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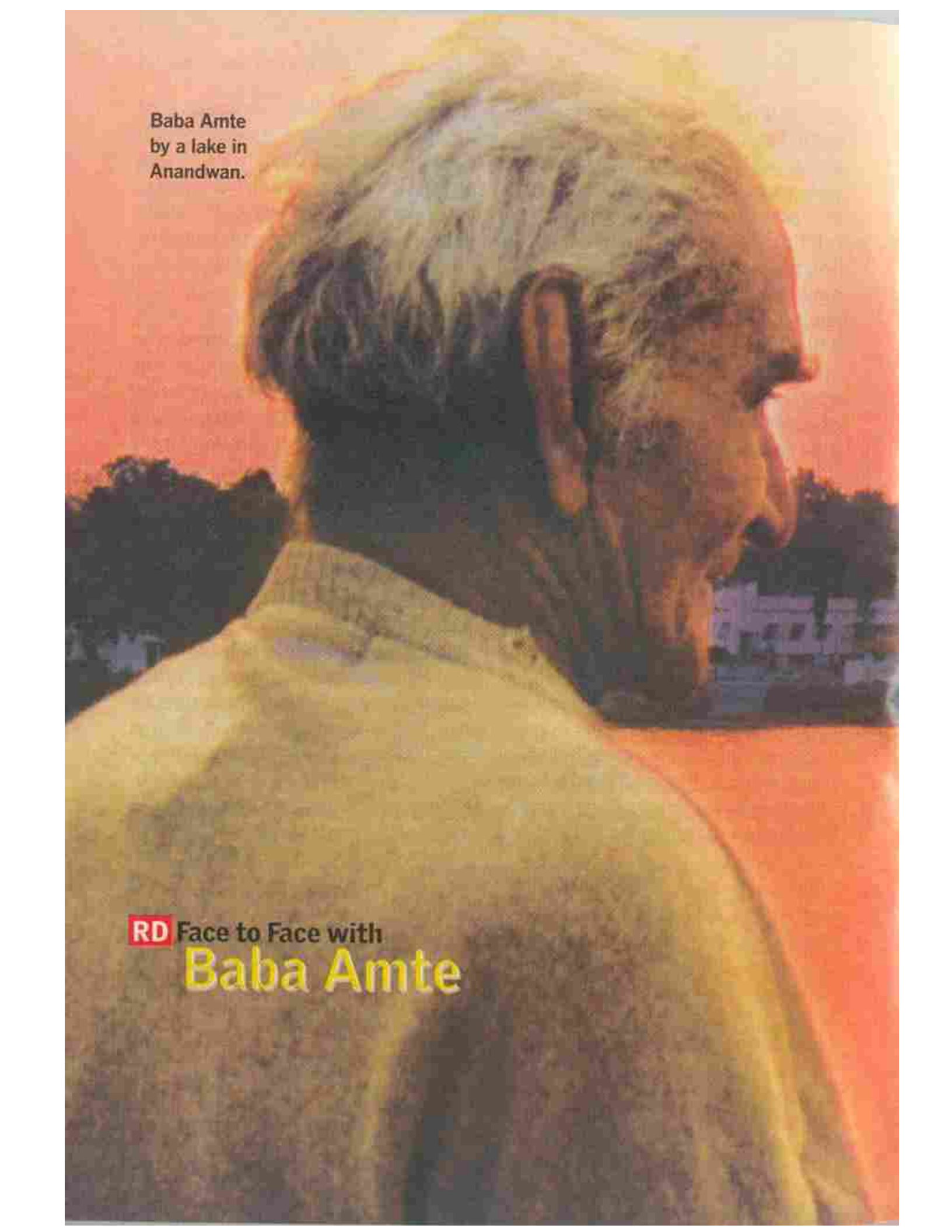
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# Reader's Digest

