

## A relation that was just meant to be

Dr. Bharat Vatwani

**Dr Bharat Vatwani is a Mumbai-based psychiatrist who set up 'Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation' in 1989. It is a non-profit organisation that strives to find, restore and re-unite mentally ill destitutes wandering on streets, with their families.**

My meeting with Baba Amte was under unusual circumstances, to say the least. It was the year 2004. I had in the previous three years, on my birthday, gone to Shirdi. But in that particular year, I decided to put in a visit to Baba. We went to Anandwan, saw the entire setup and were stumped by the enormity of the work. Unfortunately Baba Amte was not there at Anandwan. Since we had our own car, we decided to go to Hemalkasa where he was staying. It was during this journey to Hemalkasa when roughly 100 kms away from his place, we came across a mentally ill schizophrenic roadside destitute who was in chains. Possibly he may have had violent tendencies and someone had chained his hands and legs and he was walking with those chains. It was a macabre sight given the fact that the road was through a dense jungle and there was not a human in sight. My friend asked him whether he would like to come with us. He refused. In all fairness I was also in two minds whether to take him in. We drove further down for 15-20 kms, when the gathering darkness and my conscience got the better of me. We drove back, and upon reaching him, I with all my psychiatric acumen convinced him to sit in the car. He had been passing urine and motions in his clothes since God knows when, and was reeking filthy. We removed

his clothes, put a 'chaddar' around him and put him in the car. Since I had no first hand interaction with either Baba Amte or his son Prakash, I was a little bit nervous as to what would be their reaction. When we reached their place, I explained to them the nature of our work, the peculiar circumstances in which we had found the destitute and requested Prakash to relieve him of his chains. Believe me, the greatness of the people whom I was meeting struck me when in all humbleness and humility Prakash personally sat down with a chisel and hammer and gently removed the chains. It was delicate work given that the chisel could have hit bone if placed wrongly. But he did it and Baba, lying on his cot nearby, silently watched the whole process. The next morning, upon waking up early, I found that Baba was awake and in tears. Upon questioning him he said that he had not slept the whole night, wondering how a man could walk with chains. He had in fact taken the discarded chains and had attempted to walk with them and mentioned with deep anguish that it was not possible. Such was the sensitivity of the man. After so many decades of dealing with leprosy patients, his still being moved to tears at the sight of human pain was tantamount to witnessing compassion at a Godly level. His sensitivity drew me to him, and when he came to know in detail about our work, he was drawn to me. It was bonding at its emotional best. We were alone and had all the time in the world to interact, exchange thoughts and feelings. While appreciating my work, he chided me to do more and when I walked out, I knew that I had to do more. He disclosed that he had come across mental illness at close quarters and that it was his dream to do something for psychiatric illness, a dream which remained unfulfilled, a dream which he wanted me to fulfil. I talked with all my trustees and looking at my motivation level they went ahead with our expansion plans. Land was purchased at Karjat and brick by brick the project was setup. I was in regular touch with Baba Amte and he was also fired up about the project. As per his own words, though he had never gone for a social function in 10 years and was in self imposed retirement, he was all exhilarated about coming for the inauguration. Unfortunately ill health caught up with him and finally he requested Prakash to do the honours.

However, the initiation of the project and its sustenance over the years have been the toughest years of my life. I was a city man. For me to set up such a huge project 90 km away from Mumbai

“ The greatest joy comes in life when you invest in others. ”

- Baba Amte

in a remote village in Karjat was daunting. I would break down into tears at the supposed impossibility of the hurdles. Time and again I would wonder as to what I had got myself into. And I would rush to meet up with Baba every 2-3 months at Anandwan to draw inspiration and rejuvenate my weary soul. And in all my depressing moments, if there was one guiding light which always came to the fore, it was Baba Amte. Keep going was his mantra and it had now become our mantra. He would call me up time and again from Anandwan and enquire about the project. Imagine, such was the sensitivity, the humbleness and the concern of the man that he would actually ring up to enquire about the progress. I remember taking photos of the Karjat project on my laptop to show him, and he noticed that there was only one tree on the plot. I agreed. He said that the single tree was enough and was strong and would survive for a long time. And this just when a horticulturist visitor friend of mine had said that the tree was infected, would decay and fall soon. The tree has survived till date and continues to stand tall. The blessings of Baba continue to be with the tree and with the project. I remember I had put in 4-5 days in Anandwan with him and Sadhanatai. While leaving, Baba saw me off at his door with a small parcel containing 'roti' and 'sabzee'. He said it was a custom that an 'atithee' would always be given something to replenish his energy for the return journey. From a man of his stature, it was by far one of the most humbling and touching gestures I had ever come across from anyone in my life.

On a personal note, I lost my father at a young age. Because of this I was prone to bouts of suicidal depression and would subconsciously end up hunting for a father figure in all the elders that I would meet and bond with. It was with Baba that the subconscious search ended, and it was reciprocated with that same love and affection by Baba too. He thought of me as his son and treated me as such, sharing more than a few personal moments with me. In all these shared moments, I realized that what set him apart from all other human



beings was his compassion for the downtrodden. His poignant tales of the leprosy afflicted travelling from all over India under inhuman conditions to seek out his shelter, narrated in his emotionally laden voice, were gut-wrenching. To find him breaking down while describing these events after so many years of their occurrence, was a reflection of his endearing everlasting empathy for their plight. His understanding of the pain of human existence and the overpowering desire to reach out and try and ameliorate it was the guiding star of his life. He cared with his soul. And this sensitivity moved me and gave the feelings of hurt within me a direction. In one of our visits, my wife mentioned to him that I seemed chronically depressed and somewhat confused. With a wry smile and a twinkle in his eye uniquely his own, he said that I was neither, but that I was restless and the restlessness was good for me and until the internal search ended, the process would continue. Prophetic words. It was after my meetings with him that my depressive bouts finally abated, and I found my breath under the sun. And I moved all out to be a part of the pain which existed in the plight of the wandering mentally ill. The identification with the commonality of pain became the touchstone of our lives, his and mine.

It is no small consolation that in Anandwan the place where he along with his loving wife Sadhanatai have been buried after their demise, has been named Shraddhawan. Sharing personal moments, I did go on my birthday this year to Anandwan and paid homage at his tombstone at Shraddhawan and broke down as only a child could at the grave of his father. While I do not know whether our efforts over the last 10 years have really created or made any difference to the plight of the wandering mentally ill, I do know that the attempt has been sincere, and the honesty and sincerity in our efforts is our offering to the departed soul of Baba Amte.

I remember attending his funeral. I have not seen so many non-related people weep so profusely at a person's death. The leprosy patients, the blind, the handicapped, the deaf, the mute, they were all there, weeping for the loss of their own. Just as I was, bereft of my own cross. All relationships are not defined by blood, some are just meant to be. Neither was he my true father, nor was I his true son, we were just that little bit far beyond. We were meant to be.

