



**Mr. DHARMANAND
BRAHMAPURI**

STORY OF Mr. DHARMANAND, BRAHMAPURI LEPROSY REHABILITATION CENTRE.

Dharmanand was born in a remote Garhwal Himalayan village in the district Pauri. Though born in a Brahman family, highest of the four castes as per the Hindu Caste System laid down by the Aryans 2500 B.C. ago, he never had the opportunity to go to school. The nearest primary school was at Brighu Khal, almost 30 km, a full day's walk through narrow paths criss-crossing numerous streams and creeks and passing through a dozen villages flourishing along the waters.

Dharmanand was an obedient son, at a tender age of five he started to learn and assist his father in the routine jobs of farming, tending to the cattle and goats, wood-cutting, house keeping etc. By the age of 12 he was training and guiding his two younger brothers in the work. But his elder brother, eldest of the four brothers in the family had an entirely different view of life in a mountain village. Back-breaking hard work from dawn to dusk, labouring on the narrow strips of stony terraced lands uphill and downhill day after day, season after season and after a full circle of one long year, life stood still exactly where it started.

His maternal uncle had left the village decades ago in search of better prospects down in the plains, landed at a small town Hapur in the State Uttar Pradesh (the then Northern Province) and started as a helping hand at a small-transporter and within years became the most favourite of the boss and eventually inherited the property of a house and 3 trucks as the boss was childless.

When the uncle came to the village on his yearly visits, Dharmanand's brother had expressed his wish to go and work with him. Within six years he became the assistant of a transporter in Haridwar and driver of one of the trucks. He thought about his younger brother Dharmanand's future. On his next visit to the village, he found Dharmanand well grown up to be a strong and sturdy young man of 17. He managed to convince his father to let Dharmanand pursue a promising career as a truck driver under his training and care, with the justification that there were still two brothers to take care of the house, land and parents.

Dharmanand had followed the foot steps of his brother and proved an obedient brother. He accompanied the brother on his long drives with the loaded truck, undergoing informal but rigorous training in maintaining the truck in good condition, including changing a flat tyre, minor repairs etc. Gradually he was allowed to sit on the driving seat and handle the steering. Dharmanand was surprisingly fast to learn the driving technique, obtained a Driving Licence for 'Heavy Vehicles' and was on the highways delivering truck loads of goods to far away towns.

Dharmanand's brother had settled in Haridwar with his wife and two children. Dharmanand had reached the age of 25 years with an experience of 7 years of safe driving. His brother had thought that it was time Dharmanand got married and settled in life. Soon he was married, brought his wife to Haridwar and lived together with his brother's family and was blessed with a son. One year later came the sad news of his father's sudden death. It was decided that Dharmanand keeps his wife and son in the village in order that she would take care of the household and the ageing mother as the two brothers were 22 and 18 and unmarried. Happy and content with the temporary settlement of the crisis, Dharmanand was back at his work. As he always held his brother in esteem as high as his father, he never thought of making any suggestions or giving his opinions. He never spoke of getting the two younger brothers married so that there might be two daughters in law at home and he could bring his wife and son back to Haridwar. He simply kept dreaming of such a day.



Life continued normally with his routine long drives with the loaded truck, except the monotony of reaching the same destination twice a week. A new assignment came up, a four month contract of transporting apples from Chamba (Himachal Pradesh) to a wholesale fruit dealer at Delhi, with a challenge of driving half of the way through mountain roads. After passing through a test in hill driving, Dharmanand had received an Official Driving Licence. Soon after that Dharmanand had started enjoying the trips of long ways with 3 stoppages for dinner at 10 p.m., rest and sleep till 4 a.m. and the same on his way back from Delhi to Chamba with a load of soaps, detergents, tooth paste and tooth brushes, cosmetics, footwear etc. to deliver to the shopkeepers of Chamba where people of the neighbouring villages come for their shopping.

