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Stand and deliver

Baba Amte found his brother, God and soul on a rainy night

By R. Prasanna

In November 1983, THE WEEK, just about to complete one year of publication, sent me to find out about Baba Amte, who was running a leprosy centre called Anandwan near Nagpur. I landed in Nagpur and made inquiries. I heard a lot about Sevagram and Vinoba Bhave's Paunar, but little about Baba Amte.

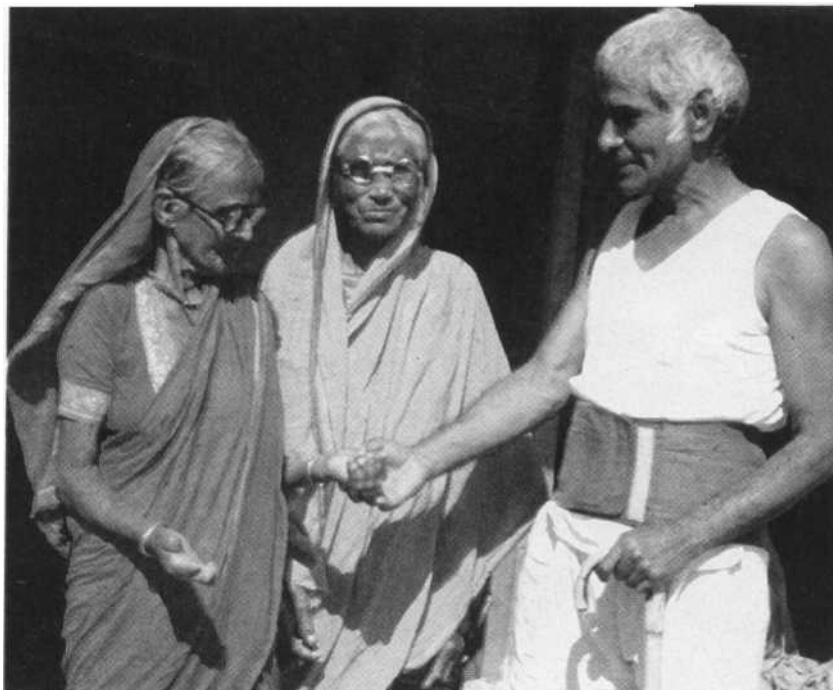
A visit to a Nagpur post office helped. Anandwan had a post-office. Photographer Sankar and I drove to Warora, where Anandwan was located, and spotted the ashram. Amte lay on a cot and received us without getting up.

I told him the purpose of my visit. "Don't write about me; write about the ashram and the people here," he snapped.

In 10 minutes, he was up and briskly walking around the ashram, as a man transformed. The 70-year-old man, lying lazily in the sun till then, was now a powerhouse of energy. With his son Vikas, we walked around the ashram, looking at the farms, community kitchens, hospital, schools and cycle repair shops.

There was something amiss. I had come to write about leprosy work; and no one was talking about leprosy. I told him as much. "Oh, I forgot to tell you. Take a closer look at these people in the farms and workshops," Amte told me with a laugh.

Then I saw. The mechanics, the drivers, the carpenters, the ploughmen, the milkmen, the teachers, even the post-master—most of them had a few fingers or toes missing. "There is no leprosy here," Amte declared. "They have been cured bodily and in the mind. They are all productive members of society." Anandwan was



Help for the helpless: Baba Amte at Anandwan

not about leprosy. It was about integrated farming, and a bold experiment in community living.

I was then taken to the hospital. "There are some pre-drug era people still here," said Amte. "But most of them are treated with modern medicine. After treatment, they can either go back home or stay on in the ashram. We give them training in some trade."

"Don't miss that, that is the guiding philosophy of my life," Amte said pointing to a three-line poem, from an unknown poet, inscribed on the hospital wall. It read:

"I sought my soul, but my soul I failed to see,

I sought my God, but my God eluded me,

I sought my brother, and I found all three."

I was to learn later that Amte had

found his brother on a rainy night, while carrying nightsoil on his head. He saw a leper, utterly ravaged by the disease, lying in a muddy gutter and writhing in pain. He saw two gaping holes in place of the nose, and the rotted stumps of fingers. Shaking with revulsion, he threw a piece of cloth on the 'thing' and fled.

His moment of epiphany had come later, when that gruesome sight was recollected in tranquillity. At first there was a selfish fear. What if my wife or son contracted this disease? The truth came in a flash, and he told himself: "Where there is fear, there is no love; where there is no love, there is no God. I must banish this fear from my mind."

The prosperous lawyer, son of a jagirdar who had led wild life in his youth fighting the British, hunting in Gadchiroli hills, and organising

