

LEPER ASYLUM IN PURULIA AND THE GERMAN MISSIONARIES: A CASE STUDY

Anamika Ganguly

Research Scholar, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, Purulia, West Bengal, India

Received: 09 Aug 2018

Accepted: 13 Aug 2018

Published: 21 Aug 2018

ABSTRACT

Chotanagpur plateau, especially Purulia was a fertile land of the Lepers. It is a matter of sadness that the history of leprosy and its interaction with human being is one of suffering and misunderstanding. This disease is not hereditary or epidemic. Rev. Uffmann, a German missionary, cared for it. He established Leper asylum in Purulia. After that thousands of people cured from here and freed from the curse. This is a natural Asylum and still functioning from 1883.

KEYWORDS: *Leprosy, Misunderstanding, Hereditary, Curse, Natural Asylum*

INTRODUCTION

From time immemorial Leprosy was a curse for Indian society. It is mainly caused by the bacteria *Mycobacterium Leper*; it damages skin and the peripheral nervous system. It is gradually increased from six months to forty years and results in skin lesions and deformities, most often affecting the cooler places on the body (eyes, nose, earlobes, hands, feet, and testicles). The first known written documents of the disease were noticed in the Egyptian papyrus in about 1550 B.C. The disease was located in Ancient China, India, Egypt, vigorously. Bible also gave several references about the disease. The affected people by this disease are segmented in our Indian society. When German missionaries had come here the leper patients of Chotanagpur plateau, especially Purulia (then Manbhum) saw the light of hope. They came like an angel to them.

The Contribution of Rev. Uffmann to Eradicate Leprosy in Purulia

Rev. Henry Uffmann was the pioneer, who took initiatives to eradicate the disease from Chotanagpur division. He was a German missionary of Gossner's Evangelical Lutheran Mission family. Though he was a Westphalian (Germany), but kind enough to the Indians, especially about the lepers. The leprosy sufferers could find sympathy and protection in Rev. Uffmann's house. The problems of leper were noticed by Rev. Uffmann and he wrote to Mr. Wellesley Bailey, the founder of the mission to lepers for help. Thus Bailey came to meet Rev. Uffmann and the first grant was aided by him in 1887. It is through this money that two mud houses were built in February 1888 and the first Leprosy mission in Purulia opened. This mission came as a rescue to those helpless lepers and thus more mud houses were built to help those victims in the future.



Figure 1: Rev. Uffmann (1831-1901)

Source: <http://www.purulia.gov.in/distAdmin/departments/dico/per9.html>

A terrible famine occurred in the district during 1896 A.D. due to the failure of rain the crops dried up and the stores of rice were soon dried up. This led to the suffering of the Leprosy patients.

The money received by the mission to help lepers arrived and with it a new problem raised. The original site of leprosy asylum was within the boundaries of the municipality and the authorities were extremely worried about the ever-increasing rise of Leprosy patients. But the permission to expand the mission has been denied and the visit of Rev. Uffmann too did not help because the authorities outwardly showed sympathy to the mission but they were denied access to help. Rev. Uffmann founded a new site away two miles from Purulia town for expanding his mission work. Though the place was for local inhabitants, still Rev. Uffmann was determined to set up his mission in this place.

Thus, within the compound of G. E. L Church, the first Purulia Leprosy mission started its functioning. The 50 acres of land was acquired at Bhatbandh area outside the compound of Purulia municipality where the first Purulia leprosy Asylum was shifted in July 1897. From this compound, mud was dug and the pond was created for supplying water to the mission. This was even seen in today.

The journey of Leprosy mission had started with only 12 patients. By July 1897 Rev. Uffmann had to take care of 440 patients. Besides the houses, a small dispensary and a chapel had been built and paths layin between them. In the year 1898, there were 537 patients in the cottages which he built and there seemed to be no end to their need. In 11th August 1901 Rev. Henry Uffmann died at the age of seventy.

Contemporary Scenario of Leprosy Mission after Uffmann's Death

H. Coupland in *The Bengal District Gazetteers Manbhum* -published during 1911, provided a vivid description of the leper asylum in Purulia. It said that this Leper asylum was removed from its present location and was situated about two miles west of public office on outskirts of a broad strip of cultivated land. After four years this land had grown into a small town of itself and was neatly laid out to a large Sal (tree) plantation. The well-built brick house had been separated by 50 feet from its neighbor on either side. In each house down the center ran a wall which separates the male wards from the female and along intervals were the offices, the shop, the hospital and a church which lied on a central position. For unknown or doubt-ridden cases there were separate isolation wards, along with half a mile or more away and nearer to town was a large building and compound forming home for the untainted children of the lepers. It was in this area and in

the asylum that a technical school had been found for untainted children who could masterworks such as carpentry, masonries and building of others useful crafts or materials. The main asylum had 22 wards for men and 18 for women of whom all had been provided with the support of the mission and its other friends. Untainted children had the average population from 600 to 700 whereas the actual number in May 2010 was being 629 which included 41 cases under close observation. The popularity of the asylum was such that a large majority of the victims could be legally sent there and in consideration of this fact an annual grant of RS. 12000 had been dispatched by the government as an aid in keeping the view of the useful work done by the asylum.