Teenagers  
Grade Their  
Mums & Dads

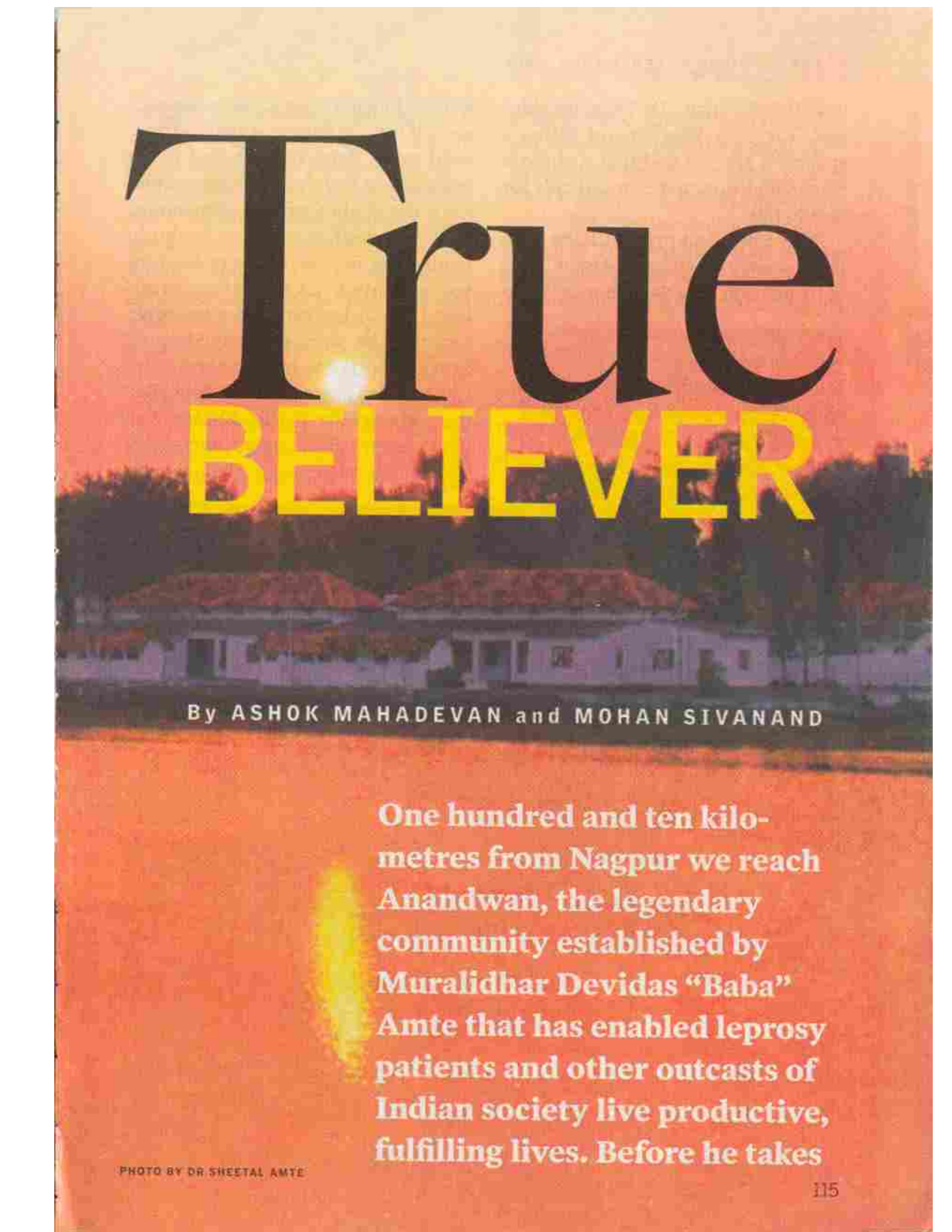
**PARENT  
REPORT  
CARD**





Baba Amte  
by a lake in  
Anandwan.

**RD** Face to Face with  
**Baba Amte**

The background of the page is a photograph of a sunset. The sun is a bright white circle partially obscured by the letter 'r' in the word 'True'. The sky is a gradient of orange and red. In the middle ground, there is a long, white, single-story building with a dark roof. The foreground is a dark, calm body of water reflecting the colors of the sky.

