

THACHAKKADU NATESA JAGADISAN 1909–91

Professor Thachakkadu Natesa Jagadisan born on 2 October 1909 was an outstanding man who had a worldwide influence on the care given to those suffering from leprosy, a disease he developed when he was 10 years old. His father had just died, having been a victim of the post-war influenza epidemic. C. K. Rao writes, 'Having neither resources nor resourcefulness, the little Jagadisan was in a lonely prison of fear for he had heard people say the most fearful things about leprosy and thought himself doomed to be one of those wretches he saw in the streets; the abandoned victims of the disease.'

Fortunately, Jagadisan's leprosy was quiescent and he was able to take his Honours Degree in English Language and Literature in 1930 and teach for 11 years, having married Asanambal when a schoolboy of 14.

In April 1934 Minakshi was born. Sadly she had infantile convulsions which developed into epileptic fits and, in her 'teens, brain fever. She became completely dependent on others for everything. In his later years Jagadisan was worried who would look after her, but fortunately she predeceased her mother and father.

A second daughter, Sulochana was born in August 1937 and she brought lasting joy and gladness to her father, especially by giving birth to Sankaran a very much loved and able grandson currently studying in the UK. In 1938 Natarajan was born, but Jagadisan's only son was destined for a very short life and died of pneumonia in August 1942, a year which became a turning point in the Professor's life. Not only did he have to face the death of his son but also the humiliation of being refused a lectureship at a college in Trichinopoly because of his leprosy, despite a medical certificate from Dr Robert Cochrane certifying that, 'he is non-infective and is no danger to the public'.

The decision, in Jagadisan's own words caused neither disappointment nor sadness. He was already, 'familiar with the wild fear and prejudice of people towards leprosy and the consequent social injustice to which the innocent sufferers are subject'. However, it did start Jagadisan on the road to fulfilment and international fame. Now he knew that his life's work was to educate people in the simple facts of leprosy so that it would be viewed as a disease and not dreaded as a social disgrace.

Once again Cockrane helped by giving Jagadisan a post in the Madras branch of the British Empire Leprosy Relief Association, BELRA, as the Honorary publicity officer, in 1943. The Sir Dorabji Tata Trust provided a modest stipend which, 'secured me life without anxiety in which to serve a sacred and dear cause'. In 1945 he became the Honorary Secretary of the same organization.

Following political developments, the Hind Kusht Nivaran Sangh (HKNS), took over, in 1950, the assets and liabilities of the Indian Council of BELRA which had been set up in 1925. The Minister for Health for India, Amrit Kaur, offered Jagadisan the post of Secretary, a job which 'needs courage and patience and few have that sympathy in the same measure as one like you who has suffered and serves'. Jagadisan became the organizing secretary of the HKNS, a post he held until 1970.

Jagadisan needed to become more actively involved in leprosy work and as a result of a meeting he and Cockrane had with Mahatma Gandhi on the 8 February 1945 the Kasturba Kushta Nivaran Nilayam was approved and through immense effort and drive on Jagadisan's part set up at Malavanthangal. The nearest railway station was 10 miles away, so having left Madras early in the morning Jagadisan, his wife and two children arrived by bullock cart late in the evening. It was a thrilling moment for all the villagers when at midnight on the 15 August 1947 Jagadisan first hoisted the Indian national flag in this remote village. Mahatma Gandhi shared Jagadisan's confidence that leprosy could be conquered and when asked to open the Kasturba Kushta Nivaran Nilayam replied 'Get someone to open it, opening a hospital is not a big matter but I shall come to close it'.

In spite of dedicated work and great support, Gandhi was not able to carry out his wish. The

results however speak for themselves, in 1945 the overall prevalence of leprosy in the area was 48 per 1000 and in 1987 only 3 per 1000! Not content with providing modern drugs for the 100 or more villages, Jagadisan also arranged dental and eye treatment for the area.

Jagadisan's influence was much wider and by maintaining his position as Honorary Advisor for BELRA, now LEPRRA, in India he travelled the length and breadth of India vetting requests for support. He was particularly interested in children's work as he saw this as very important. Jagadisan's advice and integrity could always be relied upon and he quickly developed a very wide network of friends in the leprosy field, especially those in the charity world. He was never at a loss to find someone or some organization to help a deserving cause.

Despite the increasing difficulties caused by his leprosy, Jagadisan travelled widely in the cause of leprosy and took an active part, not only in many Leprosy Conferences in India from 1947 to the XII International Congress held in New Delhi in 1984, but also in international leprosy congresses held in Madrid, Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro, and London. He had friends everywhere and was much sought after as a speaker and writer on his pet subject.

Many awards came his way in later years, but the one he treasured most was the International Gandhi Award for Distinguished work in Leprosy given in 1988. In presenting the award The President of India, Mr R. Venkataraman, concluded his presentation speech by saying:

'Professor Jagadisan, in presenting you this Award, I am not just placing it in a Gandhian's hands, but through them, at the feet of the Master, whose name it bears.'

It was in fact a stroke of fortune, not only for Jagadisan but also for the cause of leprosy, that he caught leprosy in his youth. His life, which started with so many setbacks, was truly one of 'fulfilment through leprosy'.