

Report

Positive Living Leprosy and the Spirit of Man

by T. N. JAGADISAN*

All exceptional suffering is a challenge to the spirit of man. Leprosy with its long legend of incurability, deformity and mutilation leading to ostracism of the patients, sometimes sanctioned even by religious practice, has remained through the ages a living death to the patients and a dark horror. In the past the large multitude remained indifferent and even cruel to the leprosy patients so that, 'Man's inhumanity to Man' was seen at its worst in the treatment of leprosy patients. But this very inhumanity of the ordinary man roused a rare devotion and compassion amounting to herosim in the hearts of some of the finest spirits of mankind. In the dark life of the leprosy sufferer these exceptionally compassionate souls brought gleams of light and love. But alas! these souls were few and far between; they were, at any rate, far too few to save the vast numbers of the neglected and despised leprosy patients who were steeped in their own despair. These brave and dedicated men—Jesus Christ, the Knights of St. Lazarus, St. Francis of Assisi, Father Damien and in recent days Mahatma Gandhi, by answering the challenge of leprosy, have ushered in a new outlook on leprosy and a new era for the leprosy patients. These men, imbued with religious spirit, saw the Divine in the lonely and forlorn leprosy patients and identified themselves with them. Out of such compassion and identification with undeserved suffering was born the wider impetus to scientific adventure which resulted in an understanding of the causes of the disease, the discovery of drugs to deal with it, the

measures to control the spread of the disease and ways to rehabilitate the patients.

SCIENTIFIC ADVENTURE AND COMPASSIONATE ACTION

As if to emphasise the inter-linking of scientific adventure and compassionate action, it was about the time when Dr. Hansen discovered the leprosy bacillus in the early 1870's that Father Damien went to Molokai to live among the uncared for victims of leprosy, thus beginning a life of matchless heroism which ultimately awakened the world in an unforgettable manner to the needs of leprosy patients. It was at this time that Wellesley Bailey was paying his first visits to the leprosy sufferers at Ambala which led to the foundation of the Mission to Lepers (now the Leprosy Mission) which has done incalculable service in research, treatment and care of patients. The voluntary spirit behind all this early endeavour is a precious inheritance which should be preserved and enriched. For, by so doing, we shall not only conquer leprosy but improve the quality of life. First, and last, we should remember that leprosy work is a means of humanizing human life and giving greater depth to civilized life.

FALSE ASSUMPTIONS

The legend of leprosy, however, is only scotched, but not killed. It should be completely destroyed if leprosy is to be conquered and this ancient river of suffering is to be dried up. 'This legend is based on 3 false assumptions: that leprosy is a very contagious disease; that it is incurable; and that leprosy patients are people, apart, accursed and possessed of a special psychology.'¹ These erroneous ideas, deeply rooted in the minds of most peoples, at all levels of society, have been responsible for much affliction of the mind and loneliness of the spirit. This loneliness that comes in the wake of the knowledge that one has leprosy has been described vividly by Perry Burgess where Ned Langord says: 'I walked

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and walked through that whole night. I walked and thought and suffered. You could never believe how alone aloneness is. You have to move, live, breathe, see, hear, in the midst of millions of people, not daring to touch one of them, afraid to speak lest they become friendly—avoiding, avoiding—eternally avoiding.²

CONSTRUCTIVE ACCEPTANCE OF THE ILLNESS

The psychological trauma resulting from the enveloping loneliness of the patient's spirit has left an intense need in the patients themselves to isolate and conceal themselves in their own little shrivelled selves. Hence the supreme need for providing psychological and psychiatric help in the treatment of leprosy patients. Hence also the supreme need of remembering the worth of the individual, his personal and social needs in our 'Mass campaigns'. For, only by helping the leprosy patient from his consuming resentment against his own illness and liberating him from his psychological isolation and hiding, can we secure his successful treatment and rehabilitation. The doctor's drug and the surgeon's knife can heal and mend a man's body. But it is only the human touch that can heal him of the wounds of the spirit and pluck from his memory a rooted sorrow. And it is amazing how acceptance of leprosy and reconciliation with the physical and mental suffering it entails, can be a transfiguring experience. In fact, there have been and there are persons whom the crucible of suffering has transformed from the base metal of ailments and grievances to the pure gold of noble service, enriched by a vivid perception of the values of life.

WORLD PROBLEM

With modern methods of treatment including physiotherapy and reconstructive surgery, and with an effective drug not costly and capable of being administered on a large scale, hopes have mounted of controlling the disease that has been a terror of mankind for ages. The new impetus given by scientific advances has made the nations of the world aware of the fact that leprosy is not a disease of an unfortunate few, but really a disease that afflicts millions in many parts of the world. It is now recognised that it is

a world problem. The recognition has in turn generated a new urge of well-directed emotion, among the peoples of the more fortunate countries which have practically no leprosy, to organise leprosy foundations and associations not only to collect monies but also to send out trained workers who can help in the newly developing countries. Truly the spirit of man has been aroused on a world-wide scale to help in the conquest of leprosy and the wide misery, associated with it, and thereby to assert the brotherhood of man and oneness of the world. We in India are particularly grateful to the many organisations in Europe, America, Britain, Canada and Australia and other countries and on this occasion I would particularly like to express our gratitude to the spirit of helpfulness of our friends from Japan who have come forward to set up a valuable research centre at Agra.

May I warn that in the context of today we have to guard against excessive emotionalism and weakening sentiment which may stand against a rational approach to leprosy and still present a picture of leprosy work as the field of the specially dedicated, while the great need today is to make it the normal duty of the everyday physician. But we have also to guard against the danger of looking upon our leprosy campaign as a mere technical warfare against a bacillus, thereby reducing it to a soulless campaign in which the human being who happens to harbour the leprosy bacillus is forgotten or ignored. We shall be in no danger of doing this if we remember the intensely spiritual appeal of leprosy to Gandhi and his memorable words:

‘Leprosy work is not merely medical relief; it is transforming the frustration in life into the joy of dedication, personal ambition into selfless service. If you can transform the life of a patient or change his values of life, you can change the village and the country.’

Surely Gandhi would approve of our adding ‘and the world’.

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REFERENCES

1. *WHO Chronicle*, **14**, 1, January, 1960.
2. *Who Walk Alone*, p. 70.