



**Mr. HIRA SINGH
BRAHMAPURI**

Hira Singh calls himself , ‘Ex-Serviceman’ with the attached pride just like all the retired defence personnel in India , Army, Navy or Air Force, all alike. Hira Singh had run up from the position of an army recruit all the way to the rank of ‘Hawaldar’, a non-commissioned officer of the British Army in the five pre - independence years 1942 to 1947 and then from 1947 to 1955, eight years in the Indian Army. He then managed to get a voluntary retirement at the age of 31 after a big long effort with lots of excuses, mainly his family problems.

Hira Singh, born in the year 1924 in a village of Garhwal Himalayas, not very remote but about 15 km of walking distance from the six- foot wide stone paved road called, ‘Bridle path’ built for pilgrims travelling on horse back to the Holy shrines Gangotri and Yamunotri at the sources of Holy rivers Ganga and Yamuna. Years later, the bridle paths were widened up to 12 feet, paved with gravel and covered with earth dug from either side, called , ‘Dust roads’ for a faster if not comfortable travel of pilgrims by cars, jeeps and buses. Pilgrimage season lasts for 6 hot months of the year. During the winter season the shrines are closed due to heavy snow fall on the high mountains where they are situated. The ‘Motor Roads’ had been a blessing to the people of Garhwal as buses and trucks plied throughout the year for people to travel and to transport their produce to the towns of the plains to sell.

People of the village of Hira Singh and of the dozens of neighbouring villages were benefited as the roadside village, ‘Khadi’ had developed into a market place. A Government Primary School was built, followed by a Primary Health Centre. People had an easy access to the nearest big town Rishikesh , less than 30 km from Khadi by bus. Rishikesh is the starting point from where buses ply to and from the four Holy Shrines - Badrinath, Kedarnath on one direction and Gangotri, Yamunotri on the other. Because of these four pilgrimage places (Chaar Dhaam) Garhwal, half of the Uttaranchal State calls herself, ‘Dev Bhoomi’ land of the Gods.

Credit goes to the good- hearted old gentleman of the village where Hira Singh was born. He donated part of his land, collected donations from the people of surrounding villages and managed to get a school building constructed with voluntary labour of villagers. The only teacher was paid his monthly salary in cash and kind by the parents of the pupils. That was in the year 1919. A second teacher was added two years later. Hira Singh was fortunate to have a primary school close to his house, he was able to complete his studies upto Class V th.

During the II nd world war the British were in need of soldiers to fight Japanese army advancing into India through Burma. A countrywide campaign of mass recruitments was in full swing. The minimum educational qualification was reduced from Class VIII to Class V for the recruits. Hira Singh and two other young men from his village were recruited. After a two months’ training they were sent to the warfront with rifles in hands.

In the past years Hira Singh was coming home on one month annual leave from the army. After his voluntary retirement he returned home for good in 1955. One of the two of his villagers who joined the army had been killed in the war in 1943, just one year after his recruitment and the other one had returned home in 1945 after he had lost his right leg. Hira Singh was very lucky to have come back home safe and sound. Granted by the Defence Ministry, he is entitled to a lifelong pension, the amount of pension money being enough to support his lower middle class family.

His very first job was the marriage of his only daughter. In consultation with his wife he decided to find a young man who would be willing to remain with his family, not only as a son-in-law but also as a son, taking up all the responsibilities of running the home, cultivation, cattle etc. Hira Singh found a suitable match in a far away village, whose father was happily willing to spare one of his four sons. This is a system of convenience in India, with mutual agreement between the



families of both the bride and the bridegroom called, “Ghar Janwai” (son-in-law living in the house of parents-in-law). Their daughter was married and the son-in-law took over all the duties of the family.

His next job was to renovate the old, dilapidated Primary School of his village. In the past 19 years, nobody bothered about time to time repairs and maintenance. Even the rusted tin sheet roofing full of big holes was never replaced. Hira Singh plunged himself into the task. He walked from one village to another motivating the people to raise money. He made applications to a number of officials of different Government Departments with signatures of hundreds of villagers. His long walks and trips to various offices continued unabated.

