

MY EXPERIENCE OF ANANDWAN

How Reverence for Life Permeates Activities at Anandwan

Written by Percy Mark

I visited Anandwan, located some 80 miles from Nagpur in Central India in 1998 and in 2003, both times for about three weeks. This account was written after my first visit.

Those of us who have known Dr. Schweitzer personally, and are familiar with his philosophy of Reverence for Life from his writings, have to ask ourselves: "How do we allow this philosophy to permeated our lives and determine our actions in our own circumstances today?"

Those who come across the phrase for the first time must wonder, to the extent to which their commitments allow them to think about it deeply, what the implications might be of taking these words seriously.

As one who belongs to the former category, I am now in search of an answer to the former question, and with that in mind I visited the leper community of Anandwan in August 1998. I went in the capacity as chairman of Dr. Schweitzer's Hospital Fund in the UK, which had been sending money there during 1996 and 97. Now the Fund wanted to have a first hand account of the projects we were supporting and Nouvelle Planète¹ allowed me to join one of their youth group which they send annually to Anandwan (as well as to many other projects in a dozen different countries all over the developing world).

All I had heard and read about Anandwan, impressive as it was, had not prepared me for the simple, natural, welcoming happiness which lights up the faces and shines from the eyes of the inhabitants of this community. Everyone, from the little 5 year old deaf and dumb girl to the 80 year old one-armed wood-carver, from the 30 year old cook, who prepared all our meals and spoke but a few words of English to Dr. Vikas Amte, on whose shoulders rests the huge responsibility of managing the welfare of the whole group of communities, comprising some 5000 people. (*By the time of my second visit this had doubled to more than 10,000 in some 26 communities*). Everyone there radiated this quiet, self-confident, warm welcome, as normal, natural behaviour, seeking no recognition or recompense, but freely offered.

Where might this inner confidence and generosity come from, which made you totally forget that the owner of that face, of those eyes, had no fingers, only one hand with short stumps; or was sitting on a specially designed tricycle, propelled by turning a pedal with one hand and steering with the other, because both legs were missing from above the knees; or that this pretty young face with long black hair belonged to a body with both feet twisted into unrecognisable lumps?

Babe Amte, the father of Dr. Vikas and Dr. Prakash Amte, who both studied medicine and now manage the venture, has for 8 years been living with his wife on the shores of the river Narmada, trying to prevent the Indian Government from drowning 85,000 village and tribal forest inhabitants with a mega hydroelectric scheme. But it was he who in 1951 started this leper community with his wife Sadhanatai, and who based it on the foundation of self-sufficiency and faith. But a faith which says:

"God brings no luck to idle hands"
"Happiness dies when it is not shared"
"Love alone can resurrect a man in agony".

Early on in this venture, when lepers were coming to join the new community from all directions, and Baba had no visible means of housing and feeding the newcomers, he made a vow, never to say "no" to someone seeking help - never to turn anyone away who came to him in need of care - and to live in the conviction that the means would come with the need. And so it was: all-be-it that the means involved his own most strenuous and continued work as well as that of his companions and patients.

Before Baba started this project, he was a rebellious young high-caste Indian, living the life of a lawyer in Warora, with his young wife and two small sons. On his way home from the office on a stormy night, he saw what looked like a bundle of rags lying in the gutter. On closer inspection he found that it was a leper, close to death. He recoiled and ran home in disgust and fear. However, he prided himself on never having been afraid of anything. Gandhi, had nicknamed him 'the fearless one'! Now he stood at home reflecting on the fact that he had run away in fear from a dying man. This thought crystallised his conviction, that fear lay at the root of all evil. He went back, picked the man up, took him home and started to look after him. In the full knowledge that this would result in their Family being cast out from their society, his young wife stood by him. They renounced their considerable inheritance and started a community for lepers. He sold his law practice,

¹ Nouvelle Planète is a non-profit organisation based in Lausanne founded on Albert Schweitzer's ideas and ethics; strictly neutral in religion and politics, it works to support small practical projects all over the globe

studied the medical treatment of leprosy, and, as the community grew, they moved to an area of land made available by the government, which turned out to be a disused road-stone quarry. They named it Anandwan, meaning: "Forest of Bliss" - which is what it has truly become.