Everything was going very well till the cruel bacteria, called, "Mycobacterium leprae" fast multiplying in his body had started its manifestation in the shape of reddish blotches over his face, ears, neck, forearms and legs. His driver friends had remarked a few times, "Your face is very reddish, what is wrong?" But Dharmanand did not bother about it as there were no symptoms like itching, pain or burning sensation. It was when he spent a sleepless night with a sudden fever with chill and joint pains that he realised there was something wrong. A Doctor had treated him for Malarial fever and it gave him relief. But just 3 weeks after that he was struck with a severe pain in the nerves of forearms and legs, added with a high fever. He handed his truck over to his assistant to go to Chamba. A truck going to Haridwar brought him back to his brother.

He was taken to an Ayurvedic Doctor who had diagnosed the condition as a case of allergy to some substance Dharmanand had come in contact with, or some food he had eaten. He gave a herbal medicine for one month with many food restrictions. For a whole month Dharmanand was in bed with pains and fever and due to loss of appetite and poor food intake he became very weak. Somebody told his brother that Ayurvedic medicines are of no use and that an Allopathic Doctor of the District Hospital, Haridwar should be consulted.

The Skin Specialist at the Hospital made his diagnosis on the first look. He explained to Dharmanand and his brother that the disease was called, "Kushth Rog" (Leprosy) and that the particular Type was Lepromatous, which was highly infectious. He advised that the treatment was very long, he should regularly take one tablet everyday without missing a single day, for full five years. And that he should stay away from his family, especially far away from children, otherwise the disease would spread to them. The Doctor also told that Dharmanand had better get admitted into Mc Lauren Leprosy Hospital, Dehra Dun where he could stay as many years as needed and could get free food and treatment.

But Dharmanand preferred to return to his village, build a small hut for himself and live there alone quite far away from the families of his two brothers. His brother had supported the idea without question. The Doctor prescribed a medicine called D.D.S. (Diamino Diphenyle Sulphone). A bottle of 100 tablets was bought from a Chemist Shop, a supply of 100 days.

Dharmanand's brother accompanied him back home. With the help of his brothers he built a one room house with mud and stone walls and flat slate-stones perched upon logs of pinewood for a roof. Dharmanand had requested his brother to take his wife and son to Haridwar and care for their future. It was arranged that the two younger brothers provide him cooked meals. A cot and clothes were kept inside the new house he called, "My Ashram" (Hermitage).

Life in seclusion, one tablet of DDS daily, meditation and prayers to God either to cure him or take his life, had not helped him. Almost 3 to 4 days every fortnight he suffered from 'Hectic' type of fever-- onset of fever in the afternoon, sudden rise of temperature with shivers continuing all night and back to normal by next morning. Not just a fever but Dharmanand was suffering with joint pains, neuritis, reddish bunches of noddules erupting over the body, with pain and burning



sensation. This particular condition is known as acute exacerbation or lepra reaction. He kept taking a tablet of Aspirin from the bottle his brother had bought in Haridwar, whenever the pain or fever was unbearable.

Dharmanand had firmly believed that all his physical suffering was the will of God and that he had no right to complain but to endure and obey God's plans for him, taking it as a punishment for the sins he committed in his present or previous birth.

Had he got admitted into the Leprosy Hospital, Dehradun in the first place and got himself treated under the supervision of the Leprosy Specialist, the story might have been different. Treatment with DDS needed regular observation, temporary interruption or reduction of the dosage of DDS, supportive therapy with analgesics, anti-reaction drugs and corticosteroids in case of nerve involvement.

DDS was the only effective anti-leprosy drug between 1940 and 1985, used to be called 'Mono Therapy' (MT) after 1985 onwards treatment of Leprosy started to be 'Multi Drug Therapy' (MDT) with 3 drugs: DDS, Rifampicin and Clofazimine, highly effective compared to single drug treatment. Duration of treatment is also reduced from 5 to 6 years to 1 to 1½ years.

