

[Baba Amte's Work with Lepers Wins \\$279,000 Religion Prize](#)

Category : [July 1990](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jul. 02, 1990

Baba Amte's Work with Lepers Wins \$279,000 Religion Prize

Mathur, Rakesh

Service, World Upliftment, Faith and Compassion Guide the Former Freedom Fighter's Mission

Dr. Vikas Amte received the world's most valuable award on his father's behalf from Prince Philip at a ceremony at Buckingham Palace May 8th. Royalty, Rolls-Royces and most proper afternoon pinstripe suits were the order of the day. But, reflecting the unpretentiousness of his father, Vikas was sporting a traditional Maharashtrian white kurta pyjama outfit which looked so simple he was asked to show his invitation card by the ushers at the Guildhall reception. They did not realize he had in his hand a check for US \$279,000, his father's share of the famed Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, nor that he was the main speaker of the event about to begin.

Vikas's speech, written by his father, was laden with extracts from the Vedas, Puranas and other holy books. Baba cited the important principles of nishkama karma yoga - service without expectation of reward and loka sangrahya - the unity and Upliftment of the world. He described his work as founded in sraddha, these Hindu principle helped inspire to create the modern communities for lepers in India for which he won the prize. Starting with an abandoned rock quarry leased from the government in 1951, he created Anandwan, the "Forest of Joy." "The joy in Anandwan is more infectious than the disease in Anandwan," he declared. By 1990 Anandwan has expanded to 450 acres with 1,400 lepers and its own university. The desolate site was transformed into one of the most fertile farmlands in the entire province, even winning top prizes at the regional agricultural shows. The residents built everything themselves, baking the bricks and erecting the rows of neat cottages. So successful were their business enterprises that some started sending money to their able-bodied relatives. The community does receive outside help, but

only on Baba's terms. When the Australian organization, Food for Peace, offered to help, Baba said, "The food will be over in six months and there'll be no peace. What we need is technical knowledge and equipment." Greatly impressed, the organization sent it to him.

Canon Edward Finch, who nominated Baba Amte for the Templeton Prize, said in his introduction, "Amte's aim is not just to provide home and treatment to the needy. It addresses itself holistically to the suffering man-in-the-round, to rebuild and uplift him back to his birthright in God's creation, back to fulfillment in harmony with the Divine Order. Amte's leadership never issues from above and beyond the people, but always from within their midst. 'Work with the people, not for the people,' is one of his basic tenets. For instance, when in the 1940's he fought for the night-soil carriers, one of the most abject sectors of the 'untouchables,' he worked with them, loading and carrying the excreta in a wicker basket on his head as they did. Very Indian in his roots, Amte, through his work, is restoring and revitalizing the profound ideals of his country's faith."

M.G. Ghate is a childhood friend of Baba who also belongs to Warora village, near Nagpur in Maharashtra State, very nearly in the center of India. He has been meeting Baba on an off for the last 70 years. He told me in London that Amte is a brave and courageous man who could, in spite of his education - he was an extremely successful lawyer - rub shoulders with the down-trodden people. Ghate said, "Baba Amte's wife is more devout Hindu than he is. She does her daily puja. But Amte seems to believe in karma." Amte studied medicine to cure leprosy but, Ghate said, he found the real cure in traditional Ayurveda medicine and a good rehabilitation program.

Anandwan is not a proselytizing community, as are most such Christian missionary colonies. Ninety percent of the residents are Hindus and celebrate the popular festivals and conduct weddings in the Hindu tradition. Those of other religions follow their faith without hindrance.

Despite spondylitis, a spinal inflammation, Baba Amte has proceeded through all his work. Six vertebrae were removed from his spine in 1976 and he is unable to sit. He must either stand up or lie down and wear a neck brace.

In the speech read by his son, Baba expressed his indebtedness to Mahatma Gandhi and the scriptures which inspired him. He mentioned India's traditions of maintaining the balance with the air, water and all living things. He expressed his concern with the proposed dam projects on the Narmada River which would flood hundreds of villages and green environment in Central India - a project recently postponed for two years for a reappraisal in the face of many such objections. Amte has, in fact, relocated himself to an area of Narmada River valley which will be flooded by the new dams. He has vowed to die there if the dam project is not stopped.

The only other Hindu to win the Templeton Prize was Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, former president of India. Most of the other winners are Christians, though a Buddhist, Nikkyo Niwano of Japan, won it in 1979 and a Muslim, Dr. Inamullah Khan, won in 1988. Amte's co-winner, Dr. Charles Birch, 71, of Australia, is equally a religious man, maintaining that the interrelationship of nature, humanity and God finds support in physics. The ecological crisis has resulted from a mere mechanistic view of nature. According to Birch, the solution is to change our view: "Nothing will save the whales unless we attribute to whales intrinsic value in themselves and to God" - a decidedly Hindu point of view.

During a 1987 visit to Anandwan, writer Gokul Gokhale of California asked Baba what kind of epitaph he'd like on his grave. Baba said, "I would like a line like the one on 'crossed checks' - to mean a man who said responsibility is not transferable!"

Address: Baba Amte, Maharogi Seva Samiti Anandwan, Warowa, Dist. Chandrapur, Maharashtra, 442 914, India.

The Man Behind the Prize

John Marks Templeton, investment counselor and financial analyst, was born in Winchester, Tennessee, on November 29th, 1912. He has enjoyed a hugely successful financial career, filled with academic distinctions and civic awards recognizing his philanthropy. As a devout Christian, Templeton has long studied the role of religion in the 20th century, pondering in particular the need to recognize progress in the areas of religion and spiritual development.

For years he watched lucrative Nobel prizes being awarded for outstanding accomplishments in peace, literature, medicine and science - but neither recognition nor cash for religion. In 1972 he decided to change that and established the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. One of his first guidelines was to always keep the monetary value of the prize higher than that of the Nobel prize. It is not a prize for saintliness or good works, nor is it to encourage any forms of syncretism. The work must be original, spiritual and "increase man's love of God or man's understanding of God."

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.