A perennial stream flows alongside Hira Singh’s village and scores of other villages uphill and downhill. During the three months of monsoon rains, the stream swells with rain water, turns furious, the villagers can hear its roaring noise all night. During the rest of the year the water is crystal clear, shallow but deep at places.

These streams are the lifeline for the people living in the mountain regions, the water is invaluable. For drinking, washing, cooking and for their cattle and most important of all, for irrigation of their small pieces of land created by cutting, digging and made even by picking out all the stones and filling with soil brought from here and there. All the hard work on their lands uphill and downhill results in a meagre yield of their staple food: rice, pulses, wheat, potatoes and a small amount of vegetables.

Hundreds of streams like this one flow into the river Ganga, called, ‘Gadhna’ in Garhwali dialect, meaning, ‘mini-rivulet’. Some people do fishing in the deep water and sell their catch to the villagers and to the roadside eating places at the bus stop and market place Khadi.

As usual, a few men were enjoying a refreshing evening bath after a gruelling hot summer day. In the lower Himalayas, close to the plains, winters are too cold and summers are too hot. Hira Singh was among the dozen bathing mates. Someone had noticed some small and some big sized spots on Hira Singh’s body. Not dark, not reddish nor whitish but pale coloured spots over his back, shoulders and thighs, too conspicuous to ignore. He said to the others, ‘Look at Hira!’

Hira, what are those ugly spots on your body? One of them had asked out of curiosity. What spots? Where? Hira turned around. Look there, on your chest and on your tummy too! Can’t you see them? The others gathered around.

Tell me Hira, do you have any pain or burning or itching or anything? Another one had questioned in the tone of a physician.

No, I don’t have anything. No pain, no burning or itching or anything! Hira replied, quite surprised at the sudden revelation. He himself had never noticed what was cooking over the skin of his body, without his knowledge, without any sort of symptoms.

Whatever it might be, Hawaldar ji, I think you should not waste any more time, please show it to the Doctor at the Primary Health Centre at Khadi, someone else had advised in his meek and mild voice, keeping his distance from the high caste people called, ‘Thankurs’ (warriors and kings) who add a title to their names, ‘Singh’ (Lion) like, ‘Hira Singh’. Illiterate and from a low caste he was, he was doing his daily job of fishing close by the Thakurs bathing. His father had never bothered to send him to the Primary School of the village but had taught him lots of techniques in the art of fishing, with the sole aim that his son would become an earning member of the family, as they never had any land of their own, but their forefathers had spent all their lives as agricultural labourers in tilling, sowing and reaping on the lands of the Thakurs.



Nobody, ever after that, had thought about Hira Singh's skin condition, not even Hira Singh himself, who had busied himself with his project, 'Renovation of the Primary School building'. He never bothered to go to the Primary Health Centre. But the worried fisherman went to Hira Singh's house, met his wife and told everything that had happened at the stream, in full detail. He requested her to persuade Hawaldar ji to do something about that. When his wife spoke to Hira Singh about his skin problem, he simply shook it off, "I have better things to do than running from one Doctor to another for those silly little spots, I am more worried about the school". She did not dare to argue with her husband but kept a close look at those spots in the ensuing months, more than one year.

Her observations revealed many interesting clinical features. Both those big and small spots were not of the same shape, each one had its different and irregular shape. Her second observation after a few months was that the smaller spots had increased in size and the bigger ones became thicker and harder at the edges. The colour of those thicker areas started turning from pale to pink and later into a reddish tint. She was helplessly watching all those evolutions. Some other day she was surprised to notice the central areas of the spots looked absolutely normal as if completely healed up. She was quite alarmed to notice something else. She could not find a single hair on any of those spots whereas the rest of the body had its normal growth of hairs. Every time she found some sort of change, she kept complaining to her husband but he ignored.

Hira Singh's long walks to the neighbouring villages and trips to various offices continued. One evening he returned home limping with a painful lump in the groin and a high fever. His wife brought out the Army First Aid Box her husband had brought with him from the army. He took a tablet of Aspirin. His wife washed the foot with soap and water. There was a big blister just underneath the tip of the big toe, with a sticky fluid oozing from it. She bandaged the toe with an anti-septic solution.

