



# TRANSFORMING RURAL INDIA

AMRITA  
**SERVE**  
AMRITA SELF RELIANT VILLAGES



" Villages are India's foundation, Her very life-force, and it is society's responsibility to take care of them. In fact, it is our villages that sustain us by providing us, who live in cities, with the nourishment we need, in order to survive. However, today, we are just exploiting them and casting them aside. It is time to acknowledge that our villages are our very foundation, and move forward with one heart and one mind to protect and serve them."

-Amma

## Amrita **Self-Reliant** Villages

Until the 18th century, India was one of the world's wealthiest nations. Indian villagers lived their lives in harmony with nature and based on traditional values. They were skilled makers of silk and other fine cloth, medicinal drugs and pottery, and were prosperous owners of sandalwood, gold, silver, emeralds and diamonds. One can see a glimpse of India's affluence from the Arabian ambassador Razzak's description of the glory of the Vijaynagar Empire: "... such as the eye has not seen, nor has the ear heard of, any place to equal it on earth."

Today, however, Indian villages tell a different tale. Travelling across the length and breadth of India during her annual tours, and stopping in remote areas en route from one city to another, Amma has personally seen and heard the problems of thousands of poor villagers all over the country. Amma's 60th birthday was celebrated with the launch of a new humanitarian project, Amrita SeRVe, wherein the Mata Amritanandamayi Math (MAM) is working in 101 villages throughout India with a view to helping them become self-reliant.

In fact, all of MAM's humanitarian activities — whether building homes for the homeless or distributing pensions to destitute widows — have been the direct outcome of stories of suffering Amma has heard from those who have come to her. This new project is yet another expression of Amma's boundless love and compassion for suffering humanity. It draws upon the experience of various humanitarian activities that MAM has been engaged in throughout the world for the past three decades.



**Project Vision** To empower villagers to live in a prosperous village—where people are educated and healthy, and lead a life of dignity in a clean and pollution-free environment; where everyone's basic needs of life such as food, water, clothing, housing and employment are met; where there is harmony between man and nature; and where there is a self-reliant and vibrant culture rooted in India's age-old traditional wisdom.

# Model for Sustainable Development

There is no rigid blueprint of the interventions planned. These are being designed in close consultation with local communities in order to best address their specific priorities. The Amrita SeRVE project is strongly characterized by the process of 'learning by doing' that is attuned to the ground realities.

Certain activities and guiding principles characterize the project:

- Formation and strengthening of SRGs (Self-Reliant Groups)
- Respecting and restoring harmony between human beings and nature
- Strengthening of traditional values and respecting local knowledge
- Leveraging existing infrastructure and utilizing government schemes
- MAM's role as mentor and facilitator

**SRGs** Self-Reliant Groups, a key component of the project, are made up of 9 to 11 people (women, men or youth), and they work towards fulfilling the project vision. Women SRGs especially play a key role because a woman, as wife and mother, is integral to strengthening the whole family.

**Respecting and restoring harmony between human beings and nature** The loss of harmony between human beings and nature is leading to increased natural disasters. At the village level, this manifests in the large-scale use of chemicals in farming, the cutting down of trees, resultant loss in biodiversity, and unsanitary conditions.

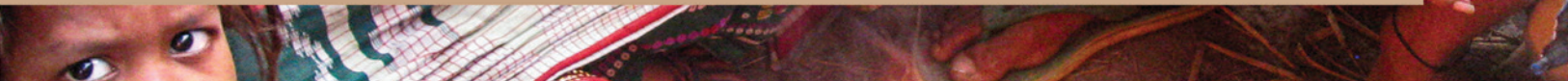
**Strengthening of traditional values and respecting local knowledge** Most problems facing human society today result from a decline in values such as helping and serving others, using things according to need and not greed and respecting others, especially women. There is a lot of wisdom in traditional agricultural practices, water management methods, and healing practices and the need is to document, revive and strengthen these.





## Leveraging existing infrastructure and utilizing government schemes

The existing infrastructure in villages such as schools, anganwadis, and health centers will be strengthened. There will be coordination with other voluntary organizations for specific tasks. Wherever possible, villagers will be encouraged to utilize government schemes for health insurance, maternity benefits, old age pensions, etc.



MAM's role as mentor and facilitator

MAM will seek to empower villagers so that they fully utilize the physical and human resources available to them. Critical to the success of Amrita SeRVe is the tenet that village communities must become the driving force of their own development. Villagers will be expected to contribute a substantial amount of their time, skills and resources towards the project. The focus will be on building local technical, administrative and entrepreneurial capacity. MAM's role will be that of a mentor and facilitator, until the transition to full local ownership.

Activities have begun in the following seven focus areas:

Health | Education | Water and Sanitation | Agriculture

Eco-Friendly Infrastructure | Income Generation | Self-Empowerment





# Health

Goal: To combat malnutrition, reduce the incidence of disease, and eradicate substance abuse.

Malnutrition is a grim reality in Indian villages. This problem can be addressed by encouraging villagers to start kitchen gardens and grow vegetables for their own consumption. The World Health Organization defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely as the absence of disease or infirmity. As such, our goal in the villages is to promote the holistic well-being of all, beginning with a focus on physical health needs.

Activities: • Combat malnutrition by promoting green, leafy vegetables • Provide clean drinking water • Train community health workers, organize medical camps and immunization drives • Counsel for substance abuse in order to create addiction-free villages.





**Education** Goal: To strengthen village schools, achieve zero drop-out rates, and provide opportunities for higher education.

