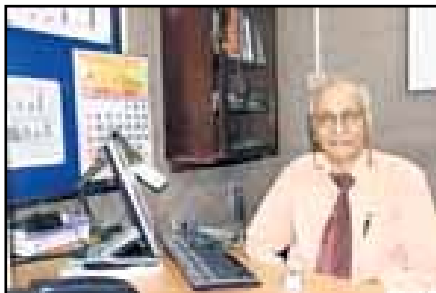


Weeding out leprosy and myths

Working where most people wouldn't, Dr R Ganpathy has helped treat leprosy patients for 30 years, writes Moni Bhushan



We have been made to believe leprosy has been eradicated from India. The truth is far from this. Though there is definitely a decline in the number of 'active' leprosy patients, there are about 15 lakh leprosy 'disabled' patients in India. And working quietly and untiringly with them, determined to eradicate the disease completely, is Dr R Ganpathy. A Padmashri recipient and a leprosy specialist, Dr

Ganpathy was moved by the isolation forced upon leprosy patients, often by leprosy institutes themselves, prompting him to set up the Bombay Leprosy Project (BLP) in 1976. According to the 76-year-old doctor, there was a need to identify leprosy patients, medicate them, and bring them into mainstream society. He founded the project with the determination to rehabilitate leprosy patients because, he says, "We cannot claim to have eradicated leprosy completely."

From when leprosy sets in to the last stage, there is usually a 20-year time period, during which it is possible to prevent the irreversible final stage of deformity. Only five per cent of leprosy cases are contagious. Dr Ganpathy says people associate leprosy deformity with it being contagious. This is one reason why most leprosy patients live in leprosy colonies or are shunned from society. For Dr Ganpathy, the Herculean task was to go into slums and identify patients, instead of waiting for them to come out. His approach was to form a core group of local community volunteers who knew the area well. At the same time he also had to keep costs from spiralling. The doctor says he has not received much financial help from the government, and that the project is "sustained only through public donations".

When the project started, Dr Ganpathy brought in doctors like Dr Wardikar and Dr Kapoor to formulate the rules and regulations of the committee. Financial aid first trickled in from the **German Leprosy Relief Association**, increasing over time when the project began to show good results. Although he initially found it difficult to put together a dedicated core team due to a dearth of funds, Dr Ganpathy says, "My staff is my greatest strength".

The doctor's wife, Padma, whom he married in 1957, has always supported her husband in his work, and their house also doubles up as the BLP's registered office. Padma herself is associated with another NGO which works to raise awareness about sclerosis.

Dr Ganpathy has been felicitated with other awards as well, like the Outstanding Community Service award, International Who's Who in Medicine in London, and Award for Excellence by the Maharashtra government. Untouched by the commercialised, fast-paced life all around him, Dr Ganpathy intends to work till he is 80, "if health permits".

Coping with heart problems, Dr Ganpathy says he will eventually give up administrative responsibilities with the BLP, but will continue with fund-raising and other organisational duties. Flooded with 200-300 calls per day, he says he handed in his resignation thrice to the managing committee, who refused to accept it. Dr Ganpathy laughs, "I think I will die with my boots on!"
Unstoppable: Padmashri awardee Dr R Ganpathy