His condition was not better next morning. His wife, daughter and son-in-law discussed among themselves and made a suggestion that he should go to the Doctor. Feeble state he was in, with fever and pain, he tried to avoid the long journey by postponing it. The fisherman arrived at his doorstep. From outside he called out, 'Hawaldar ji, sorry to say, but you have already wasted valuable time. I am going to get the horseman, please get ready'. Unwillingly Hira Singh got out of his bed.

They helped him mount the horse. At the Primary Health Centre, the Doctor had a look at the patches on the body and then bandaged the toe, gave pain killers and advised him to go to the Government Dispensary Hospital, Rishikesh. Accompanied by son-in-law, Hira Singh took a bus to Rishikesh. There they had to wait for the Doctor's arrival after lunch break at 4 p.m. The Doctor took a quick look at the lesions, scribbled a few words on the prescription paper but did not say anything about what the disease was. On a separate piece of paper, he wrote the name, 'Mc Lauren Government Leprosy Hospital, Chander Nagar, Dehra Dun', gave it to Hira Singh and explained how to reach the Hospital. It was of no use going to Dehra Dun before dark. They spent the night on the Hospital verandah.

Early next morning they set out to Dehra Dun. From the Bus station they took a horse cart to the hospital. The Leprosy Specialist Doctor took a close look at all the lesions and made some marks on the Anatomical Chart. He palpated a number of peripheral nerves. Then he performed a simple test, first he explained Hira Singh about the procedure. With the tip of a feather he touched here and there over both the normal skin and the affected skin in irregular turns. Hira Singh, keeping his eyes closed, pointed at the part of the skin with his forefinger each time he felt the touch of the feather. He did not point where he could not feel. At places he was not sure. The Doctor did the same test using the tip of a blunt needle. The test had revealed that there were both complete loss of sensation and partial loss on different parts of the lesions. The Doctor repeated the



same test on his hands and feet. The sensation of touch and pain was normal in the hands but was absent in both the feet. The good and kind Doctor explained Hira Singh in simple words. ‘Look, you could not feel pain in your big toe when your shoe was pressing hard while you were walking. You looked at your foot and found the blister only when you had a painful gland and fever. You should have showed your skin problem to your nearest Doctor at least 2-3 years ago. Your treatment would have been a lot easier and you would not have lost your sensation, one of the 5 senses given to humans by God. It cannot be restored by medicine’.

He was admitted into the hospital, put to bed-rest, treated with oral medicines including an anti-Leprosy drug and daily bandaging of the wound. Hospitalisation, medicines, food etc. were entirely free of cost. Within one month the toe had completely healed up and he was allowed to walk around, with soft footwear. Thereafter, everyday, he was given a tablet of ‘Dapsone’, which was the only and effective anti-Leprosy drug used in those years. Three months after his admission there, Hira Singh requested the Doctor for permission to leave the hospital and continue to take his medicine at home. He was reminded once again how to take care of his insensitive feet, and was provided with a supply of Dapsone tablets for three months. He was told to come for check up and further supply of medicine every three months.

Hira Singh happily returned home to the delight of his family and villagers. A small crowd gathered at his house to meet him. Standing at a far corner was the fisherman. Hira Singh walked to him and said, “My friend, had I listened to your advice that day, the state of my body would have been different, now it is too late. Thanks for your help”.

A happy news was awaiting Hira Singh. The torch lit by him was taken over and carried forward by his son-in-law. His fervent pursuit had brought fruit. Next day, first thing in the morning, Hira Singh walked straight to the school. He was overwhelmed with joy to see the old rotten roof replaced with new asbestos sheets. Repairs of walls and floor were in progress. The son-in-law told him that all the renovation work was being done entirely from the contributions of the villagers and that the Department of Education had granted monthly salaries for the two teachers of the school.

