

Shri Murlidhar Devdas Amte

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Constructive Work-1979

*I sought my soul, my soul I could not see;
I sought my God, my God eluded me:
I sought my brother and I found all three.*

These lines, inscribed on the walls of the Leprosy Clinic at Anandvan, sum up the philosophy of the life of Murlidhar Devdas Amte, popularly known as Baba Amte.

Murlidhar was born on 26th December 1914 in a rich orthodox Brahmin family at Hinganghat in Wardha district. His father Devidas Harbaji was a Jagirdar and high revenue official. Although Murlidhar was brought up in luxury he had something of a rebel and the humanitarian in him even from his childhood. A thrashing he received from his father for dining with the servants only made him firmer in his resolve.

Taking his degree in law in 1938, he set up practice at Chhattisgarh and shifted to Warora in Chanda (Chandrapur) district a couple of years later.

Visiting the extensive family estate at nearby Goraja, Murlidhar was appalled by the naked poverty and pitiable living conditions of his tenants, and nauseated by the parasitic life he was leading on their labours. He started taking an interest in civic affairs and he was elected as Vice-Chairman of the Warora Municipality. He also became the President of the scavengers' union at Warora.

After his marriage he renounced, with his wife's consent, his family estate and started a commune called *Samya-kul* where he lived with about twenty other persons of all castes and communities, including cobblers and scavengers : they pooled their incomes and shared their expenses.

In 1948, when the scavengers of Warora were thinking of going on a strike in protest against their heavy load of uncongenial work and meager pay, Murlidhar as President of their Union, decided to gain first-hand experience of the work. He joined in cleaning the city latrines and even carried night soil in a container on his head like any other scavenger.

During this period one rainy night, on his usual round carrying night soil on his head, he saw what he thought was a bundle of old clothes on the roadside near the gutter. On closer examination he found a person afflicted with leprosy lying there, severely mutilated by the disease and unable even to move. He ran away in panic, dreading that he might catch contagion. But realizing that he had done wrong and his wonted courage had failed him, he came back and put up a temporary shelter of bamboo thatching to protect the afflicted man.

Cogitating over what he would have done if his own near and dear ones were victims of the dreaded disease, he made the supreme decision of his life to devote himself to the service of these unfortunate beings that were shunned by society and needed compassion and help more than even the Harijans and other downtrodden sections of society.

Murlidhar had been influenced by Gandhiji's principles from the early thirties, but his association with Gandhiji started in 1939. Thereafter he used to visit Sevagram off and on to meet Gandhiji. During the Second World War, commending his courage in fighting single-handed with a group of British soldiers to protect the honour of a helpless young woman, Gandhiji described him as *Abhay Sadhak* (Fearless Seeker).

Murlidhar started on his new venture of leprosy relief with the blessings of Acharya Vinoba Bhave. He read all the books on leprosy which he could find. He visited the leprosarium, an Ashram for leprosy patients which was conducted by Manohar Diwan, a disciple of Gandhiji, at Dattapur (Wardha) to study the methods of treatment and rehabilitation adopted there. In 1949 he took a special course in leprosy treatment at the School of Tropical Medicine at Calcutta. By this time the whole basis of leprosy treatment had been revolutionized with the discovery and ready availability of the sulphone drug known as DDS.

Baba Amte, by which name he had come to be affectionately known by now, found that most of the patients needed treatment over a long period of more than three years for cure, which most of them could not afford, during the period of treatment they had no recourse except to beg for a living because they could not get any employment. To live on charity would be humiliating and degrading to them. Charity, he believed destroyed a man's self-respect, but work built a man by making him self-reliant.

Baba Amte, therefore, decided to set up a colony where the patients could live and work, where they would be provided with gainful employment, and where they could permanently settle down, if they so desired, after their treatment was completed, or go back to their own people fully cured. Their psychological, social and economic rehabilitation was as important as the alleviation of their physical suffering.

