

A Chronicle of Leprosy Elimination – Efforts in Bhutan” - ISBN: 978-99980-729-0-6

Vishwa Mohan Katoch

Honorary Editor, Indian Journal of Leprosy

This book edited by Dr Bjorn Melgaard & Dr Tandi Dorji is a beautiful story of history of elimination of leprosy from Kingdom of Bhutan. This is another valuable contribution by the authors who earlier wrote, “History of Medicine in Bhutan.”

This book starts with a foreword by Her Excellency the Royal Grandmother Gyalyum Kesan Ghoden Wangchuk. This foreword reflects the value system of the Royal family of Bhutan and their contributions to strengthen the efforts to fight the scourge of leprosy in Bhutan. Her words set the tone of what to expect from this book.

Introduction to this book provides the background of contributions of three remarkable and unique institutions to the history of control of leprosy in Bhutan: The Royal family and two Christian missionary organizations (The Leprosy Mission – TLM and Norwegian Santal Mission -DNS). A statement, “*The trust between the King, government and people is astounding and rare to be seen anywhere else*” is touching and would perhaps be the aspiration of people all over the world.

The chapter, “Leprosy, A Global Scourge” deals with important facts about global history of disease and beautifully describes its evolution, evidence of its presence in India more than 4000 years ago and Jerusalem somewhat later. It refers to molecular evidence about its likely route of

spread. This chapter also deals with knowledge about identification of its cause and history of treatment from Ayurveda mentioned in Sushruta Samhita, Chinese medicine to modern medicine. Important landmarks – roles played by Ryoichi Sasakawa and World Health Organization (WHO) to reach goal of elimination of leprosy as public health problem, criteria for different stages of elimination as laid by WHO Task Force and recent target of zero leprosy, have been captured very well.

The chapter on, “Mention of Leprosy from ancient Buddhist scriptures and stories” contributed by Chholay N. Dorji is rich in content and very informative. Interesting Bhutanese stories narrated in the chapter also “*reflect a distinctly Buddhist attitude towards leprosy*”. Like other civilizations leprosy was also linked to past actions. There is mention of anecdote of leprosy in the Himalayan region is the story of Gelongma Pelmo (Bhikṣuṇī Lakṣmi), a former Indian princess who became a nun and had suffered from leprosy. Historical mention of leprosy in the Bhutanese religious sphere and history has been cited - Ngawang Drakpa, Thangtong Gyalpo, Pema Lingpa and old narration of the Yakchoe Festival in Ura, Bumthangetc. Despite the severity of the affliction, Buddhist accounts seem to underscore the possibility of healing.

There is an interesting and informative chapter on “Royal Initiatives for Leprosy elimination”. This chapter mentions about opening of Bhutan to modernity, visit of Indian Prime Minister Nehru and start of first five plan in 1961 for its development. Push by the Royal family of Bhutan in supporting the government initiatives on health including establishment of a makeshift clinic was on the ground floor of their residence in Thimphu to treat patients with help of Dr Craig, establishment of a hospital with support of the Leprosy Mission to treat leprosy patients, are all inspiring stories. It is a great example of an ideal ruling family (King, Royal Grandmother and her daughter) whose heart beats for its people.

The chapter on “The fight against leprosy takes shape” describes the evolution of National Leprosy Elimination Program (NLEP) of Bhutan. This was part of larger efforts of His Majesty the third King, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, for economic and social development with the start of the first five-year plan. Establishment of ministries, departments including health was part of it. Strengthening the infrastructure and human resource for health, support of TLM in expanding the leprosy services is beautifully described. NLCP- NLEP, extensive coverage of MDT, efficient referral services with help of NGOs and support of Royal family have been mentioned in this successful journey. Though few cases of leprosy continue to occur in Bhutan, the disease burden is minimal and most patients are cured before disability sets in.

