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Living with dignity

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Beyond rejection by relatives, friends and society, to rebuild one's life and a community based on hard work and dignity — that's the essence of Amte's Anandwan.

The incredible story of Anandwan, an expansive, cooperative town of 2,000 leprosy-afflicted and disabled residents, began one rainy night. While returning home, Murlidhar Devidas Amte — better known as the humanitarian crusader Baba Amte — came across what seemed to be a bundle on the side of the road. When he took a closer look, Amte, to his horror, encountered a man in the last stages of leprosy. He saw a rotting mass of human flesh without fingers and toes, with holes, sores and worms in place of a nose and eyes. Horrified and afraid, he ran home. But he could not live with himself. To overcome the fear he had experienced, he resolved to work with the leprosy-afflicted, a life-changing decision that laid the seeds for his future course of action.

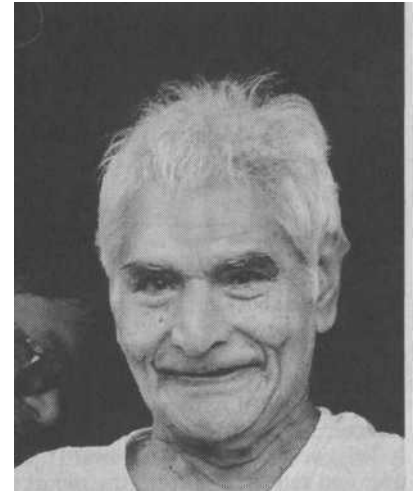
In 1951, on 50 acres of stony wasteland inhabited by wild animals near Warora in north-eastern Maharashtra, Amte along with his wife Sadhana and six patients crippled by leprosy, started building Anandwan, a leprosarium and farm where those shunned by their families and society could live and work with dignity. Among the first tasks, Amte and his companions with deformed hands and feet, built shelters and dug a well which took almost two months. In three

years' time, Anandwan grew to a community of 60 people building a new life together. Agriculture, the mainstay of Anandwan's economy, developed gradually, along with its diverse endeavours.

Impressive growth

Today, Anandwan sprawls across 175 hectares, encompassing hospitals for the treatment, training and rehabilitation of leprosy patients, schools for the leprosy-afflicted, blind, deaf-mute and handicapped and a home for the leprosy-afflicted old. It boasts of 120 hectares of agricultural land and vocational training centres for disabled youth and rural school and college dropouts. It also includes a home for senior citizens, a community nursery for orphans and the children of those with leprosy, and housing for some 2,000 residents, among various other endeavours. These varied activities at Anandwan are carried out by the leprosy-afflicted and disabled themselves. More than five decades of hard, laborious work has created this "grove of joy" which offers opportunities to live a life of dignity to its residents.

During my visit to Anandwan, I watch a partially blind man named Govind weaving a handloom mat. The task demands craftsmanship, patience and at-



HOPE AND REFUGE:

Baba Amte. PHOTO: PTI

tention to detail. Govind progresses extremely slowly but with confidence. A visitor comments, "He can't see a thing so I don't know how he weaves." At Anandwan, countless such persons with disabilities are trained in trades ranging from carpet making to carpentry, handloom weaving to electrical work, tailoring to repairing air conditioners. The rehabilitated members of Anandwan's community produce a diverse range of products including cloth and carpets, leather products and metal furniture, coolers and bicycles. In a country where the disabled are usually sighted begging on the streets or in trains in miserable conditions without any dignity, Amte's creative response — "Work builds, charity destroys" — comes alive in the vocational training centres here.

Through the years, Anandwan has been home to many remarkable individuals who have overcome enormous odds to rebuild their lives fruitfully, utilising the opportunities provided here.

Courageous lives

Eighty-three-year-old Bansilalji is one such individual. A long-time colleague of Amte, Bansilalji talks of the devastating discrimination he faced when afflicted by leprosy. "Anywhere in the world/" he tells me emphatically, "once you have leprosy, you have no father, no mother, no brother, no relatives. No one loves you." With a smile on his wrinkled face, he is rational and understanding about the absolute rejection he faced from his near and dear ones. They were very afraid of getting infected, he tells me. They were illiterate and believed that leprosy could not be cured, he reasons further. People from his village, including his own relatives, would refuse to visit his house and buy the milk of his buffaloes. Bansilalji found that people who used to love him and care for him — his parents, siblings, wife and friends — now systematically avoided him. They refused to eat with him, refused to talk to him, rejected him entirely. Utterly frustrated, he decided to leave home, resolving to commit suicide. But fortunately, he happened to meet Amte in 1956, and in the days that followed, played a significant role in helping him develop Anandwan's agriculture in its early days. Today, Bansilalji's son and grandson visit him at Anandwan, but the scars of the discrimination he faced are etched on his mind so deeply that he refuses to visit his old home.

Another life lived with courage is that of SadashivTajne. Sadashivwas afflicted by polio at the age of three, hence he can-

not walk. I had decided to talk to him about his disability, but he spoke to me about his work at Anandwan with so much hope, energy and enthusiasm that I forgot my original purpose, forgot that I was speaking with a disabled man. Sadashiv's parents educated him up to Class 10; throughout those years, he would move about on his hands. In 1972, he met Amte and enrolled at Anand Niketan College — the Arts, Science and Commerce College built by the leprosy-afflicted for those without leprosy from the world beyond Anandwan. To educate himself during college, he had to travel two kilometres back and forth on his hands everyday. While pursuing his formal education, he learned various trades at Anandwan's vocational training centre. Today, he is the supervisor of the same programme, and also the director of Anandwan's orchestra. At Anandwan itself, he married Asha, a deaf and mute woman, with whom he has what he describes as a wonderful marriage. Sadashivhas never considered himself disabled, never avoided any task due to his disability, never said no.

A range of endeavours

Over five and a half decades, Anandwan has pioneered a diverse range of endeavours in various fields ranging from community living to caring for the environment. One such endeavour at Anandwan is its very own, extraordinary orchestra — Swaranandawan. I am moved beyond words to see this group of performers with varying disabilities on stage. Swaranandawan belts out popular, lively film songs in self-assured, confident voices. A sign on the backdrop to the stage reads "Give them a chance, not charity"; beneath it is painted a raised

fist. Some performers move to the centre of the stage by supporting themselves on their hands. Other blind singers have to be helped in order to face the audience. But, in spite of the difficulties, they are undaunted, confident and charismatic. A little girl sings "Dil hai chota sa, Choti si Asha". Her talented mother sings "Jo bhi kiya, Hamna kiya, Shaan se". After the performance, the audience — visitors from Bihar — crowd around the artists. One of the polio-afflicted singers, who is also the flamboyant compere of the show, has sung a song dedicated to his life-partner, who is deaf and mute. Who is she, people from the audience ask him? Can we see your house, they continue. She is very lucky (to have a husband like you), remarks one lady.

Back to reality

Having spent a few unforgettable days at Anandwan, I take my leave. On the train, I encounter many beggars, some blind, some without legs who are crawling on their hands, some pointing out their deformities to me. What kind of a society are we, I think to myself, that cannot even provide a basic life of dignity to our fellow human beings? As the beggars stream past me gradually, I am reminded of my days at Anandwan. I am reminded of the girl who confidently pointed out directions to me with her hand amputated at the elbow. I am reminded of a group of deaf and mute students talking animatedly amongst themselves in sign language. I am reminded of the partially blind girls who danced beautifully to the beat of the Anandwan orchestra. Outside Anandwan, the world seems to be back to its usual self. It is difficult to keep in mind that a place such as Anandwan really exists.