

The Business Standard, Mumbai, 10 Feb 2008

Modern day Gandhian

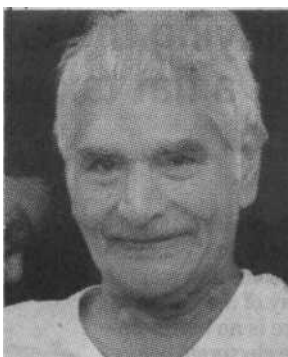
Goodness seldom dies. And so in an age when there are social workers at literally the drop of a coin, the legacy of Muralidhar Devdas Amte or Baba Amte lives on. Baba Amte died today at the age of 94 in his ashram at Anandvan in Chitrapur. He had begun his life's journey as a social worker from that very place about 40 years ago, taking forward the legacy of Shantivan and Sevagram and with it the spirit of the humanism that was alive in pre-independence India.

It was at Anandvan that Amte was first given 250 acres of land by the state government to start his work for leprosy patients. His work was not of charity, but that of creating a life of dignity and hard work for the patients.

What was achieved in Anandvan lives on today. It was but a laboratory for his vision of a life imbued with respect and self reliance, a model he wanted for the whole nation.

His ashram was home to destitutes and patients. Many of them had lost their fingers and feet due to the disease. Baba Amte not only trained himself to treat them, but also helped each of them acquire skills despite their handicap. These people later transformed a barren piece of land into a model farm.

But half a century ago, disease struck Baba Amte and



BABA AMTE
1914-2008

condemned him to restricted mobility. But his vision was clear. And he was living it along with the community and especially his two sons who were eager to follow him.

Today, while son Vikas Amte runs Maharogi Sewa Samiti and coordinates operations between Anandvan and satellite projects; his wife Dr Bharati Amte runs a hospital at Anandvan and his brother Dr Prakash Amte and his wife Dr Mandam Amte run a school and hospital at Hemalkasa.

Baba Amte, born on December 26, 1914 at Hinganghat, Wardha district in Maharashtra was the eldest son of a wealthy Brahmin landowner and spent an idyllic childhood. By the time he was fourteen, Baba owned his own gun and hunted boar and deer.

"During his college holidays, Baba travelled all over India. He visited Shantiniketan, attracted by Rabindranath Tagore's music and poetry. Closer to home, at Sewagram

(Gandhiji's ashram) near Wardha, Baba was equally fascinated with Gandhi's relationship with God.

But it was the poetic simplicity of Maharashtra's fiery social reformer, Sane Guruji, which pushed him into action. From Anandvan, he moved to Hemalkasa where he took on the might of the state and central governments and persuaded them to reverse the decision on two hydel power projects. But he failed to produce the same success with regard to Madhya Pradesh.

According to Medha Patkar, she was not a follower or disciple of Baba Amte, but definitely found him inspiring. He was opposed to big dams and had a clear view on the matter, she added.

Amte brought out a booklet titled Cry 0 Beloved Narmada in July 1989, dubbing the Narmada project as a social, economic and ecological disaster-in-the-making. It also recounted the emerging protests against the mega dams. Baba concluded with an appeal to actively examine alternatives to big dams.

Decorated with various awards such as the Magsaysay award in 1985, the Damien Dutton award (the highest award in the field of leprosy) in 1983 and the International Gandhi Peace Prize, Baba Amte believed that the example of Gandhi will find followers in the coming generation. The efforts of Baba Amte are not lost voices in the deep either.