



## **A Study of Baba Amte's Socio-Cultural Reformation Movement in Contemporary Maharashtra**

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Murlidhar Devidas Amte, affectionately known as Baba Amte, is a constructive worker par excellence. He has devoted his entire life in the service of the lowliest, the lepers and trihals. A Philosopher, poet. And an artist, Baba Amte has infused his own missionary zeal into thousands of youngmen who serve their follow men with love in their heats and joy in their work.

Born in an upper class Hindu high caste Brahmin family on 26 December 1914 at Hinganghat in Wardha district. Maharashtra . Murlidhar's early life was spent amidst affluence and plenty . His father , Mr.Devidas Harbaji Amte was a Jagirdar under the British . He remembers how in his childhood, when he travelled in a bullock- cart, a servant ran ahead of it to signify that some one important was travelling .

For four years a private teacher taught young Murlidhar Indian mytholiogy . This included training in manners. Customs. And rituals . Murlidhar was being trained to behave like a blue- blooded Brahmin landlord. But sensitive and sincere. Murlidhar rebelled against all this Snohebery . At an early age, he felt engaged when he had to play only with the sons of Government officers or high class farmers. Once he was even thrashed when he attempted to eat with the family of one of his servants.

Mixing with poor:

Murlidhar indulged in many pastimes which a high class prahmin was not supposed to do at 14 he handled his own rifle and hunted wild bear and deer, he was also fond of fishing. Young Amte had his schooling at Christian Mission School in Nagpur. Schooling over. Murlidhar wanted to study medicine but his father forced him to take up law. In college his lodging was in the quarters where British members of the Indian Civil Service lived. Like other students Murlidhar was not allowed to use a bicycle. His fathers insisted that a horse carriage should take him to and fro the collage . In the college he wore suits made by Rasario, the tailor by ' Special Appointment ' to His Excellency the British Governor.

After graduation, Murlidhar Amte set-up practice in Chattisgarh, His Father persuaded him to move to Warora, a town few miles away form his family estate Gojarj Murlidhar was appalled by the poverty and pitiable living condition of the tenants.

In the summer moths when the courts were closed Murlidhar Amte used to visit villages neighbouring Warora with only a stick, a small bag and a bhanket, he had lost all taste for fine clothes and rich living. One of his first responses on seeing the miserable life of the villages was to allow the untouchables to draw water from the wells in his father's estate at Goraja. He then organized various groups of workers such as wavers. Seepors and the



carriers of high soil . Into unions and co-operatives. Murlidhar Amte offered legal advice free to the Harijans. After two years, he was elected Vice-president of the Warora Municipality.

At this time Baba Amte got involved in the Indian freedom struggle and persuaded fellow lawyers to defend imprisoned freedom fighters. He smuggled arms for the Indian Revolutionary party. In 1942 he was jailed. Mahatma Gandhi described him as an “ Abhay Sadhak ” (Seeker of Fearlessness ) for fighting single handed a group of British soldiers to save the honour of a young woman. His body still bears the marks of that fight.

In 1946 Murlidhar was Married to Indu Ghule , who hails from the orthodox family, had produced Sanskrit scholars through seven generations . After marriage she came to be known as Sadhana Amte. Soon after marriage , with his wife’s consent Murlidhar Amte , First disowned the property and then tore-up his licence to practice law. He was now free to devote himself entirely to social work.

#### Turning Point :-

Murlidhar and his wife set-up a commune near a Mohammadan cemetery and invited labourers of various castes to Join it. He was chairman of the waroda Scavengers Organisation. He was shocked by their pitiable plight and decided to find out things for himself by enrolling as scavenger. He was entrusted with the cleaning of 40 latrines a day.

The turning point in his life came when one night he was carrying the night soil on his head in pouring rains. Suddenly to his great mortification , he came upon a disfigured person writhing in gutter. He was face to face with a leprosy patient with maggots in his wounds lying uncovered. The sight sent a chill through Murlidhar’s spine. Stricken by remorse, Murlidhar covered him with gunny cloth and went home bewildered, A clean bath at home could not wash away the ugly sight from his mind, which haunted him again and again He was doing same hard thinking. “what would happen if any of us, my wife, my son contracts this disease ? where will they be ?” He became restless. A fear seemed to grip his mind. He pondered. “ 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.” He became very miserable. He resolved to devote himself to the eradication of leprosy. What helped him to arrive at this decision was the inspiration he had received from Christ, Gandhiji & Vinoba Bhave. His wife gave him all the support. He read all the books on leprosy that he could lay his hands on. He finally opened his own clinic outside the hospital in Warora. Hundreds of patients turned up for treatment.

In 1949 . Murlidhar Amte took a special course in leprosy treatment at the Calcutta School of Tropical Medicine. After coming back from Calcutta, he wanted to start an institution where leprosy patients could live & work. In 1950, he was given 50 acres of disused plot of quarry and forest land. Accompanied by six patients he settled down here along with his wife and two sons. They setup shelters with roofs made of Bamboo matting and leaves but without walls. Baba Amte and the patients dug a well. Cleared the rocks and the forest working as many as 18 hours a day. He called the place Anandwan (Garden of joy) and established the Maharogi seva Samiti. After three years the number of patients increased to 60.



### Jungle of Happiness :-

Baba Amte felt the need for more accommodation and better treatment facilities as patients increased. A team of young volunteers from 36 countries engaged in a building project at Gandhiji's ashram at Sevagram, 60 miles away. Agreed to come over to Anandwan after they had finished that project. Three months later a new clinic and two new wards were added to the hospital. With the coming of the Europeans to the site, there was a marked change in the attitude of the inhabitants of Warora toward Anandwan. Many started visiting the farm at Anandwan and were impressed by the way it was run.

