



## Avadhoot Bhagwan Ram: A Great Luminary in Leprosy Services

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Available online at: [www.isca.in](http://www.isca.in)

Received 6<sup>th</sup> June 2015, revised 30<sup>th</sup> June 2015, accepted 10<sup>th</sup> July 2015

### Abstract

*Renowned for dispelling suffering of millions, Avadhoot Bhagwan Ram had immense knowledge of medicinal herbs, their healing properties and abilities. He dedicated his life to serve poor, diseased and other needy ones. His patriotism was incomparable. Though this great saint did not undergo any formal education or training, he guided numerous scientists, physicians, surgeons and other medical professionals. His decision of free treatment of all admitted leprosy patients indicates his incredible interest and effort of serving these helpless individuals abandoned even by their own people. The OPD of his hospital provides purest and cheapest medicines of all skin diseases and other chronic ailments. Surprisingly, money for all arrangements in his hospital comes from the voluntary help of ordinary people. This study also explains how spiritual prowess can be used in social welfare.*

**Keywords:** Avadhoot Bhagwan Ram, leprosy, leprosy services, leprosy wounds, leprosy healing, Sarveshwari Samooh, Gurupad Sambhava Ram.

### Introduction

Leprosy is the oldest disease known to humans. Despite monumental development in medical sciences, the cause of this disease has been a matter of intense debate globally. Leprosy is still believed to be caused by curse or sin. It is perceived as a disease from God, the will of God or as a punishment by God<sup>1</sup>. The published literature indicates that leprosy patients have been behaved ruthlessly by the society, rulers and until recently by the government throughout the world. The patients were forced to lead stigmatized lives in confinement in leprosaria, sanatoria, asylums or leper colonies. Unfortunately the whole question of leprosy and its prevention has been surrounded with much feeling and sentiment, and has not always been approached with the necessary impartiality and candour. Laymen have too often been allowed to pour out their harrowing stories and have been listened to with too much credulity<sup>2</sup>. In Japan, the males admitted to leprosaria were sterilized and females found to be pregnant were forced to have abortions. These extreme actions were done to prevent the children of diseased parents from being born lest they also contract the disease. Doctors still mistakenly believed that leprosy was a hereditary disease<sup>3</sup>. Lack of interest of health professionals in handling contagious diseases is another aspect hampering leprosy services globally. Studies reveal that the medical negligence for all types of patients is on rise in many countries. In Bangladesh, the study showed that about 94 % respondents faced negligence in hospitals and had losses of some kinds due to the negligence they faced<sup>4</sup>.

The greatest surgeon, Sushruta had described completely for the first time the causes, symptoms and cure of leprosy in the

period between 1200 BC and 600 BC in his book Sushruta Samhita. Contrary to misleading concept originated in the Western world, leprosy is absolutely curable by Ayurvedic system of medicine. Western people call leprosy as Hansen disease as its causative organism, a bacterium, *Mycobacterium leprae* was discovered by a Norwegian physician Gerhard Armauer Hansen in 1873. In modern era, medical scientists work hard to develop vaccines for infectious diseases. Vaccines develop immunity in individuals. Immunization programme aims to reduce mortality and morbidity in preventable diseases. Since ancient era emphasis has been given to the preventive aspect of health and it is well known that the prevention is better than cure<sup>5</sup>. In certain countries notably India and Brazil, the tuberculosis vaccine *i.e.* Bacillus Calmette Guerin (BCG) is currently being used against leprosy because of similarity in bacteria causing these two diseases. However, the quest for developing a globally acceptable and unquestionably effective vaccine still continues in the United States and elsewhere as the efficacy of BCG against leprosy is controversial.

Inefficiency of government machinery in handling health care system in India and other countries has resulted in the birth of non-government organizations. With a view to provide a real picture of leprosy, the present study was carried out at Avadhoot Bhagwan Ram Kusta Sewa Ashram which is the world's largest ayurvedic hospital for leprosy services. This paper deals with the brief biographic account of Avadhoot Bhagwan Ram as well as the treatment facilities available in his hospital. It is first time in the world's history when spiritual ability is directed to serve the poor, diseased and disturbed ones. Established in Varanasi, this hospital is a boon to leprosy patients coming from various states of India.

