinam relief camps, 670,500 meals were prepared and served within a radius of 15 km, beginning on December 27, 2004.
- In Tamil Nadu, MAM distributed 185 tons of uncooked rice, 1.1 tons of cooking oil, 1.5 tons of flour, 1.5 tons of sugar, 1.5 tons of rava (cream of wheat), 2.1 tons of powdered milk and 4.5 tons of dhal.
- In Chennai, a total of 56,000 meals were provided from December 27, 2004 through January 10, 2005.
- During Amma's visit to Nagapattinam, Amma distributed 6,000 bags of rice.
- Uncooked foods such as rice and beans were distributed in Sri Lanka.



Ashram residents worked tirelessly chopping vegetables and preparing food at the University.



Many devotees worked all day and night, inspired by Amma's message of love and compassion.



Food being transported and unloaded from an MAM lorry.



Food was prepared and distributed round the clock. No one went hungry.



The food was loaded onto trucks and distributed to relief camps in Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu and Alappad, Kerala.



Children praying over and enjoying their meals at one of the MAM relief camps.

Food being served at MAM's food counters along Beach Road in Alappad Panchayat.



Swami Ramakrishnananda Puri and Br. Abhayamrita Chaitanya distribute bulk cooking supplies to those in need in Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu.

Not only the villagers were fed, but also the police and paramilitary helping in the relief efforts.



The villagers carried their bundles of provisions back to their homes in Samanthampettai, Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu.

Ashram residents serving food at one of the temporary shelters in Srayikkad and Clappana, Kerala.



Amma gave darshan and handed out bundles of rice as prasad in Samanthampettai.



Temporary Shelters & Relief Camps

- On the day the tsunami struck, MAM created three relief camps at the Amritapuri campus of the Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham. About 4,000 families stayed there after the tsunami.
- MAM built temporary shelters for hundreds of families in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The shelters were completed by January 13, 2005 and were equipped with electric lights, fans, running water and TVs.
- MAM loaned five acres of land to the Kerala Government to build temporary shelters in Srayikkad, Alappad, Kollam District, Kerala.
- MAM's camp at Amrita University took in an additional 1,500 families when they requested to be relocated there because the families felt that women were not safe at the camps where they had been staying.
- At the relief camps, MAM organized sporting events, as well as music and dance programs to entertain the residents.

Visitors pray silently or aloud at the Amrita University campus, across the backwaters from Amritapuri.



Amma at the Amrita University Campus relief camp consoling a family who had lost a loved one in the tsunami.

Sand was brought to the Srayikkad shelter site in MAM lorries.



These shelters in Srayikkad, Kerala would serve as homes for the families until new homes could be built.



Ashram residents took time to sing and play with the children living at the shelters.



The shelter sites included a community hall with a television, day care, running water and community kitchen.



At the shelters in Samanthampettai, games, competitions and other forms of entertainment were arranged for the residents.



Free Clothing & Other Essential Items

In the days and weeks after the tsunami struck, MAM distributed:

- Thousands of relief kits to people in Kollam District. The kits were distributed the day after the tsunami struck and included clothing, sandals, sleeping mats, bed sheets and other essential items.
- 40,000 new saris, dhotis, shirts, undershirts, undergarments and children's clothes in Tamil Nadu.
- 35,000 articles of clothing in Kerala, including 10,000 tailored sets of clothing for children from Alappuzha and Kollam.
- 15,000 new sarees and dhotis in Sri Lanka.
- 30,000 blankets in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Ashram residents distributed sarees to villagers in the local area.



Essential items like toothbrushes, toothpaste and soap were distributed at many of the MAM relief camps.



Weeks after the tsunami, the MAM was still making clothes for the villagers. Here, ashram residents took measurements.

Br. Abhayamrita Chaitanya distributed free clothing at one of MAM's temporary shelters in Nagappattinam. Refugees waited in line for clothes such as sarees, dhotis and other essential items.

Amma distributed new sarees and dhotis at the Tamil relief camp in Ampara, and the Sinhalese relief camp in Hambantota, Sri Lanka.





Children's Camps

- Two camps, which included classes in Yoga, spoken-English, Sanskrit and personality-development, were conducted at the Amritapuri Ashram for 10,000 children from Alappuzha and Kollam Districts, Kerala. The camps were designed to keep their minds active and help them overcome their traumatic experience.
- Swimming classes were conducted to help the children overcome their newly developed fear of water.
- The five-day camps included question-and-answer sessions with Amma.
- 10,000 tailored-to-fit sets of clothing were made and distributed to all the children attending the camps.

Children who attended the camps received training in some basic yoga asanas.



Classes in English and Sanskrit, as well as question-and-answer sessions were held as a way to help them overcome their trauma of having experienced the tsunami.



Amma had a playful time with the children that attended the camps.



Amma taught the children how to float and feel safe in the water.

She served food to all of the children who attended.



Amma sang bhajans with the kids, and as part of the cultural activities, the children performed skits and sang songs.



Amma gave the children a sense of hope and security in a time of deep grief and drastic change.