# True BELIEVER

By ASHOK MAHADEVAN and MOHAN SIVANAND

One hundred and ten kilometres from Nagpur we reach Anandwan, the legendary community established by Muralidhar Devidas “Baba” Amte that has enabled leprosy patients and other outcasts of Indian society live productive, fulfilling lives. Before he takes

us to Baba's cottage, Dr Vikas, his elder son, says his 90-year-old father's speech is slurred and that a chronic heart condition makes it difficult for him to talk.

We've come to present Baba with the first copy of our special issue "Best of Inspiration," but we're hoping to in-

terview him too. "Just a few questions," we tell him. "As soon as you're tired, we'll stop." Baba, lying in bed in his white singlet and shorts, a brace around his waist, replies with a warm smile.

The son of a wealthy Brahmin landowner in Warora, near Nagpur, young Amte lived a carefree, privileged life. A lawyer with a lucrative practice, he wore pinstriped suits, drove a sports car, hunted, wrote film reviews and corresponded with Hollywood stars like Norma Shearer and Greta Garbo. But beneath the glitter was a great restlessness. He hungered

**Baba and his wife Sadhana today. Right: Baba receives the Gandhi Peace Prize from President K.R. Narayanan while Dr Vikas Amte looks on. Other awards conferred on Baba include the Magsaysay, the Padma Vibhushan and the Templeton Prize. At award ceremonies, Baba always starts his acceptance speech by addressing his wife—she has been his "biggest inspiration."**



for a life with meaning—and he found it, as so many have done, in service to the downtrodden.

To the horror of his orthodox relatives, he allowed Harijans to draw water from his family well. He started farmers' cooperatives to help the impoverished peasantry. To understand what it meant to be a scavenger, he even carried night soil on his head for nine months.

Baba also spent time with Mahatma Gandhi at Sewagram ashram in Wardha and was jailed during the Quit India movement. He visited Rabindranath Tagore at Shantiniketan and was deeply influenced by the poet's vision of a community united by work and love. (Incidentally, Baba is known for his Marathi poetry.)

For a few years, he took a vow of celibacy and wandered the Himalayas as a sadhu, but gave up asceticism when he met a remarkable young woman and married her in December 1946.

One rainy evening in Warora, he saw a huddled figure lying on the road. It was a man in the last stages of leprosy and the sight repelled Amte so much that he fled the scene. Then, ashamed,

he went back. And with his wife, he took care of the man until he died.

Amte now began to read extensively about leprosy, even taking a six-month course on the disease at Calcutta's School of Tropical Medicine. By this time a cure for leprosy had been discovered, and Baba began treating patients. Then in 1951, he leased about 20 hectares of rocky government scrub land outside Warora to establish a community that would not only treat leprosy patients but also revitalize their lives.

Today, the 5000-strong model community, spread over 190 hectares and ably led by Vikas Amte, has farms, small-scale industrial units, man-made lakes stocked with fish, hospitals, colleges, and a school for the blind.

**Reader's Digest:** *Looking back at your long life, how do you feel?*

**Baba Amte:** A sense of fulfilment. That keeps me fearless in the face of death.

**RD:** *Do you have a principle that guides you?*

**Amte:** "I sought my soul, My soul I could not see.

I sought my God,  
My God eluded me.  
I sought my brother  
I found all three."

**RD:** *What's been done here is very impressive.*

**Amte:** It's all been done by the leprosy patients. Their hands gathered the colours of the rainbow and gave them to the fruits, flowers and vegetables which they grew here. The same hands built their homes. Once they were not



Baba Amte as a westernized young man. Right: With Sadhana and their children Vikas, Prakash and Renuka.

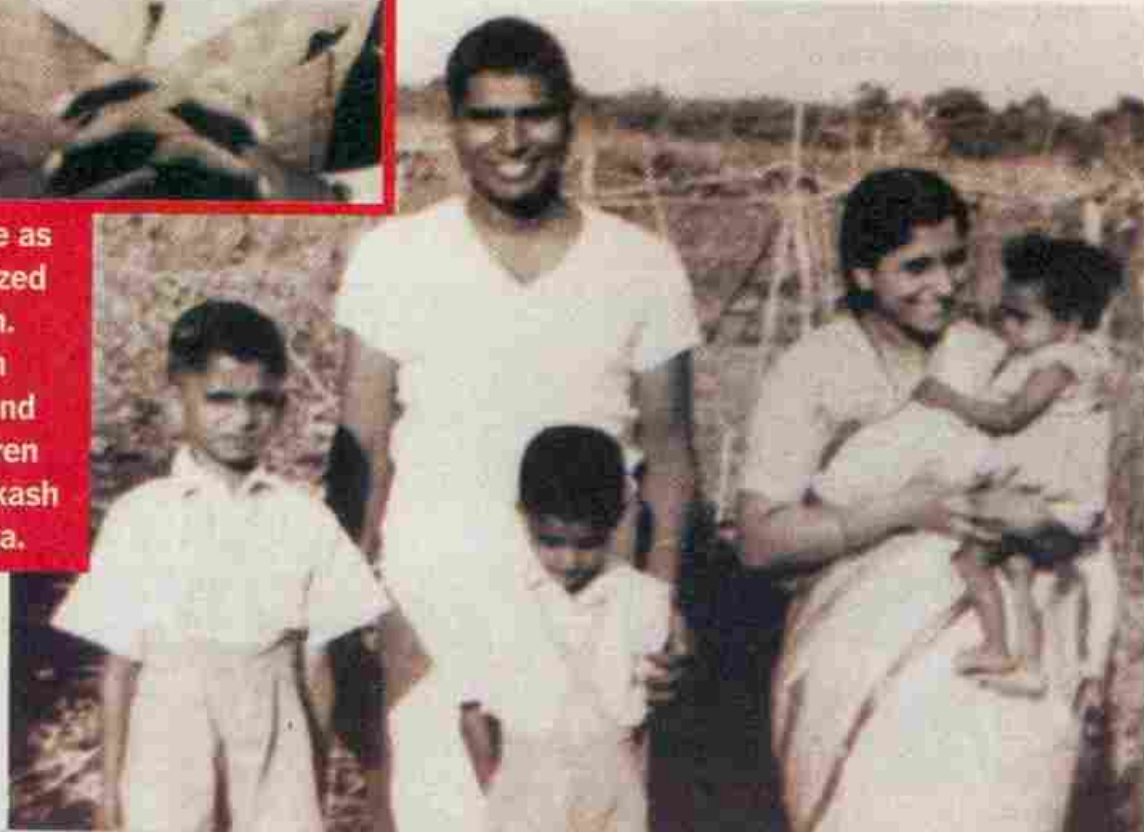
allowed to sip water from village wells; now people call them to fit water pumps and other gadgets!

**RD:** *That's amazing!*

**Amte:** You'd be surprised at what those who seem to have nothing can do. There's a girl here; she has no hands. When I first saw her, she was eating with her toes. She said to me, 'Babaji give me some work.' I said 'Beta tu kya karegi?' [Child, what will you do?] She asked for a needle, threaded it with her toes and showed me she could sew. Another leprosy patient who'd lost her fingers loaded 10 bricks on her head.

**RD:** *Did everyone shun you when you began working for leprosy patients?*

**Amte:** When I started, Norma Shearer, that Hollywood queen, wrote, asking me: 'Why do such dirty work?' I replied that people find pleasure in the ruins of the Acropolis. But they fail to see beauty in the ruined body of a person with leprosy. Incidentally,



the first foreign donation we got was from Norma Shearer.

My work with leprosy patients gave me confidence. And confidence is more contagious than disease. Thousands of people whom society had rejected came to me. We gave them dignity. We also gave them the right to companionship, the right to sexuality, to parenthood. Those who once hated to live began to love life again.

**RD:** *Gandhiji had a special name for you, didn't he?*

**Amte:** Yes, *abhay sadhak* [apostle of courage].

**RD:** *Why did he call you that?*

**Amte:** Once, while I was travelling by train to Wardha, there was a young newly-married couple and several British soldiers in my compartment. When the girl's husband went to the toilet, the soldiers began touching and harassing her. I told them, 'You have sisters. Instead of respecting a new bride, why are you behaving like this? You dare not touch my sister!'

