

India's Progress

Meetings in Bihar and Goa confirm the headway that India is making in its efforts to eliminate leprosy and tackle discrimination but also the challenges that still lie ahead.

BIHAR (AUGUST 26-29)

At the end of August I visited Bihar in northeast India. It was my second visit to this populous state, one of several where much work remains to be done if India is to achieve the goal of elimination by the end of 2005.

I used to be pessimistic about Bihar's prospects. When I first visited in December 2002, the prevalence rate was 11 per 10,000 population. This time, according to Bihar's health ministry, it was down to 4.5/10,000. I am encouraged to see that the efforts of those who have been working hard for leprosy elimination in Bihar now appear to be bearing fruit.

In total, I spent three days in Patna, Bihar's capital, and one day in Gaya. In Patna, I attended two meetings. The first was a workshop to discuss the role of medical professionals, the media and NGOs in leprosy elimination. The second was on how to involve non-leprosy organizations.

The workshop, which was organized by Dr. S.D. Gokhale, Chairman, International Leprosy Union, and chaired by Dr. P.K. Gopal, President, IDEA India, also focused on the role of cured persons. In particular, it looked at the part they can play in educational campaigns to neutralize discrimination and so make it easier for people to come forward for treatment.

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On the opening day, about 30 recovered persons each gave a self introduction. They included an MBA student, a housewife, a construction worker, a stationer, a shopkeeper, a milkman, a barber, a bicycle repair man and a computer technician. They all appeared to be leading normal lives. But encouraging as this was, such people are the exception, not the rule, and I believe we must do everything possible to enable all cured persons to be accepted by society.

The second meeting I took part in was on the role of social organizations and was attended by about 60 representatives of companies, banks, industry organizations and other groups. Representing the Bihar government was Health Commissioner Dr. A.K. Choudhary; attending from WHO were Dr. S.J. Habayeb and Dr. Derek



Lobo, and from the government of India, Dr. G.P.S. Dhillon, DDG (Leprosy).

Dr. Choudhary said that while Bihar is making progress in reducing the number of patients, work still needs to be done to restore the dignity of cured persons. Dr. Lobo said it was important to move beyond the current situation where cured persons tend to find work only within the leprosy community; they must be given support in finding work outside work.

I used the opportunity to appeal for the support of all sections of society, stressing the three messages that leprosy is curable, treatment is free, and social discrimination has no place. I emphasized that if every Indian was to have a proper understanding of leprosy, it was vitally important to start a huge social movement.

While in Patna, I gave a speech at Patna Women's College. I told my audience of 500 students that leprosy wasn't just a medical disease, but was a social problem with a long history of human discriminating against fellow human. Each student, I said, should consider leprosy elimination and the restoration of the human rights of those

Speaking out: people recovered from leprosy address the Bihar workshop



Patna Women's College: students learn what they can do for elimination