

OBITUARY

Baba Amte: architect of creative humanism

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On February 9, 2008, Murlidhar Devidas Amte, better known as Baba Amte, passed away in Anandwan, Warora, in Maharashtra, India. He was 94 years old. If his death was at a time of global terrorism and war, his birth, too, was at a time of political, social and intellectual turbulence as India sought to cast off its dependence on a transnational ruler. His childhood and adolescence, in a rich but conservative family when the Indian middle and elite classes were imbibing the liberal values of European culture, laid the foundations of a unique revolutionary mind.

A lot has been written about Baba and his creation, Anandwan; about his compassion and perseverance to redeem the self-esteem of the socially outcast leprosy-affected people. I will discuss, instead, two important influences on his life and work that are missing from the literature about him: the concept of God of Tagore and the radical humanism of MN Roy.

Baba Amte was born on December 26, 1914, a year after Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for songs in *Geetanjali*. These songs so fascinated young Amte that he went to the extent of learning Bengali and spent some time at Shantiniketan. I could not get him to give me details of his encounter with Tagore but during my second visit to Anandwan he recited one of Tagore's poems in a good Bengali accent, though his voice was weak from illness and age (he was 90 years old). This poem was an inspiration to Indian women to join the freedom struggle. It began, "*Shonkochero bihabolata nijere aupomaan*" [bewilderment from hesitation (*due to fear*) is an insult to the self.]. Baba's life, too, was transformed after he realised that fear drove him away from his first encounter with a mutilated leprosy patient.

Apparently Tagore was Baba's inspiration for his own poems. VS Khandekar writes in the preface to the first Marathi edition (1) of the book *Baba Amte's flames and flowers*, published in 1964:

Baba's experience does not stop at sentimental sympathy or a transient sorrow. It goes into the roots of that sorrow with free reason.

Baba's plan, codified in his poetry, was being translated vigorously into Anandwan, starting in 1951 with a 50-acre expanse of barren land and a group of six outcast persons affected by leprosy. To quote :

These words come trotting / The entire battle field of life / With wounds all over body / Meaning bleeds bubbling from them. / The touch of these flames is soft/

But their scorching quality is very much there, / And in these flaming moments Semen of centuries is preserved / For the conception of greater tomorrow.

Baba's God was very personal, and was meant to arouse the self-esteem of the neglected through what he calls "creative humanism". He wrote, "It consists in awakening God who is always there in their hearts, sleeping like a baby." (2) There are no public places of worship in Anandwan that is home to more than 2,000 inhabitants of mixed religious backgrounds. Unlike Tagore, Baba did not believe in a god that inspired mystic philosophy. I have seen him walking early every morning in the garden, along with a calf. And every day he would feed the calf a twig with three young leaves. This personal act was his own form of worship.

Baba did not meet or talk about MN Roy who founded the rationalist movement and whose manifesto was published on August 15, 1947, under the title *New humanism*. This is intriguing, because Roy was also moved by the poverty and superstition of Indian society, and reflected on a philosophy that would free humankind from the tyranny of society, God and religion. Indeed, their thoughts were very similar. The only difference I conclude was Roy, unlike Baba Amte, did not subscribe to even a personal god. Both had nearly the same vision for future of humankind: learning from the past but striving to free the mind (Roy) or cure mental leprosy (Baba Amte), not by following any political ideologies of the day, but by engaging the rational faculty in a new humanist philosophy. Baba concretised his vision by action, not by Roy's path of "re-educating the educators" with a scientific outlook.

Baba Amte also believed in the pivotal role of science and technology in transforming society. I witnessed his zeal when a team of scientists from Bhabha Atomic Research Centre came to transfer technologies to Anandwan. Against the doctor's advice, he got up and walked up to the gathering to watch the function. He would regularly enquire about the project's progress from his sickbed and discuss developments whenever I visited him. He spoke extensively about what science and technology meant to him.

Perhaps it is time for a meaningful synthesis of Roy's theory and Baba Amte's practical application of the benefits of science.

References

1. Ramesh Gupta. *Baba Amte's flames and flowers*. Delhi: Indian Publishers Distributors; 2001.
2. Staffner H. *Baba Amte: a vision of new India*. 3rd ed. Mumbai: Popular Prakashan; 2000.