**RD:** *What happened then?*

**Amte:** They said, 'She's not your sister,' and started beating me. But they left her alone.

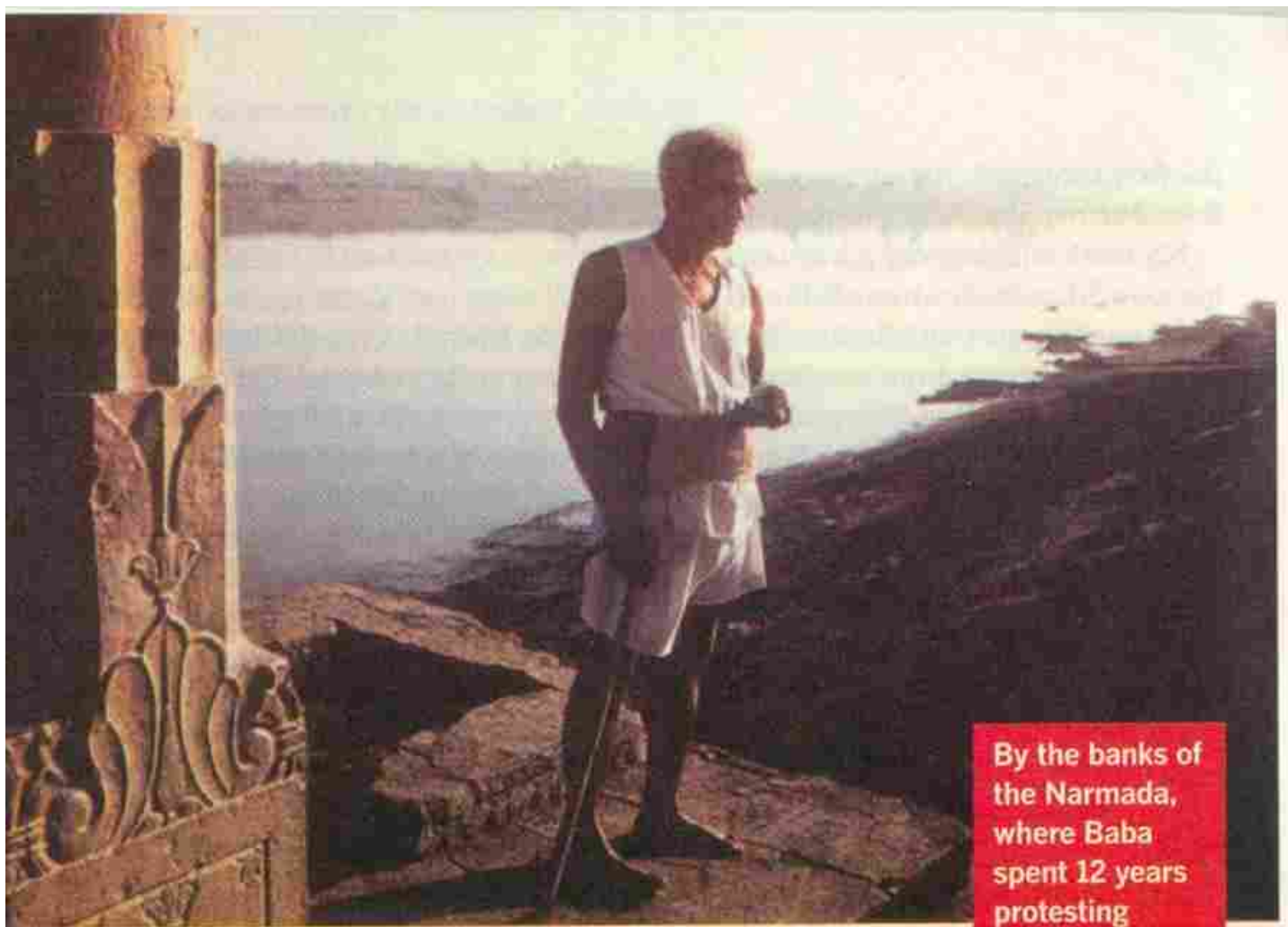
## Three Generations

of Amtes are involved in social work. Baba's elder son, Vikas, heads Anandwan. His wife, Bharati, a paediatrician, works at the community's hospital. Baba's younger son, Prakash, and his wife, Mandakini, live in the forests of Hemalkasa, 250 kilometres from Anandwan, and run a hospital and a school for tribals, as well as a shelter for animals. Baba and Sadhana Amte's two adopted daughters, Renuka and Bijli are teachers.