Chapter on “Enter the Leprosy Mission” begins with important events of 1964-69, Tashi Tobgyel suggesting the need for foreign assistance and reaching to his friend Dr. Albert Craig working at Kalimpong, working out an understanding with the Leprosy Mission International (TLM), Dr. Riedel coming to work at Langjopakha General Hospital in Thimphu – all make interesting

reading. Visit of Dr. Bjorn Melgaard, the author of the present book and describing the situation in a leprosy colony, pictures of His majesty the King of Bhutan, princess and expansion of program of TLM including Gidagom hospital, role played by Dr Edie Askew, arrival of Mollie Clark - a nurse and her impact, her departure in 1987, her illustrious successors, these complete the picture of situation and developments regarding leprosy program during that period. Story of Kaka Tshering (Paramedical worker/ Nonmedical supervisor- PMW/ NMS) and impactful role played by him reminds us of great role by PMWs/ NMS in the success of programme in India as well! Return of Dr Reidel, role played by him in roll out of multidrug-treatment (MDT) in 1980s and events of next two decades are beautifully summed up. Chapter also describes the transfer of control of TLM led activities to Dr Anayat in the government. Dr Sangay Thinley, first national doctor joining the programme was indeed a landmark for Bhutan. Role played by Lisbeth, a nurse and her husband Dr Steen in transition to integrated program has been described. There are many inspiring stories of rehabilitation of leprosy affected persons which readers will definitely like.

It is inspiring to read that the Royal family were regular visitors to Gidagom. The Royal Grandmother and Ashi Kesang Wangmo stayed around to talk to all patients, brought gifts and money.

The chapter on Norwegian Santal Mission (DNS) establishing their activities Eastern Bhutan is very informative. DNS had established a hospital in 1941 at Parkijuli (Assam, India) a few kilometers from Bhutan and had a long list of patients from Bhutan. Dr Haugstad from DNS then decided to approach the Royal Government of Bhutan to propose a regular service for leprosy

patients inside Bhutan. His receiving a positive from the Director of the Health Department in Bhutan Dr. T. Tobgyal, almost coinciding with a similar invitation sent to The Leprosy Mission in India, Riserboo becoming the general hospital with beds for leprosy patients and Dr Haugstad visiting, treating patients and returning to India same day, Riserboo becoming the center (1967–1977), Asbjørg Fiske a Norwegian nurse working there (1967-1980) fondly called Abi Fiske (Grandma Fiske) by the locals – so many important landmarks have been mentioned. A book was written about her in Norway: “Samaritan among the Thunder people” (title translated from Norwegian). There is mention of visit of Ashi Dechen Wangchuck which was nicely captured, *“She has come all the way from the capital Thimphu. The princess carries herself with dignity, and is friendly and open”*. In 1974, the Haugstads returned to Bhutan to make Riserboo their home; During these years, DNS provided most of the healthcare in the region; Edel Haugstad & Jan Ørnulf Melbostad, Lama Dazer and his working with newfound Norwegian friends show the merger of human values despite belonging to different faiths. The last Norwegian to work in Bhutan was Grethe Raddum, tributes to all those who made these noble efforts.

Epilogue starts with statement, “The process of putting together this book took us through the rollercoaster of emotions”. This concluding chapter has summed up all – past, present and future. Challenges in reaching to sources, collecting valuable material was indeed an herculean task. This book is rare concise scholastic product which combines history, evolution of leprosy programme in Bhutan and role played by NGOs (missionaries), Govt of Bhutan especially its Royal family.

Reading these condense 104 page material supported by beautiful pictures and authentic references captivated me so much that I decided to write the review myself. My apologies to several heroes and heroines from Bhutan and other countries mentioned in the book but missed in my review, mainly due to constraint of length. I am optimistic readers will feel the same way. I will recommend this book to all those who are interested in growth of Bhutan as a nation and elimination of leprosy from this country. Compliments to authors for this important contribution which blends history, science, culture and harmonization of great values from diverse faiths to achieve the best for human welfare.

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The book can be obtained by writing to Dr Tandi Dorji; email: dorjitandi@gmail.com. Authors also plan to post the book on Kindle, making it available in electronic format at this platform.