In the next few years the State Governments gave Baba Amte another 200 acres and buildings sprang up every year and new crops were cultivated. By early 1960, Amte was taking care of as many as 4000 patients at a dozen clinic at Anandwan. In 1960 he opened a School for the blind children called "Sunshine Home" near his own house. In 1964 the patients built the Anand Niketan College with four faculties (Arts, Science, Commerce and Agriculture) as a gift to the local people. The patients themselves designed and built the buildings. In 1972 with the help of a handicapped Englishman, Arthur Taronowski, he setup a training centre for the physically handicapped.

Anandwan has now developed into a sprawling complex. Vegetables, wheat & cotton are now grown in the fields. The dairy herd at Anandwan provides milk to the inhabitants of Warora. A flour mill, an engineering shop which makes all the beds and operation tables for the hospitals as also furniture for the homes, tailor shop, a post office and a Community theatre have come up. All of them – the tailor, the carpenter, the postman – are leprosy patients. The buildings and institutions have been built almost entirely by the leprosy patients themselves. Baba Amte lives here in a modest cottage with his family.

### Model Farm :-

In 1967, Baba was offered 2000 acres at Somnath, 60 mile south-east of Anandwan. A model farm has been established there. Today Somnath provides a home for 400 leprosy victims. They live in good, clean houses for the construction of which aid was received from the people of Switzerland. The farms produce bumper crops. Somnath has also modern godowns to store vegetables and rice. It has a dairy of 100 cows and buffaloes and 30 pairs of bullocks.

In 1973, Baba Amte began surveying the forests and regions south-east of Warora aided by his doctor sons. In one village, inhabited largely by a nomadic tribe, they found 90 cases of leprosy in a population of 170. Other diseases like Gonorhoea, Syphilis & Tuberculosis had a very high rate of occurrence.

Hemalkasa, 65 kms south of Anandwan, a complex consisting of a General hospital, a 140 student non-formal school and five satellite training centres set in a radius of 30 kms. Lok-Beradari prakalp, Hemalkasa, is a comprehensive scheme to provide health services and education and also to impart agricultural methods to the Maria-Gonds living in remote areas in the Chandrapur district and bordering areas. These tribes who have been living in utter poverty and neglect, now have the benefit of health care at a 50-bed hospital at Hemalkasa and health centres at six other villages.



### Production :-

Thirty years after its inception, the Maharogi Seva Smiti has a long list of achievements behind it. Over 130000 leprosy patients have been successfully treated by the society since it was first set up and today there is residential accommodation for almost 2000 positive and negative patients, though the Govt. grants covers only 300 of them. The general hospital at Hemallcasa, run by Amte's younger son Dr. Prakash and his wife Dr. Mandakini – has treated over 100000 Madia- Gonds in the seven years since it was set-up; moreover, complex surgical operations are performed in an area which has no electricity or running water, no telephones, and is cut off from the world for six months every year by the monsoons.

The samiti's projects, between them, produce enough grain and food stuffs to virtually independent, though government grants are received for the educational institutions and a portion of the leprosy treatment. In 1980, Amte's projects produce 47 tonnes of foodgrains, 55000 litres of milk, over three tonnes of vegetables and 13000 eggs. Govt. grants paid for only 30 percent of the 50 lakh budget, eighty percent of the budget is used to run the university affiliated Anand Niketan College. Private donations account for another 6 percent of the budget. And a medical research grant from Oxfam, a British social welfare group, provided another 4 percent. The rest came from production by the patients themselves, something which makes this programme stand out from other social welfare efforts, Amte believes that charity destroys and only work builds a person. These outcast people needed a chance, not charity, and you can see the tremendous use they have made of the opportunity given to them.

Baba Amte is the author of several books in Marathi. Though afflicted by an extremely painful spondylosis for the last 20 years, Baba Amte has been working ceaselessly on these various projects. His wife Sadhanatai has been his constant companion and helmsman in his work, sharing his tribulations and triumphs. His elder son Dr. Vikas Amte serves as Medical Director, an engineer, a planner and architect. His wife Dr. Bharati, the second son Dr. Prakash and his wife Dr. Mandakini, Baba Amte's daughter Renuka and son-in-law Vilas Manohar have all devoted themselves to this constructive work. This is a rare phenomenon of an hundred of young people of the new generation seeking outlet 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.

### Training Tribals :-

Baba Amte wants to build an agricultural college at Somnath where tribal boys could be trained in farming. Baba Amte says, "To fight ignorance and hunger they must grow food." He realizes that tribals can best be taught by tribals, so he wants to train tribals to teach the tribals. Baba Amte speaks of the "Mental leprosy" of the healthy as apart from the physical leprosy of his patients. Baba Amte holds that joy is far more infectious than disease, conquest should be of the heart of the loneliest, the lost and the last. We seek sublime inspiration from the ruins of old churches and temples, but none from the ruins of man, he says.

### Foreign Recognitions :-



Characteristically, Amte and his work have been far better received abroad than in his own country. Lady Barbara Ward Jackson, an economist who specializes in third world problems, recommended his name for the Nobel Prize. In a letter to Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Jackson, called him “ a most remarkable Indian” and a “saint.” Given the one Lakh Nehru Award for her contribution to development earlier, she donated the entire sum to Amte .

Amte’s notwithstanding his claim that he shuns personal publicity, has been lionized through the printed word in the west . The unbeaten Track , a book by Count Arthur Tarhovski about men involved in path-breaking work around the world , and Turners more Than Conquerors contain glowing eulogies on the man and his achievements. But Amte is probably best summed up in the words of Robert Hart, The author of a treatise on forest farming .” Baba Amte must be one of the most remarkable men in the world , and his achievements are far more significant than those of any political leader today”.

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