As for the grandchildren, Prakash's sons Digant and Aniket, and their wives, work at Hemalkasa. Vikas's son Kaustubh, a chartered accountant, helps run Anandwan, while daughter Sheetal, a fresh MBBS graduate, has just joined them.

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**B**ABA AMTE freely admits that without his wife, Sadhana, he would not have got very far. And at every award ceremony—he's won everything from the Magsaysay to the Padma Vibhushan—he makes it a point to start



By the banks of the Narmada, where Baba spent 12 years protesting against the Sardar Sarovar Dam project.

his acceptance speech by addressing Sadhanatai first—never mind if presidents or prime ministers are present. As for the gentle, soft-spoken Sadhana, her support for Baba seems like second nature, although she likes to tease him by saying that “had the Women’s Liberation movement been there in the 1940s, who knows, there may have been no Anandwan.”

**RD:** *How did you meet your wife? What made you fall in love with her?*

**Amte:** I happened to visit her home for her elder sister’s wedding and saw this beautiful, dimple-cheeked girl helping an old maidservant wash clothes. She warned me not to tell anybody, because her sisters were complaining that the old woman didn’t work and should be sent away.

She [Sadhana] had had marriage

proposals from leading families but she didn’t like

those boys. Her people asked me to tell her that such opportunities won’t keep coming. I replied that within six months I’d find a good groom for her [whom she’d accept]. After six months, I went there and said ‘I tried my best, but I can’t find a better boy than me!’ They were upset. ‘Sanyasi pighal gaya!’ they said [the sanyasi has melted]. But she accepted me.

**W**ITH HIS two sons, Vikas and Prakash—both doctors—and their families having taken over much of his responsibilities, Baba Amte, by the mid-1980s, decided to concentrate on national causes dear to his heart.



He launched his “Bharat Jodo” [Knit India] movement to combat separatist and communal forces—and led a 7500-kilometre march from Kanyakumari to Kashmir, during which he also visited the Golden Temple in strife-torn Punjab. Then, to protest the building of the giant Sardar Sarovar dam across the Narmada, Sadhana and he lived in a hut on the banks of the river, vowing that they would not leave when the land was submerged. The police forcibly removed the couple before dam construction began.

**RD:** *You were a lawyer once.*

**Amte:** I still am. I plead the cause of the needy, the loneliest, the lost, the least and the last.

**RD:** *Your vision of development is very different from that of official India.*

**Amte:** That’s why I am against big dams. The nation’s rivers are the cradle of our civilization and they cannot be strangled to meet the needs of society’s exploiting class. The issues raised by the construction of big dams challenge the very concept of economic growth adopted by our planners. Nothing less than the survival of life itself is at stake for many

of our people and time is running out rapidly. Big dams are responsible for only two percent of the world’s food production.

**RD:** *Despite your crusade against the Sardar Sarovar dam, the government went ahead and built it. So you failed?*

**Amte:** We lost the battle, but we’ll win the war. Big dams deplete our resources. What we need are small dams and water conservation. My son Vikas and his friends have harvested water and grown fish worth Rs1.20 lakhs in the summer months—at a time when there was water shortage elsewhere.

**RD:** *You’ve said that you are dissatisfied with the way democracy is practised in India. Why is that?*

**Amte:** For these 50 years, corporacy and bureaucracy have ruled supreme. We really don’t want our daughters to be enlightened. We resort to sonography—and murder girls in the womb. Had we empowered women, things would have been different.

**RD:** *Thank you Baba.*

**Amte:** May God give you long life to see all that injustice changed in this century. ■