Hira Singh was a happy and contented man. His two important jobs were well done, his wishes fulfilled. But the disease Leprosy still active in his system despite regular medication, had struck him unawares. He felt a slight burning pain in the nerves passing along both the elbow joints, with a clear appearance of swelling and redness. Within a short period of three days, the pain and swelling became unbearable and agonising. His son-in-law brought a supply of analgesic and anti-inflammatory tablets from the Doctor of the Primary Health Centre. His wife made a hotwater fomentation over the elbows, applied a pain balm and bandaged twice a day. There was a clear feeling of weakness in the fingers of both hands. His wife massaged the fingers with mustard oil but the fingers could not be straightened. As if it were not enough, the one year old wound over the tip of the big toe broke open, followed by a pressure sore over the heel. Hira Singh began to realise how vulnerable his feet are to the unfelt pressures while walking. Puzzled by the sudden development, his son-in-law took him to Mc Lauren Leprosy Hospital, Dehra Dun, where he spent three years under treatment.

The number of patients in the hospital was between 70 to 100 depending on discharges and admissions. During the three long years he had seen many cases of Leprosy in various stages and in different degrees of deformities of hands, feet, and face. Hira Singh had realised how weak and illshaped his fingers had become, how the toes of both feet had shortened after recurring ulceration and the ulcer in his heel had shown no hope of ever healing up, no matter how regularly bandaged with antiseptics, nor how much of bed rest he was put into. He had seen a number of people going back home but returning to the hospital soon because they were not accepted due to their ugly appearance, the reason for stigma attached to Leprosy.



He wrote to his family, "I have no hope of returning to our home and village to live among the neighbours, friends and relatives. I accept my fate that I am destined to live the rest of my life in a Leprosy Hospital". After a few more years there, Hira Singh found life dull and meaningless.

Eating food from the hospital kitchen, taking medicines, playing cards under the trees all day long, he got tired of such a life.

Just 1 km. from the hospital had flourished a leprosy beggar settlement with 40-50 men and women who had left the hospital and preferred a married life, free from all rules and regulations of the hospital, earn by begging on the streets of Dehra Dun. Some of them suggested to Hira Singh to join their community. When he refused, some of them had suggested to join Brahmapuri, 8 km. away from Rishikesh, where all the patients, men and women are from Garhwal Districts, live like a village, speak Garhwali dialect, do spinning and weaving, receive monthly food rations and do their own cooking, get some pocket money for their work, there is a Dispensary with daily bandaging and medical facilities and a Temple of Lord Shiva.

Hira Singh went to Rishikesh, made a request with His Holiness Shri swami Chidanandaji Maharaj to grant him admission into Brahmapuri Leprosy Rehabilitation Centre. Out of his love and kindness for leprosy patients, Swamiji gave him a letter of recommendation and Hira Singh was admitted into Brahmapuri in 1992. He started a new life in the new village. Very soon he was able to adjust himself to the new environment and became a contributing member of the community.

Hira Singh commenced his new occupation of spinning thick wool yarns for weaving Durries (mats). His foot ulcers had remained an endless problem, sometimes getting a little better after plaster casts and antibiotics and again increasing in size and depth. After a few years a permanent swelling developed in his left leg. He became handicapped as his task of walking became more and more difficult.

When all efforts failed and all hopes lost, Hira Singh was taken to the Prem Nagar Leprosy Hospital of Mother Teresa Sisters in Delhi. The Orthopaedic Surgeon gave his opinion that a permanent solution for the problem of the foot was an amputation below the knee joint. He was admitted into the hospital and surgery was done. After two months he was brought back to Brahmapuri. He continued his brief walking with the help of crutches. After waiting for three months for a firm consolidation of muscle tissue of the leg, he was taken to New Delhi to a Charitable Institution run by a Jain Religious Society for the Handicapped who provide artificial limbs to amputees and calipers to Polio victims. Hira Singh was trained to walk with the prosthesis, with ease, using a walking stick and returned to Brahmapuri. He has to go once in two years for inspection, minor repairs or a replacement.

Hira Singh was elected 'Head of the Village Council', Brahmapuri for a three year term and he served the community efficiently. He continues with his productive work and participates in the activities of the community at the age of 82. His wife died six years ago. His daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren come to Brahmapuri to meet him. People of Brahmapuri address him, 'Hawaldar ji' with respect.

Our grateful thanks to SOIR- IM for their valuable contribution towards the upkeep of 20 of our senior workers like Hira Singh.

With good wishes and kind regards,

For K.K.M. HANDWEAVING
K.Bangaraiah
Medico-Social worker