When Baba left for the Narmada river, he extracted from his sons the same vow he had made. Thus the venture continued to grow. The closely linked communities became self-sufficient, able to pay for what they could not grow, with earnings from products manufactured from recycled materials in their own workshops. These convalescing and cured lepers, far from relying on charity, began giving back to the community by teaching blind, deaf and dumb children and training adolescents in a variety of craft and workshop skills.

And all this by using only organic farming methods; collecting plastic and recycling waste products; producing their own methane for cooking from sewage digesters; making compost; using self-made bricks in ingenious vaulted methods of construction using practically no timber; establishing huge tree-plantations; taking care to encourage all forms of wild-life and creating special sanctuaries. Their strictly vegetarian diet relieves them of the need to kill animals for food, and their respect for all wild-life is evident in every aspect of their daily lives - as completely normal behaviour. When 5 huge snails turned up one morning on the verandah outside my room, it did not occur to anyone - not even the sweepers - to disturb them in any way. The ants which roam on the floors and window-sills are allowed to go freely about their business. Action needs occasionally to be taken against mosquitoes, but even that is kept to a minimum by the use of low lights.

There is no private ownership in Anandwan. Everything is owned and shared by the community. All major decisions are made in the full knowledge and participation of the whole community. There are no special arrangements or concessions for those in management positions. Everyone works to the limit of their abilities, which vary enormously, given that nearly everyone is disabled in one way or another.

The group that had left Geneva was not the same group that returned. We had witnessed a community for whom Reverence for Life was not only a deep conviction, but was evident in all its aims, its actions and its day to day relationships. We had experienced the inner strength, confidence and love of life, which radiated from all those who lived there - in the face of seemingly insurmountable handicaps and difficulties.

Though entirely without arrogance, our hosts were well aware of our own inner uncertainties and vulnerabilities, and it came as a bit of a shock that they expected us to be prepared to learn from them. This did not come easily to my young Swiss companions. Instead of playing the role of generous benefactors from the "civilised" world, we found the "boot to be entirely on the other foot" - and with good justification. Some of the students found it hard to adjust to this, and failed to cope with it until the end. To me and some of the others it demonstrated with painful severity, the deeply ingrained European arrogance and great difficulty of shaking off the deep-rooted, subconscious attitude of "superiority" which leads us to think that we can magnanimously "dole out" to the rest of the world what is frequently some sort of 'disguise' exploitation.

But Anandwan is threatened from many directions. There is coal below the surface of their land which the government wants to extract; the proximity of newly licensed liquor stores threatens the atmosphere of tranquility and hard work; the lack of recent rainfall has affected food production, forcing them to buy in where previously they had produced a surplus. Whilst European and Indian charities are keen to provide donations for new projects, the main concern Vikas has, is to be able to cover the daily housekeeping budget and to finance the maintenance of existing buildings, for which funds are very difficult to come by.

There is need for further expansion into increased agricultural production, but that is not particularly glamorous for donor organisations. Notwithstanding, Vikas is brimming with new ideas of what else could be done: He has started an orchestra largely made up of children from the school for the blind, and he wants to create a performing group with which to travel to the surrounding villages and seek out lepers who are still kept hidden away in cellars. (*by the time of my second visit, that group was fully functioning and a year later was performing in a huge stadium in Mumbai to raise funds*). He was developing a system of building mini-dams made of discarded car tires, to be built across small rivers, to aid water conservation and counteract the droughts. (*Again, by the time of my second visit a dozen of these dams had been built*).

That such a community can exist - and even thrive - in the midst of an India tormented by poverty, corruption and religious strife, and subject to the seemingly irresistible pressures exerted by a rampant commercialism emanating from the 'West' and ravaging the globe, is a wonder indeed!

What greater encouragement for the future could there be, than to know of this Anandwan Community, where an attitude of "reverence for Life" has become as fully integrated into the daily life of its inhabitants as the air they breathe. That such a community can exist as a reality in this world, despite their many handicaps, is a true beacon of hope for us all!

Percy Mark, 1999 (edited in 2019)