As a result of his two year self-imposed segregation, his belief in God, Destiny and DDS, fingers of both hands were clawed with complete numbness, both feet lost sensation and became highly vulnerable to injuries, pressure sores and burns. During winter months his brothers supplied plenty of firewood and Dharmanand was making enough fire to last all night to keep himself warm. Sitting close to the fire had taken its toll. Burns on fingers, elbows and knees. He stepped over small pieces of red coal crackled here and there from the fire place, but he did not feel anything. Blisters came up and broke, open ulcers developed under the feet. He was bandaging the feet with turmeric paste and used the same to apply over other burns.

It was on the 13 April 1971 Dharmanand's prayers were heard. 13 April is called BAISAKHI, a holy and auspicious festival day for the people of both Hindu and Sikh religions. On that day people take a bath in rivers all over India and worship in Temples and Gurdwaras. A distant relative of Dharmanand who had settled in Rishikesh went to Haridwar with his family for a holy dip in Ganga. In the crowd of almost a hundred thousand pilgrims, he accidentally came across Dharmanand's brother, family and Dharmanand's wife and son. During lunch the relative asked, "Where is Dharma? Is he on a trip somewhere with the truck?" Dharmanand's brother took him aside and told the story. The relative was angry. "How foolish you and Dharma are? You have imprisoned him in a rat hole to rot and die. Come with me right now to Rishikesh. We shall take the early morning bus to Brighu Khal and bring Dharma to Brahmapuri Leprosy Ashram 8 km from Rishikesh where he can get proper treatment under medical supervision, free food and clothing. I saw the patients doing spinning and other jobs too. Above all, they take only Garhwali people, Dharma would feel at home there".

They both went to the village. Dharmanand refused to leave the hut, his Ashram. He had determined to suffer silently and die there whenever God may permit, rather than going here and there. It took a lot of persuasion before they could put him on a horse, brought him to a place 9 km from home, 18 km by jeep over the 3 year old dust road upto Brighu Khal and took a bus to Rishikesh, got down at Brahmapuri, 8 km before Rishikesh. It was almost nightfall. They put Dharmanand into the care of some patients who gathered there and took shelter in the Ram Mandir Ashram, a 10 minute walk from Brahmapuri. Next morning they talked to the Medical In Charge and got Dharmanand admitted into Brahmapuri.



He was treated with medicines to suppress lepra reactions and to reduce fever and pains. Burns were treated by daily cleaning and bandaging with antiseptic creams. D.D.S. was stopped for a month and re-started with low doses of 10 mg daily and gradually increased and in 6 months' time he was stabilized on the maximum tolerated dose of 50 mg per day. Ferrous Sulphate and Multivitamin tablets have helped correcting anaemia and in improving general health. For 3 months, his room-mate cooked food for Dharmanand, but later on he himself started cooking, washing, cleaning and looked after himself.

But the burn wounds in the soles of both feet became wider and deeper in spite of daily bandaging as he lost sensation in the feet, he kept on walking because he never felt any pain. It is the same with all leprosy patients who have lost sensation in the feet. They suffer from plantar ulcers which do not heal because the whole body weight is borne by both feet while standing. While walking, the same amount of weight is borne by one foot -- right foot and left foot alternately. The pressure of body weight is calculated in kilograms per square centimetre of plantar surface. It is this pressure which keeps on breaking the re-generating muscle tissue. Complete bed-rest or plaster casts with weight-bearing rocker or Bohlers iron are the best means to heal foot ulcers. In some cases, there is a risk of healed ulcers breaking open again. Such patients need lifelong care and treatment.

Dharmanand was given a job of digging and removing grass and weeds from the community vegetable gardens of Brahmapuri. Everyday, after dinner, he used to invite his neighbours to join him in singing Bhajans (Hymns). He came in contact with Swami Kamal Nayan, Founder of Ram Mandir Ashram near Brahmapuri. Soon it became a routine for Dharmanand to go to the Ashram in the evenings to join Bhajan singing and listen to the teachings and discourses of the Swami.

