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Published by Anonymous on Jun. 02, 1999

MEDICINE

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Ammachi heals both body and soul

India is a land where advanced medical services are unavailable or too expensive for many who need them. Now Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi ("Ammachi") has created a huge modern-day hospital to serve the poor. Work begun in 1994 culminated in mid-1998 when the 800-bed, 600,000-square-foot Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences (AIMS) was opened on May 17th by the Prime Minister of India, Sri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, in ceremonies attended by 40,000 persons. AIMS is a welcome change in a day when hospitals are just another money-making corporation, rather than a service to humanity.

Ammachi was asked, "What need does an ashram have to run hospitals?" She replied, "In order to know the Atma, it is necessary to preserve the instrument. Sri Ramakrishna, Ramana Maharshi and Swami Vivekananda all underwent treatments when they fell ill. Therefore, treatment is not incompatible with spirituality."

The site Ammachi chose was a deep marsh. All 22 acres were under water. Outside contractors were too expensive, so she

decided to go ahead mainly using volunteers from among her devotees. It took three hard years just to fill the marsh. Most volunteers came from the local community, but others, such as Dr. Prem, abandoned high-paying jobs in the West to help. He was head of a department at Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles, USA, before joining the effort. He tackled problems associated with hospital infrastructure, electricity supply, data management, computerized networks and more--each likely to cause an ulcer, fortunately his area of speciality. He also headed the campaign to attract other professionals.

Finally completed, the six towers of the allopathic hospital accommodate the wards, laboratories, operating rooms, intensive care units, blood banking facilities and emergency services. Serving these are diagnostic labs, an imaging center with CT scan facility, an uninterruptible power system, central sterilization and a modern dietary kitchen. For those who can afford to pay, the cost is minimal: open-heart surgery costs \$800 compared to \$50,000 in the United States.

The Heart Center, an advanced surgical unit opened first, now performs eight to ten open-heart surgeries every day, most of them free of charge. In Ammachi's "heart-to-heart" program, surgeons from the US come for weeks or months to perform surgery for free, and bringing with them hundreds of thousands of dollars in supplies. Harvard University is sending a team at no cost to train the staff in treating heart disease in children.

The hospital has started a postgraduate training program in medical technology and nursing and will also be training staff

to dedicate themselves to the medical profession with the attitude of selfless service.

The spiritual impact of the hospital project was summarized by India's Prime Minister, "In this hospital, we find the best medical facilities available anywhere in the world, and a dedicated team of expert doctors from various countries joining hands to keep the hearts of the poor and meek going strong. This multi-specialty hospital is truly the pride of Kerala. But it is equally a tribute to the dedication and selfless labor of thousands of people from all over the globe who came together to transform a grand vision into a reality. Ammachi has already performed the most intricate heart operation on thousands of young men and women, removing the blockages of indifference and allowing the free flow of love."

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