### Early life of Avadhoot Bhagwan Ram

Avadhoot Bhagwan Ramji was born on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1937 to a peasant family in a small village 'Gundi' of Bhojpur (now Arah) district in Bihar, India. The new born was named 'Bhagwan' (God) due to his endowment with supernatural features and as per pre-birth dream by the mother. Bhagwan was the only child to his parents. He grew up in extreme adversity. He was hardly five years old when his father left this world. He used to worship and meditate in his own garden or in the perimeter of his house where he himself built a small Shiva-temple. Many old, eyewitness alive today are the testimony of his compassionate conduct for everyone. Grieved ones got rid of their sufferings in the mere presence of this little child. Bhagwan remained with his family only till the age of seven. Thereafter he never ate in his house; instead he was fed by poor at their homes or in temples. Owing to repeated interruption by family members, relatives and villagers, he felt uneasy and ultimately left the surroundings of his village by the age of nine itself in quest for self-realisation to serve helpless ones.

### Establishment of World's largest socio-spiritual organization and service to the masses

After Avadhoot Bhagwan Ram (Figure 1) achieved enlightenment at the age of 14-15, the number of poor, diseased, distressed and oppressed people coming to him increased immensely. It was for the first time when spiritual prowess was directed to root out human sufferings. For him, words were not necessary to express one's sufferings. On the request and support of locals for the welfare of society, he founded an absolutely socio-spiritual institution Sri Sarveshwari Samooh on September 21, 1961 with headquarters at Parao, Varanasi. At present this institution has over 51,000 registered members and immensely large number of other devotees with majority from the downtrodden section of the Indian society. Bhagwan Ram established three bigger ashrams in Jashpur district of Chhattisgarh province with the generous support of his staunch devotee and the former king of Jashpur His Highness Vijay Bhushan Singh Judeo who donated about 600 acres of land. The king also became a parliamentarian (Lower House 1962-67, Upper House 1970-76; also an MLA in Madhya Pradesh Assembly 1952-62). These ashrams conduct a number of public welfare programmes including leprosy and other medical services at large scale.

The Head Office and its over 100 branches in various States of India strive to offer services to suffering humanity irrespective of caste, religion or social status. The founder's teaching "God does not reside in temple, mosque or church but can be traced in the tears of poor and hungry" is the guiding force to volunteers of this world's largest socio-spiritual organization. Some of the regular services offered free of cost are medical camps including cataract operation for needy public, dental camps, treatment of epilepsy, and camps for prisoners, socio-cultural awareness, dowry-less marriages, widow marriage, mass-scale

plantation, campaigns against smoking and alcohol, running primary schools, imparting free boarding and education to poor children etc.



Figure-1  
Avadhoot Bhagwan Ram

Avadhoot Bhagwan Ram visited not only every nook and corner of India but also traveled to many countries on the request of his pupils. He visited leprosy hospitals abroad and analysed the socio-economic status of patients and kind of treatment facilities available there. Though he did not obtain even primary-school education, he later became an author of many matchless books dealing with every aspect of human life including health, body, mind, soul, family, society, worship, meditation etc. These books are readily available at the head office.

### Avadhoot Bhagwan Ram Kusta Sewa Ashram (Avadhoot Bhagwan Ram Leprosy Service Centre)

Having seen the pathetic situation of stigmatized and ostracized leprosy patients begging especially at Ganga ghats and near temples as well as lack of governmental effort despite his elaborate requisition, Avadhoot Bhagwan Ram established an ayurvedic leprosy service centre "Avadhoot Bhagwan Ram Kusta Sewa Ashram" (ABRKSA) in 1961 at Parao, Varanasi. Many people of Municipal Corporation and contractors of leper-beggars strongly opposed this leprosy service as they had the lion's share in the begged money. Initially, patients were accommodated in a

