

Spreading the Word

Media workshops in India generate interest, but there needs to be a way to sustain coverage once they are over.

INDIA (September 18-24)

During September and October I visited India twice to take part in a number of media workshops. On arrival, though, my first task was to give a lecture at Jadavpur University in Kolkata. I spoke on Leprosy and Human Rights before around 200 faculty and students. The chancellor of the university is West Bengal's governor, Shri Gopal Krishna Gandhi: Mahatma Gandhi's youngest grandson.

Prior to our meeting, the governor had visited Premananda Memorial Leprosy Hospital, where he spoke with a number of patients. Impressed by their self-confidence, the governor appeared committed to eliminating leprosy and supporting the rehabilitation of those affected by the disease. He recalled his grandfather's response to being invited to attend the opening of a leprosy hospital in Tamil Nadu, saying: "I will come to lock the door when it is over."

We met again on September 20 at the first of the media workshops. This was also attended by West Bengal's health minister, who said that the number of leprosy cases in the state had come down from 150,000 to 16,000 and that elimination was just a matter of time. (The state's PR is currently 1.88.) The minister said that from now on it was important to make efforts to rehabilitate cured people "economically, socially and psychologically" and that the media have an important role to play.

While in Kolkata, I visited the Gandhiji Prem Nivas Leprosy Center in Titagarh on the outskirts of the city. Founded by Mother Teresa in 1958, it currently sees about 400 patients a month who come for multidrug therapy. About 200 recovered

persons and their families live at the center, which has facilities for weaving, shoemaking and carpentry.

The second media workshop I took part in was in Patna, which Bihar's governor, Sardar Buta Singh, also attended. Bihar accounts for 23% of India's leprosy cases, but has been making great progress. Three years ago when I visited, the PR was 8.7; today it is 1.8. This is thanks to the efforts of the state government, WHO, NGOs and other partners. Among the latter is *The Times of India*, which a couple of years ago collaborated on producing an informative booklet entitled *Together We Can Eliminate Leprosy*. This has been widely distributed and has helped to set the record straight about the disease.

For the next workshop I made my first visit to Assam, famous the world over for its tea. Unfortunately, due to the insurgency, my movements were restricted. Nonetheless, I was able to meet many people, including representatives of the North East Chamber of Commerce, who invited me to dinner. I took the opportunity to stress to them what an important role industry has to play in the rehabilitation of the leprosy-affected, and urged them to take this on as part of their corporate social responsibility.

(October 18-20)

I returned to India in October for another media workshop, this time in Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous state. Since my last visit three years before, the PR had fallen from 4 to 1.6. I learned that schoolchildren are now obliged to perform skin checks on their family members as part of their homework. This is something I first saw in Mozambique, and which I spoke about on my last visit to UP. I was thus delighted to see that this idea has been taken up and is proving helpful in discovering new cases.

My overall impression from these workshops is that the media still have a lot to learn about leprosy — which is of course why such events are being held. Coverage has been very positive, but the next task is finding a way to provide the media with a steady flow of information to ensure that interest is maintained. ■



West Bengal Governor Gopal Krishna Gandhi (left) and State Health Minister Surjya Kanta Mishra confer at the media workshop in Kolkata.