In 2011, UNESCO placed India fourth from the bottom worldwide in terms of the number of out-of-school children (1.7 million). Enrolment in schools shot up around India after the Right to Education Act was enacted in 2009, but the dropout rate even in elementary schools remains 40%. We are offering free teaching support in villages to ensure that students remain in school. Adult literacy is also being emphasized.

Activities: • Introduce a holistic, value-based curriculum that includes nature activities and project-based learning • Enable dropouts to resume school via intensive bridge camps • Provide coaching support to students who want to enroll for higher education • Start adult education centers.

## Water and Sanitation

Goal: To ensure that there is easy access to sufficient and clean water at all times, and promote hygienic, sanitary conditions in villages.

India is the largest user of groundwater in the world, and is being threatened by rapidly depleting groundwater supplies. There is an urgent need to recharge groundwater, especially by farmers who are its biggest consumers. Contaminated drinking water and open defecation are other big problems. It is estimated that rural India spends up to Rs. 6,700 crore annually for the treatment of water- and sanitation-related diseases.

Activities: • Encourage ground water recharging through proven, scientific methods • Revive traditional rainwater harvesting techniques • Encourage cleanliness of surroundings and drains in villages • Build toilets to end open defecation.

## Agriculture

Goal: To increase agricultural yield, promote natural ways of farming, and end dependence on chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

The Green Revolution was hailed as a means to ensure food security for the nation and reduce dependence on imports. It brought additional farm land under cultivation, but at a great price to the environment. There is an urgent need to replace chemical methods of farming with techniques that are more in harmony with nature. Natural farming nurtures the soil, ensures continual ground water recharge, promotes trees on farm boundaries, and emphasizes seed saving.

Activities: • Promote natural farming techniques • Repair soils degraded from years of chemical farming • Encourage the cultivation of additional crops, especially those that require less water • Promote dairy farming and cow breeding; cows play an essential role in natural farming.

## Income Generation

Goal: To empower men, women and youth economically by providing vocational training and helping initiate income-generating units.

By providing training to produce value-added products from agricultural produce, by promoting local handicrafts, and by training rural artisans to make eco-friendly products, villagers can find opportunities for generating income in the village itself. This will stop the migration of youth from villages to cities in search of better employment opportunities.

Activities: • Identify skills in demand in the local market and provide vocational training • Support village-based industries by providing training to improve product quality, thus ensuring better marketability and price • Empower villagers by setting up business groups (through SHGs), milk co-operatives and farmers clubs • Facilitate the marketing of village produce to get fair and remunerative price for farmers.

## Eco-Friendly Infrastructure

Goal: To promote traditional building technologies that rely on local resources and that leave a small footprint on the environment.

Indian villages have perfected many time-tested and proven building technologies that use natural materials. The need of the hour is to promote these technologies as people all over the world are waking up to the wisdom of using local resources. Using such local materials to build also helps to reduce energy costs, as homes remain cool in summer and warm in winter. Another priority is the planting of trees; massive afforestation will also help to combat climate change.

Activities: • Help provide all-weather roads and street lights • Plant fruit-bearing and local species of trees. • Promote eco-friendly building technologies • Set up the Amrita Village Resource Centre.





## Self-Empowerment

Goal: To provide inner strength and self-confidence to face the challenges of life.

Many scientific studies have shown the immense benefits of practicing yoga and meditation. These will be taught to villagers. For many millennia, a completely self-reliant village was at the center of Indian life. A vibrant culture that had evolved over thousands of years guided the way of life. We want to revive this culture once again.

Activities: • Conduct yoga, meditation and cultural awareness classes • Organize village-level sports events and camps for children and youth • Document and revive traditional practices • Create awareness about living in harmony with nature.



# MAM Humanitarian Initiatives

From the first humanitarian program that Amma launched in India to the latest, all can be likened to pieces in a huge jigsaw puzzle that comes together for the material and spiritual uplift of the poor and needy. Here is an overview of the vast and varied activities that MAM has undertaken worldwide over the last 30 years:

- The Amrita Kuteeram Free-Housing Project has already built 45,000 homes in 75 locations all over India.
- The Amrita Nidhi pension scheme provides 59,000 pensions to widows and the disabled all over the nation.
- The Vidyamritam scholarship program supports 41,000 students from disadvantaged backgrounds in rural India.
- The Green Friends Afforestation Program has planted hundreds of thousands of trees worldwide.
- The Amala Bharatam Campaign (ABC) has led to the clearing of thousands of tons of trash from public places.
- Tens of thousands worldwide have learned the Integrated Amrita Meditation (IAM) Technique and Amrita Yoga practices.
- The Amrita SREE program has organized hundreds of thousands of poor women into self-help groups.
- The Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences (AIMS Hospital) provides greatly subsidized healthcare to the poor and needy.
- Amrita University has developed integrated, nano-material-based solar cells and batteries with large power densities for providing electricity to villages that are off-grid.
- Amrita University's AMMACHI Lab uses computerized vocational training to empower the marginalized, especially women.
- Amrita University's CREATE Lab provides two hours of after-school coaching through tablet-based programs in selected villages.
- A-VIEW, designed to facilitate online communication, has been adopted by thousands of schools and colleges around the nation to promote e-learning and address the issue of a shortage of qualified teachers.



" There is more to society and life than the bright lights of big cities.  
Unfortunately, we forget this. There are also rural villages and agricultural communities.  
It is the people living there who produce the fruit, vegetables and grain that feed  
the entire world. Without them, how can we continue to exist?"

- Amma

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