hut where Bhagwan Ram himself treated their rotten wounds. Later on he started construction of the hospital building astonishingly with the contributed money of just Rupee 10 of which Rupee 7 was spent in the inaugural ceremony itself. Farmers, labourers and other ordinary people were the main contributors in erecting this hospital. The male ward with 40 beds was inaugurated in 1962 by Sri Jagjivan Ram, former Deputy Prime Minister of India. Similarly, a separate female ward with 10 beds was inaugurated in 1964 by Sri Morarji Desai, former Prime Minister of India. The centre in Raebareli also has an IPD facility with a 10 bed hospital. Generally there are a total of 30-40 patients undergoing treatment in these IPDs throughout the year. In addition, leprosy medicines are also provided at many branches of ABRKSA spread at various places in India notably Bilaspur, Dhanbad, Jamshedpur, Kharsia etc. Further these centres, like the head office, provide self-made medicines also for most chronic diseases, e.g. asthma, diabetes, epilepsy, arthritis, malnutritional diseases, dental diseases, mental illness and all other skin diseases including psoriasis. The medicine manufacturing units are established only at two places, one at the head office in Varanasi and second at Aghorpeeth Vamdeo Nagar, Gamharia, Jashpur district of Chhattisgarh. The medicines are manufactured under the strict guidance of experts. The ABRKSA (figure-2) is perhaps the only hospital in the world which does not receive any grant from the government and the national and international aid agencies like the World Health Organisation, World Bank, The Leprosy Mission, and the International Federation of Anti-leprosy Associations (ILEP) etc.

Bhagwan Ram has developed a holistic approach for the absolute cure and rehabilitation of leprosy patients. The Avadhoot

Bhagwan Ram Kusta Sewa Ashram has already been included in the Guinness Book and Limka Book of Records for treating highest number of leprosy patients. Being the prominent leprosy hospital in north India, it has successfully treated over 4,00,000 leprosy patients. This hospital not only provides free medicines, food, clothes, specially designed shoes, and accommodation etc. to admitted patients but also offers a strongly cooperative and healthy environment necessary for faster healing. At ABRKSA, the founder established the patient wards in close proximity of the residence of his own as well as of doctors, care takers and other residents where hundreds and thousands of devotees come to get rid of their diverse difficulties every day. Besides medical healing, this unprecedented management is enough to dispel mental leprosy prevailing in the society. Here doctors, care takers and patients all live as the members of the same family. This helps to overcome the feeling of leprosy related stigma. Elsewhere in the world, the fear in leprosy sufferers stems from an expectation of social restriction and the ensuing family and economic issues<sup>6</sup> as well as a dread of disfiguring deformities. The author, having visited many countries, has to assert the level of respect given to leprosy patients is highest in ABRKSA. Here patients are regularly visited by their family members who are assured of their protection, care and treatment. The hospital is open every day including Sunday. Depending on the extent of disease severity, some patients recover in a couple of months while others may take years. In fact this hospital is the boon to the mankind. Though this hospital is not well equipped with modern sophisticated medical tools and techniques, the existing facility is enough to treat all sorts of cases from paucibacillary to multibacillary leprosy.



Figure-2  
OPD of Avadhoot Bhagwan Ram Kusta Sewa Ashram

The routine prayer in the morning and evening helps patients in keeping them in an elevated state of mind free from any agony or stigma. Besides, daily activities such as cooking and farming by themselves develop confidence in them. At their leisure, patients enjoy reading news paper, watching television or narrating religious books. At beginning, some patients feel difficulty to cope with the prevailing ambience where smoking is absolutely prohibited together with certain dietary and life-style restrictions. Subsequently the persisting atmosphere causes them to nurture the feelings of a normal person and they never feel stigmatized and secluded. Interestingly, the surrounding and kind of services offered here compel skin specialists of many private clinics and government hospitals to refer many new as well as MDT (multi drug therapy) abused cases to this centre for quick and irreversible cure. During the year 2013-14 itself, a total of 2494 leprosy patients were treated out of 6036 registered cases including 3542 patients of other diseases. Their age varied between 1 and 80 years. However, majority of patients are in their active age of life, 20-50 years. Many patients take medicines even without registration to hide their identity due to their social or professional status. Most recovered patients of this centre return home with great vitality and resume their normal social lives. As per their wish, few recovered individuals stay in the ashram to offer their services to other members<sup>7</sup>.