With these broad aims and objects in view, Baba Amte established the Maraogi Sewa Samiti in 1950. Anandwan (Forest of Joy) was the first colony set up by the Samiti on the outskirts of Warora, on a 50-acre plot of quarry and forest land given by the State Government. With the help of six male leprosy patients Baba Amte cleared the ground, put up a couple of temporary sheds and dug a well to convert this barren land into a farm. A clinic was set up in due course. The work flourished and the State Government gave them another 50 acres of land. New buildings were constructed to house the patients and enlarge the clinic. By 1960 there were 600 patients staying and working in the colony and another 4000 out-patients were given treatment at weekly clinics at a dozen places in the surrounding villages.

Today Anandwan with a large farm and a host of buildings on 450 acres of land bustles with activity. There are 1500 persons living in the colony. They work in the fields and in the many workshops where utility articles including household goods are produced. Adequate wages are paid to them. The colony is not only self-sufficient but the surplus produce is sold to the public at Warora and surrounding areas. Patients who are cured are encouraged to marry and settle down with their families. Baba Amte lives there in a modest cottage with his family.

In 1956 a similar colony named Ashokwan was set up a few miles from Nagpur. It has now about 100 inhabitants and is largely self-supporting.

In 1964 the Anand Niketan College was started with faculties in Arts, Science, commerce and Agriculture. This institution is unique in the history of leprosy because it has been established by leprosy patients not for their own benefit, but as a gift from them to the healthy people of the surrounding areas from which most of the students come. It has 1400 students on its rolls.

The *Somnath Prakalp* was taken on hand by Baba Amte in 1967. Situated at Somnath, about 60 miles from Anandwan on 1,300 acres of dense forest land. Baba Amte's ambition is to build a Workers' University (Man-power Training Centre) there. Presently 500 acres of land have been brought under cultivation and about 400 leprosy victims, many of them married have been settled.

In 1974, he started *Sandhi Niketan* (Home for Opportunity) which during the last few years had grown into a full-fledged centre of rehabilitation for all manner of physically handicapped and displaced persons.

Lok Biradari Prakalp, started by Baba Amte in 1973, is a comprehensive scheme to provide health services and education and also to impart training in improved agricultural methods to the Maria-Gonds living in remote areas in the Chandrapur district and bordering areas. These tribals who have been living utter poverty and neglect, now have the benefit of health care at a 50-bed hospital at Hemalkasa and health centres at 6 other villages.

Baba Amte is the author of several books in Marathi. His poems and other writings flow from a sensitive mind and compassionate heart.

Baba Amte has embarked on a new project called Centre of Science for Social Justice with the object of developing appropriate technology for the use of people living below the poverty line and physically handicapped persons. The Centre is also setting up a solar village (*Surya Gram*) to introduce innovations for harnessing Solar Energy for productive use.

All the institutions are manned and managed by the leprosy patients themselves, with minimal help from outside. Even the buildings have been designed and built by them. Baba Amte's aim is not only to make the patients forget their handicap but to make the visitors forget the disease. Periodically conferences and camps are held at the various centres in which persons from all walks of life, including school children participate, with the object of propagating the 'Anandwan Movement'.

Though afflicted by an extremely painful spondylosis for the last 15 years Baba Amte has been working ceaselessly on these various projects. His wife Sadhanatai has been his constant companion and helpmate in his work, sharing his tribulations and triumphs. His elder son Dr Vikas serves as Medical Director of Anandwan. His wife Dr Bharati helps him in his work. Baba Amte's second son Dr Prakash and his wife Dr Mandakini have taken up the responsibility of the Lok Biradari work. Baba Amte's daughter Renuka and son-in-law Vilas Manohar have also devoted themselves to this constructive work. This is a rare phenomenon of an entire family dedicated to public service. What is more, hundreds of young people of the new generation seeking outlets for their talents in constructive social work have derived inspiration from Baba Amte's missionary zeal and are working in the various projects initiated by him.