The asylum then became the largest of its kind in India with its pleasant and healthy environment. The infrastructure of the asylum had been improved tremendously with wells had been sunk and the compounds were kept clean by the inmates themselves. Recently land improvement loans act had been taken to build a tank and bring some of the extensive wasteland buy and the asylum under cultivation.

In that place, shops were built where small luxury items could be given as a weekly allowance of 5annas for the male laborer and each adult female 4 annas per week. The popularity of the asylum and the pleasure of their lives were doubled when the asylum being wide open on every side was not based upon a model of prison. It was a natural asylum.

The German Evangelical Mission and Rev. H. Uffmann initiated the working of the asylum. Late Rev. Ferdinand Hannand Rev. Paul Wagner was given due credits for its thoroughly efficient organization and management.

Rev. E. Canon had been entrusted as the first CMS missionary superintendent of the Leprosy mission from 1915 to 1921. While taking charge he had to face horrific time due to the famine in Purulia district. Further, during 1918 and 1919 influenza and smallpox added more difficulties to the overcrowded wards where 17 patients died in a day on one occasion and 30 in a month. The Anglo-Christian sub-assistant surgeon provided medical aid during this difficult period of time. This particular surgeon had been trained in German Mission at Agra Medical College long before and carried a medical work for over thirty years until his retirement in 1925 A.D.

In July 1921, Dr. Muir visited Purulia for the first time and soon after, that he had started treatment for all patients by injecting Chaulmoogra oil. These were given to all who would take them and were often painful and frequently resulted in abscesses. The compounder who begun this work was transferred to another colony and Dr. Muir sent another young man from the Tropical School of Medicine in Calcutta. Then in 1923 through the action of Inspector General, Colonel Austen Smith of the Indian Medical Service and Dr. Muir, a really organized attack on leprosy was made. A sub Assistant Surgeon who had already done good work at the Cuttack leper colony was appointed as the research worker, Dr. Issac Santra began his work in a little box room off the verandah of the Superintendent's office facing the dispensary, Rev. Hann had built long before. He began at once to train patients, in the new methods of treatment. Slowly change began to come. By 1931, instead of Dr. Santra and the two healthy compounder apprentices, there was an English doctor, and Indian Government Researcher, two trained compounders, several laboratory assistants and record keepers and six or seven men or women patients capable of giving the latest methods of injections. In spite of great efforts made it soon became apparent that it was altogether inadequate to meet the never-ending demand for care and treatment. In 1933, 60000-ulcer treatment had been given but the patients never lost the spirit of hopefulness. They came here in a large number. Most of them had been given shelter and provided treatment. Thus, this asylum had been the only hope for the poorest lepers in the Chotanagpur region.



Figure 2: Old Picture of Purulia Leprosy Mission

Source:https://www.google.com/search?q=purulia+leprosy+mission+old+pic&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiT9ruCpt_cAhUJO48KHVmgAtwQ_AUoAXoECAsQAaw&biw=1366&bih=659#imgrc=iH9ch2V8UvDidM

CONCLUSIONS

From the above discussion, it is concluded that a vision was laid by Rev. Henry Uffmann that leprosy is a curable disease and it needs some medicinal care. Before that, it was a social curse. The patients were neglected and also isolated from the society. Ignorance was the key factor to eradicate this endemic disease. Beside this, a proper way of treatment was unknown to the Indians. This propaganda was kiltered that this disease was a contagious disease due to superstition. The German missionaries were successful to check the situation and raised hope for the lives of the depressed lepers. Their noble institution is still functioning to serve the people with an angel's heart. The Purulia leprosy mission is the largest Leprosy mission in Asia as well as second largest in the world. In 2013, the Purulia Leprosy mission is completed 125 years of service to the lepers.

REFERENCES

1. Chakraborty, Rajarshi, and Goutam Mukhopadhyay. *Purulia Charcha. Art Collection, Purulia, 2015.*
2. *The JOURNEY of Faith, 125 Years, The Leprosy Mission Home and Hospital, Purulia, West Bengal.*
3. GhoshBenoy. *Cultural Profile of Purulia. District Census Hand book, Purulia, West Bengal, 1961.*
4. BandopadhyaySudhakar. *Prosongo Kustharog: Prekshapot Purulia, pp.204-213,published in Ahalyabhumi Purulia, vol-II, edited by DebaprasadJana, Published by Deep Prakashan in January 2004.*
5. Sengupta Amiyakumar. *Henry Uffmann (1831-190), pp.17-20, Published by Manbhum Sambad in January 2006.*
6. <http://www.purulia.gov.in/distAdmin/departments/dico/per9.html>
7. J. Van Vagula Devi, *Determine the Problems Faced and Coping Strategies Adopted by the Patients with Hansen's Disease who are Attending the Selected Leprosy Hospital, Manamadurai, TJPRC:International Journal of Community & Mental Health Nursing (TJPRC: IJCMHN), Volume 1, Issue 1, January-June 2015, pp. 17-22*
8. https://www.google.com/search?q=purulia+leprosy+mission+old+pic&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiT9ruCpt_cAhUJO48KHVmgAtwQ_AUoAXoECAsQAaw&biw=1366&bih=659#imgrc=iH9ch2V8UvDiM: