

REVERENCE FOR LIFE PERMEATES ACTIVITIES IN ANANDWAN

Those of us who have known Dr.Schweitzer personally, or are familiar with his philosophy of "Reverence for Life" from his writings, have to ask ourselves: "How do we allow this philosophy to permeate 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 belonging to the former category, (having spent 6 months working at the hospital of Dr.Schweitzer in Lambarene, Gabon, in 1952/53 when the Doctor was 88 years old), I am now in search of an answer to that group's question, and with that in mind I visited the leper communities of Anandwan in Central India during August 1998.

I went in the capacity of Chairman of the Dr.Schweitzer's Hospital Fund in Great Britain, which had sent money to Anandwan, via the Swiss organisation 'Nouvelle Planète', during 1996 and 97. Now the Fund wanted to have a first hand account of the projects we were supporting and Nouvelle Planète allowed me to join one of the youth groups 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 well-fare of the whole group of communities comprising 5000 people; everyone radiated this quiet, self-confident warm welcome, both, on casual greeting as well as extended contact, and not as any special effort but as normal, natural behaviour, seeking no recognition or recompense, but freely offered.

Where might this inner confidence and generosity come from, which was so evident in every human contact? 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 tricycle which he was propelling 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.

Baba Amte, the father of Dr.Vikas and Dr.Prakash, who now manage the venture, has for 8 years been living on the shores of the river Narmada, preventing the Indian Government from drowning 85000 hectares of land and forest and displacing 300000 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" and "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 Amte had no visible means of housing and feeding the newcomers, he made a vow never to say "no" - never turn anyone away who came to him in need of care and help - 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 continuous work as well as that of his companions and patients.

When Baba Amte left for the Narmada river, he exacted that same vow from his son Vikas and thus the venture has continued to grow, so that now it has 3 main centres and 8 sub centres spread over an area of some 300km in diameter. Until 2 years ago the communities were self-sufficient needing to buy in only specialised ingredients and able to pay for these with earnings from the products of their many workshops. And they had not only achieved self-sufficiency, but these convalescing and cured lepers, far from relying on charity are giving back to the wider community by teaching blind, deaf and dumb children and training adolescents in a variety of crafts and workshop skills.

And all this by using only organic farming methods; recycling waste to produce methane for cooking and compost; using building techniques that use self-made earth bricks, an absolute minimum of imported material and virtually no timber; operating extensive tree planting and re-forestation programmes taking care to encourage all forms of wildlife and creating special bird sanctuaries.

Their strictly vegetarian diet relieves them of the need to kill animal life for food, and their respect for 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 to disturb them in any way.. The ants which roam around on the floor and on windowsills are allowed to go freely about their business. That the animals have equal rights with humans and motor vehicles on all roads is of course evident throughout Central India. Action needs occasionally to be taken against mosquitoes but even that is kept to a minimum by using low lights unless otherwise essential.

In spite of language difficulties, cultural differences, and health problems, the smiles and the light in our hosts' eyes were infectious. The group that left Geneva was not the same group that returned. We had witnessed a community for which "Reverence for Life" was not only a deep foundation, but was evident in all its actions, aims and normal day to day relationships. And we had experienced the inner strength, confidence and love of life this kindled in its participants in the face of seemingly insurmountable handicaps and difficulties.

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 licenced liquor stores is causing concern to their tranquil and hard working environment. I have mentioned that it was self-sufficient two years ago. The lack of rainfall during the last two years has seriously affected their food production, forcing them to buy in rice and other staple foods to supplement their own output which before had provided a surplus. Many organisations in Europe as well as India have helped Anandwan by providing donations for specific projects to expand the scope of activities and improve living conditions over and above their basic self sufficiency at a very frugal level of existence.

But now as a result of climatic change, for which the industrialised world is largely responsible, this basic self sufficiency is threatened and Dr. Vikas' main concern has to be for the daily housekeeping budget of his 5000 strong community. The expansion of their agricultural activities, rather than further projects to improve social and educational facilities has to be a priority, however close the latter may be to Dr.Vikas' heart.

That such a community can exist in the midst of an India tormented by poverty, corruption and religious strife and subject to the seemingly irresistible pressures of the rampant and uncontrolled commercial exploitation, which is ravaging the globe, is a wonder indeed! What greater hope and encouragement for the future for all of us could there be than to know of this Anandwan where the implications of "Reverence for Life" have become fully integrated into the daily activities of its inhabitants, in spite of their many handicaps.

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