That was in the year 1972, the same year when KKM Handweaving had started its rehabilitation activities in Brahmapuri through spinning of cotton and wool yarns and set up the first loom for handweaving, with the aim that the people could earn a little pocket money for themselves and also contribute their mite towards their upkeep. Dharmanand was helping his neighbour in picking out hawthorns from the sheep wool and combing it soft for spinning. A few months later he joined the temporary workshop to do different light jobs to assist in the handweaving.

Beginning of 1973, Dharmanand had made a decision to leave Brahmapuri and spend his life in the Ram Mandir Ashram, in meditation and self-realisation to attain spiritual enlightenment. He was given permission to leave, with an advice to come for his monthly supply of medicines and an assurance that he would be taken back whenever he needed shelter and care at Brahmapuri.

Hundreds of devotees walk all the way from Haridwar (Gateway to the Gods) to the 4 Holy Shrines on the high Himalayas of Garhwal:- Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri. They strongly believe that making a pilgrimage entirely by walk brings greater grace and blessings. After 6 months in the Ashram, Dharmanand had thought of making a pilgrimage by walk and made a vow, "Lord Badrinath, I shall walk up to your Holy Abode". He sent one of the disciples of the Swami to his brother in Haridwar to ask for money for expenses on food etc., on his journey. His brother was shocked to hear the news. He came personally to meet. "Dharma, have you gone mad? How can you think of walking 270 km with your weak feet? Take money from me and go by bus". But Dharmanand was firm in his determination. He insisted on proceeding with his resolution without worrying about consequences. His brother had no option but to yield.

On the auspicious day of Baisakhi, with the blessings of the Swami, his Guru and good wishes of his friends in Brahmapuri, Dharmanand set out on his "Mission Badrinath".



Walking slowly with a pause and rest at regular intervals he managed to walk 10 km in the morning and 10 km in the late afternoon on even and downhill parts of the road and 5 km morning and evening on steep uphill, spent nights with other pilgrims on their way and enjoyed Bhajan singing till late night, he made it to Badrinath in 19 days. He spent a whole week at Badrinath taking holy bath in the "Tapta Kund" (a natural pond filled by a spring of steaming hot water and another with ice cold water) and partaking in the morning and evening "Aarti" (special sessions of worship) in the temple.

His return journey was uneventful except pain and swelling in the feet and legs. He regularly cleaned and bandaged the foot ulcers. After arriving at Srinagar (Garhwal) 170 km from Badrinath, there was a sudden onset of abdominal pain followed by diarrhoea. The Primary Health Centre provided him a few tablets. He rested under a tree on the banks of river Alaknanda for 3 days and felt better. He had 92 km to go.

It took 10 days to walk to Dev Prayag, 30 km from Srinagar, a holy place at the confluence of river Bhagirathi and Alaknanda, from thereafter the river is called Ganga. Dev Prayag is a busy place with lots of pilgrims making a halt to take a bath and worship in God Ragunath Temple. Bus-stop, Jeep and Taxi stand, provision shops, tea-shops and eating places fill the small area either side of the narrow motor road. Neighbouring villagers come there to purchase groceries. Dharmanand felt very feeble after his 2 km early morning walk to Dev Prayag.

Loss of fluids from the body and exposure to hot sun of June had drained out his energies. It took a great effort for him to go down to Ganga, cross the suspension bridge, take bath at the 'Sangam' (confluence) and worship in the temple. Returning to the roadside, Dharmanand had bought a meal, walked ½ km away from the noisy, dusty and crowded place and rested under a tree. Just as he was thinking of walking at least 1 km in the evening, a sudden bout of diarrhoea struck him, much violent than the previous one in Srinagar. He was awake all night. By the morning the watery loose motions turned into blood and mucus. He was there for a whole week in a semi-conscious state.

Dharmanand opened his eyes when some water was sprinkled on his face. Someone lifted his head and helped him take a few sips of water. Again and again at 10 to 15 minute intervals. He was helped to sit up and drink a bowl of gruelled rice. Early next morning Dharmanand realized that the swami and his 3 disciples stopped there for the night and were kind to him and they saved his life. He briefly told about his trip back from Badrinath and expressed his wish to reach Brahmapuri, even if he had to die he would prefer to be cremated by the hands of his brothers in Brahmapuri and go back to mother Ganga.

