



The Delhi conference: the voice of people affected by leprosy

at district health centers, and there were also media and NGO representatives present.

Health Minister Majhi said, “Eliminating leprosy is the biggest success since smallpox. But building on this represents a new challenge. What can we do to help persons affected by leprosy achieve economic independence?”

On my previous visit, Orissa’s PR was 6.4/10,000. Today it is 0.94. However, State Leprosy Officer Dr. P.K.B. Pattanaik said he was not satisfied and is now pursuing elimination at district level. He also said he was cooperating closely with local officials in the social rehabilitation of affected persons.

DELHI (OCTOBER 4)

The following month I returned to India to attend the 2nd National Conference on the Integration & Empowerment People Affected by Leprosy in New Delhi on October 4. This conference is designed to be the voice of people affected by leprosy, both patients and those who have recovered from the disease. The first ever conference was held in Delhi in December 2005.



Speaking in Delhi

I see these events as a way for people affected by leprosy to make themselves heard and claim their basic rights through their own efforts. Bringing

them together in a national network and giving them a forum where they can exchange ideas and opinions will bring pressure to bear on government and society to tackle stigma and discrimination.

This second conference was inaugurated by the Vice President of India Shri Bhairon Singhji Sekhawat and attended by Delhi’s Chief Minister Smt. Sheila Dikshit as well as many experts in the field of social work and rehabilitation.

The vice president is very knowledgeable about leprosy, and stressed the need to integrate people affected by leprosy into society’s mainstream while making sustained efforts to change the social image of leprosy. Because he was taking part, the conference was held at the Vigyan Bhawan, Delhi’s premier conference facility — a fact that was not lost on delegates, for whom the venue was of enormous symbolic importance as a mark of the progress their movement is making.

In the more than 20 journeys I have made to India over the last three years, the changes I have witnessed have been nothing short of miraculous: India’s achievement of elimination and its ongoing commitment to fighting leprosy; the first ever survey of the nation’s colonies; a national conference to empower affected persons; and the creation of a national forum. All have been made possible by the determined efforts of everyone concerned.

Over the course of these visits, I feel India has become my second home. To see the dawn of hope on the faces of people affected by leprosy is what keeps me going and I can truly say that this has become my life’s work. ■