### Continuation of leprosy and other services

Avadhoot Bhagwan Ram had been visiting United States during last few years of his life and guided the path of peace seekers. With a lifelong service to suffering humanity, he left his mortal body on 29<sup>th</sup> November 1992 at Mount Sinai Hospital, Manhattan, New York. The last two days of his life were exceedingly amazing especially to doctors who never attended such cases before and ultimately surrendered themselves to Bhagwan Ram itself. The clinical cause of the death was a very massive and unprecedented brain haemorrhage as revealed by CAT scan. All possible signs of life disappeared except the working heart which astonishingly kept beating with a normal pace for much beyond the doctors' expectation. Bhagwan Ram took the final decision only about 20 minutes later in the presence of his heir Gurupad Sambhava Ramji who had just rushed there from India immediately on knowing the severity of his health. After touching the pious body and offering last reverence, his chief doctor Dr Levis Burrows of Mount Sinai Hospital tearfully asserted that Bhagwan Ram was beyond the reach of science. Not only he respected every aspect of medical sciences, he crossed its boundary too. He was beyond the reach of our understanding. Dr Burrows felt himself fortunate enough to get a chance for his treatment. It was the effect of Bhagwan Ram's spiritual teachings bestowed upon that helped millions of devotees in India to overcome this overwhelming grief. As per his wish, his body was consigned to flames on the bank of Ganga, about 1 km from the head office. A beautiful *Samadhi* has been built

over there. The metallic trident of about 2 tonnes installed at its top is the heaviest known trident.

After Bhagwan Ram, all the institutions (Baba Bhagwan Ram Trust, Sri Sarveshwari Samooh and its branches, Aghor Parishad Trust, Avadhoot Bhagwan Ram Kusta Sewa Ashram etc.) established by him are running under the guidance of his heir Gurupad Sambhava Ramji. Being the President of these institutions, Gurupad Sambhava Ramji often visits and guides doctors and caretakers of the hospital<sup>8</sup>. The number of branches is gradually being increased so as to make public welfare services accessible by means of camps to the needy people in various parts of India. Day by day the hospital facilities are being improved with the help of limited available resources. Foreign physicians and social workers also are the frequent visitors of ABRKSA. Like earlier, now also the people from all walks of life come to the ashram for getting guidelines to excel in their respective professions. Despite physical absence of Avadhoot Bhagwan Ram (Aghoreshwar Bhagwan Ram), the prayer with a stable mind at his *asan* (seat) is always fruitful.

### Conclusion

The treatment and successful rehabilitation of leprosy patients is still a serious problem faced all over the world. The governments and international funding agencies are spending heavy amount on leprosy programmes. However, there is lack of efforts in active detection of leprosy cases. In India, some State Governments, for political benefits, are offering food grains at very cheap rates to BPL (below poverty level) card holders. This favours laziness and leprosy sufferers prefer remain undetected and undiagnosed. Further, many patients from rural areas come to cities particularly at pilgrimage centres for begging. Though it is sinful, affluent people paralyse their lives even more by giving them money, food and clothes without caring for need of their treatment and/or rehabilitation. The patients get their basic needs fulfilled. These factors lead to loss of self-esteem in patients and they never think of treatment. Another important aspect that hampers leprosy elimination is the freedom of WHO in deciding and implementing impractical parameters of leprosy elimination. Its multi drug therapy is not without side effects on the liver, kidney and digestive system. The facts and figures given by WHO deviate from the ground reality. The District level, State Governments and National Government must not forget the contribution of non-government organizations in combating leprosy. Government must make provision for the active detection and treatment of all leprosy patients. No leprosy patients should be seen begging here and there in streets, temples, on roads, Ganga ghats etc. The self-sustained Avadhoot Bhagwan Ram Kusta Sewa Ashram is an outstanding example of leprosy services which heals not only the physical signs and symptoms of the disease but mental leprosy too. It promotes aware individuals to guide leprosy patients to treatment centres.

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