World Leprosy Day

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Leprosy is a long term infectious disease caused by the bacteria Mycobacterium Leprae, which affects the nervous system, and nerves in the cooler part of the body, like hands, legs and face. The typical symptoms of this disease are inflammation of the nerves, skin, respiratory tract and eyes. This may lead to inability in feeling pain, leading to unnoticed injuries and infection. This disease is also known by the name Hansen’s disease, named after Norway physician Gerhard Armauer Hansen, who debunked the earlier theory of leprosy being a hereditary disease.

Gerhard Armauer Hansen

Nala Damayanthi
In India, Leprosy is known as Kushta Rog. In the Indian legends, we have King Nala, of Nala Damayanthi fame, who was the ancestor of Rama in the Surya Vamsha, Ikshvaku dynasty, who was a great cook and champion horse rider. He was afflicted by Leprosy, took Ayurvedic treatment and prayed to Lord Shanishwara, through which he was cured of this disease.

King Nala riding the chariot as swift as wind with his queen Damayanthi
More on the connect between Nala and Rama in our book and film Historical Rama.

World Leprosy Day

World Leprosy Day is observed on the death anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. This day is observed to raise awareness among people about this air-borne disease.

Gandhiji’s great service to leprosy patients

Gandhiji laid great stress on the importance of curing this disease and in helping the patients of leprosy. He also made great efforts to remove the social stigma attached to this disease, and make leprosy people live in mainstream society.

The image of Gandhiji nursing a patient suffering from leprosy is well known. A patient named Parchure Shastri was allowed by Gandhiji to stay in his ashram in Sevagram, inspite of the contagious nature of this disease. Gandhiji personally nursed him and looked after his diet. This patient recovered sufficiently in two years, and soon took on the role of a marriage priest at Sevashram.

Gandhiji serving Parchure Shastri

How did Gandhiji get this keen interest to serve leprosy patients?
In his childhood, there was a man named Ladha Maharaja who used to recite the *Ramayana* to Gandhiji’s father. This man had leprosy and was completely cured by applying bilva leaves and through the regular recital of *Ramayana*. This incident greatly moved Gandhi, and he developed great concern for those inflicted by leprosy. He also lost the fear associated with this disease.

When Gandhiji went to South Africa in his earlier days, he helped a person suffering from this disease, by dressing his wounds, and providing him food and shelter.

Later on in his life, he once said, “*Leprosy work is not merely medical relief; it is transforming frustration of life into joy of dedication, personal ambition into selfless person.*”

Thus we see that Gandhiji had great compassion for those suffering from leprosy, and hence the day of his martyrdom is also observed as World Leprosy Day.

**National Leprosy Eradication Program**

The National Leprosy Eradication Program is a centrally sponsored health scheme instituted in 1955, to implement the treatment activities of leprosy, and carry forward the leprosy mission of Mahatma Gandhi, across the country.

![The emblem of National Leprosy Eradication Program](image)

The emblem of National Leprosy Eradication Program, has a lotus in between two fingers, with rising sun below. This signifies hope of being cured of leprosy and once again being able to hold with one’s fingers, so that lotus blossoms, and the sun shines in one’s life.

**Multi Drug Therapy**

In the last few decades, giant strides have been made in the field of medicine to completely cure leprosy through a treatment procedure, which is known as Multi Drug Therapy (MDT). This
effective treatment has effectively cured over lakhs of leprosy afflicted patients all over India and the world and brought them back to near normal life.

On this day of World Leprosy Day, the same hope is carried forward in different parts of the country to completely eradicate this disease, through different awareness programs.

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