

The Times of India, Mumbai, 10 Feb 2008

A braveheart with broken dreams

To some, Baba Amte was a poet and a prophet. To others a crusader. But to the thousands at Anandwan, he was a Mother

Rajni Bakshi

Murlidhar Devidas Amte lived the last years of his life with a crown of thorns. A braveheart by birth and deed, he leaves behind a legacy of fractured dreams.

I first met Baba in 1989 on the day he moved into his new home on a barren slope above the Narmada. Behind him stood over half a century of work with physically challenged people at Anandwan and historic endeavours like the Bharat Jodo Yatra in which thousands of youngsters joined Baba on a healing mission to the most troubled parts of India.

For Baba the Narmada Bachao Andolan was not essentially a conflict between the victims and beneficiaries of mega dams. It was a struggle between the self-destructive and creative dimensions of the human race. He knew that a society that is incapable of harnessing the water of a grand river without destroying it is condemned and doomed.

Yes, there was in Baba the poet's long-

The science of large dams now seems to belong to the age of superstition; the coming century belongs to the technology of mini and micro dams. I want Gujarat to join in this bright future

ing to pass out of this world listening to the swish and gurgle of his beloved Narmada maiyya. But he also had a sharp worldly confidence that the movement for an alternative, ecologically sound and humane kind of development would gather momentum. His decision to live with the project-affected people, and drown with them if necessary, was simultaneously a political strategy and the act of a saintly missionary.

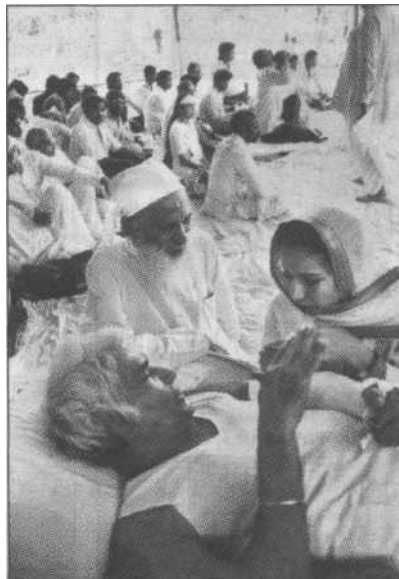
Many of Baba's faithful supporters, who had admired his earlier charitable work, were appalled by what they perceived as his anti-development stance. This hurt Baba, though the rejection of his radical vision did not surprise him. Much earlier in life he had faced similar criticism from family and peers when he gave up a successful law practice to look after leprosy patients. But for Baba the choice was quite simple. How, he asked, can I continue in a profession where clients routinely expect me to lie for them?

Throughout the 1990s I had the privilege of visiting Baba at that riverside ashram where Sadhanatai, his wife, converted the barren hillside into a lush oasis. The two-room structure built for him by the local villagers morphed into a larg-

er establishment, thanks to support from their son Vikas and the resources of Anandwan. For almost ten years, the oasis at Kasravad was a hub and pilgrimage place for activists from different parts of India and the world.

It broke Baba's heart that both his moral force and a struggle by lakhs of project-affected people had failed to convince policy makers that the dams on the Narmada were a chimera, a short-term gain that would lead to irreparable long-term losses. He also knew that this was a small episode in the much larger planetary crisis. Today that crisis is more commonly acknowledged. Interestingly, many of us who took inspiration from Baba steer clear of making a moral and spiritual case for doing the 'right' thing. In a world where a man of Baba's stature could be dismissed as well-meaning but irrelevant, it seems safer to stick with hard-nosed economic arguments that challenge the conventional wisdom without making it seem morally 'low'.

And yet, for me and most of my peers



who knew Baba as a beloved mentor, the dominant memories will be poetic, philosophical and timeless. The most vivid of these is a conversation during a walk at dusk in Kasravad. "*Matbhed hota hai par man-bhed kaise ho sakta hai kisise?* (One can have a difference of opinion with others but how can we have differences of heart?)" asked Baba in his laughing booming voice. What does one do then, I asked. How does one steer clear of *man-bhed*? The feelings and thoughts which divide hearts, said Baba, are like birds that hover annoyingly overhead. "Shoo them away, don't let those feelings make a nest in your heart."

VOICES

Baba Amte's demise has filled me with a deep sense of grief and loss. A true Gandhian, he is a saint of our times. I pay homage to a truly great son of India.

Manmohan Singh | PM

I have lost a father. I have been visiting Anandwan for 35 years, and I met Baba only a fortnight ago. They don't make men like him any more. And even as I speak of him in the past tense, I still can't believe he is no more. For me, he will always be alive through his work, his faith, his beliefs.

Nana Patekar | ACTOR

The controversy about the Bharat Ratna this year could have been solved in one single sentence: Baba Amte was the right candidate. He had the heart of a poet and a Mahatma. I knew him for 40 years; he stood rock-solid with us on the child mortality issue in Maharashtra. Who now will bless such initiatives?

Dr Abhay Bang | RURAL HEALTH ACTIVIST

Maharashtra has lost a great humanitarian and saint.

R R Patil | DEPUTY CM, MAHARASHTRA