His meagre belongings were packed into a bundle and he was brought to the roadside. The Swami tried to stop the buses going towards Rishikesh some had stopped but at the glimpse of Dharmanand they drove off. The Swami tried to explain to the bus drivers and conductors about Dharmanand's condition and begged them to take the needy passenger. But his efforts were of no avail. In desperation, the Swami laid himself flat across the road. His disciples followed suite. The next bus came and stopped there. Soon more buses stopped both sides. The drivers and passengers got down to see what happened. A big crowd gathered around. They started asking the Swami why he was lying on the road. "Look at the man sitting here, he is very sick, he needs to go to Brahmapuri for medical care. Nobody is willing to take him in the bus. He is not asking for a free ride, he has money to pay the fares. Either someone takes him or the buses run over me". The crowd was busy discussing the matter. Policemen preferred to wait and watch. After a 15 minute traffic jam, a few gentlemen come to the Swami. Swami ji, at this peak season most of the buses are booked by pilgrims for both ways, they do not take other passengers. We managed to convince a local bus to take your man but they want someone to accompany him in case something happens to



him on the way.” The Swami volunteered to go with Dharmanand. They helped him into the bus. After 2 ½ hours’ journey, a distance of 62 km, the bus stopped at the gate of Brahmapuri workshop. Swami ji helped him get down. All the people came up to see who it was. A cot was brought and Dharmanand was carried all the way to his room.

It took more than 1 month for complete recovery after treatment with anti-amoebic drugs, rehydration liquids, semi-solid foods etc., but the most important factor was purely psychological. Love and friendship of fellow leprosy sufferers, feeling of safety and security in homely conditions.

Dharmanand was back at work after an absence of 9 months. He was given light jobs as before. It took more than 4 years before he could be rid of leprosy and all the suffering repeatedly brought by the disease, acute lepra reactions with fevers and pains almost every 6 months, often complicated by agonising neuritic conditions. Thanks to K.K.M. Handweaving for the substantial improvement in the medical services through Brahmapuri Dispensary, Dharmanand received reasonably good treatment.

Between 1982-86 Dharmanand had a tiny white spot over the cornea of the left eye. In spite of the ophthalmologist’s (visiting one day a week to see eye patients at Shivananda charitable Hospital, Rishikesh) good efforts, the whitish spot spread all over the cornea covering the whole area and thus making the eye completely blind (corneal opacity). Cataract developed in the right eye. Cataract extraction surgery was done, he was provided with spectacles but a complication developed. The pupil of the eye lost its elasticity and kept shrinking down to a pin-point, diminishing his vision. The ophthalmologist advised that Dharmanand should have an eye drop of Atropine twice daily all his life. He depends on the eye drops and manages till to date with one eye.

His brother kept visiting once in 6 months but Dharmanand made it clear time and again that he wanted to spend life among his big family Brahmapuri until the moment when God calls back his soul and grant an entrance into a fresh and healthy body of a new born and that he wished to be relieved of all family ties.

Dharmanand was sincere at work and spent his leisure in Bhajan singing and meditation. He always actively participated in all religious ceremonies. He always saved a part of his pocket money and made a special ‘Pooja’ (worship) in the Shiva temple of Brahmapuri and gave ‘Bhandara’ (community meal) once in 3 to 4 years. Nobody in Brahmapuri had ever heard or seen Dharmanand in dispute with anyone. There were occasions when somebody in a bad temper had said something unpleasant but Dharmanand never showed any sign of unhappiness as he took everything as God’s will. People of Brahmapuri address him with respect, “Pandit ji”.

Dharmanand is very well known for his 2 decade job of twisting course yarn and fine yarn together with his foot on the pedal of the twisting machine. Counting from his re-admission in 1974 till his retirement in the second half of 2006, he made a contribution of 32 years to the Rehabilitation work of Brahmapuri.

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