Financial Support

- In Kerala, MAM distributed Rs. 1.5 crores (\$345,000 U.S.) among families residing in the districts of Kollam, Ernakulam and Alappuzha to purchase essential household items.
- MAM is providing pensions to tsunami-affected families in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Marriage Assistance

- MAM has conducted hundreds of marriages on an individual and group basis for tsunami-affected couples in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry.
- All the costs of the marriage ceremonies were covered by MAM, including the wedding ornaments, clothes and traditional feast for the couples' relatives.
- In Tamil Nadu, the newlyweds were provided with furniture, cooking vessels and other items needed to start their new lives.

In Arattuphuza, Alappuzha District, Swami Amritaswarupananda Puri distributed cash allotments to local villagers.



Swami Amritaswarupanada Puri gave the money to the first recipient of MAM's financial assistance.



Br. Anaghamrita Chaitanya handed out financial assistance to villagers. The money was intended to buy essential household items to replace what was washed away or destroyed.



Amma married this couple in Amritapuri. The necessary items for traditional marriages were provided to couples who had been suffering economically due to the disaster.



Br. Abhayamrita Chaitanya handed gifts to the new couples.

A priest performed the mass marriage ceremony.



The couples lifted a glass of milk to each others' lips as part of the MAM-sponsored mass-wedding ceremony in Pattinachery, Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu.

After the mass wedding, they circumambulated the Meenakshi Temple.



Prayers, Consolation & Spiritual Support

- Amma visited relief camps in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry and Sri Lanka to console those who were affected by the tsunami.
- Amma held prayers for the peace of the living and the souls of the deceased while visiting relief camps.
- In Alappad, Amma participated in the *moksha deepam* ceremony traditionally held on the 16th day after a death. Ashram swamis and brahmacharis held similar programs in various locations throughout Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry.

Most people who suffered serious losses just cried in Amma's arms. Amma herself walked through the relief camps and listened to the woes of the villagers who had undergone serious loss and damage.



Amma consoled victims of the tsunami, hearing their stories and inquiring about their families, and their care. At times like these, words mean nothing. Only sharing in the family's pain can give them solace.



Sri Lankan Cabinet Minister Douglas Devananda, Amma and the Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, at a Sinhalese tsunami-relief camp in Hambantota, Sri Lanka on February 18, 2005.



This woman told her woes to Amma through Swami Ramakrishnananda Puri, who translated from Tamil into Malayalam in Samanthampettai, Nagapattinam.

Amma distributed bags of uncooked rice as prasadam.



Amma spoke to villagers in Nagapattinam.

Amma oversees the 16th day ritual ceremony for the dead on Azhikkal beach, Kerala.



Amma took a lamp to the shore and placed it in the sea.

After addressing the crowd, Amma sat in meditation and led everyone in chanting a peace mantra. This lasted for several minutes. At the end, Amma's cheeks were stained with tears.
January 10 2005, Azhikkal, Kerala.



Volunteers

- Hundreds of thousands of volunteers—including ashram residents, students, devotees and supporters from all over India and abroad—selflessly participated in and contributed to various relief works since the disaster struck.
- In the days after the tsunami, volunteers participated in the efforts by excavating the bodies of victims, helping with the arrangements for the cremation of 42 bodies in Alappad, cleaning the ashram as well as non-MAM-run relief camps, and constructing shelters. They distributed food and clothing for months after the tsunami hit.

|| OM LOKAH SAMASTAH SUKHINO BHAVANTU ||

Ashram residents cleaned out a pond that had begun to stink due to dead fish and refuse that had washed into it.

They spent weeks removing waste and rubbish from houses and yards in Alappad Panchayat.

In the surrounding area of the ashram, more than 140 people were killed by the rising waters. Many were small children.



Many ashram residents helped with the last rites for the mass cremation in Azhikkal. Some stayed throughout the night, providing food and water to the families of those who had died.



As part of the cleaning efforts, ashram residents and volunteers dug holes for waste.

After the sludge had been scraped off the floor, the bhajan hall was cleaned.



Cleaning and drying books, pictures and CDs from the MAM bookstore was a massive job.

Many departments, such as the Press suffered from the water and sludge and had to be completely cleaned out.



Ashram residents disposed of the sludge, and burned waste and debris in Amritapuri.

Nearly 100 students from Japan motivate themselves before a long day of hard work, building houses for the displaced.



Lakshmanbhai, the chief of a village in Gujarat, and nine other villagers traveled all the way to Kerala to help.



Students from the different Amrita University Campuses have been helping to build new houses. As most of the building sites are not accessible by road, most of the materials had to be transported by hand.



Even some small children were inspired to help with construction seva.



The young and the old contributed whatever they could to the massive effort.



Devotees from all over the world came to participate in the seva.



Br. Nijamrita Chaitanya pulled a cart with the help of a villager near Amritapuri. Villagers worked happily with the ashram residents, knowing that they were helping both their neighbors and themselves.



Bri. Bhavamrita Chaitanya and ashram residents mixed cement to make the roofs of the new homes.





This satellite picture shows the Alappad coast line, the ashram, the bridge in construction, the temporary housing shelters and some of the tsunami houses built by the MAM.

