



ST. LUKE'S HOSPITAL, NAZARETH CONTRIBUTION OF ST. LUKE'S HOSPITAL TO THE PEOPLE OF NAZARETH

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ABSTRACT

The most important feature in the history of the S.P.G. was the introduction of Medical Mission. Nazareth was the village mission station of the S.P.G. Medical mission was introduced in Nazareth under the superintendence of Rev. Strachan. The first missionary work done by Strachan was setting up of a hospital. After the opening of the Tirunelveli – Tiruchendur railway in 1924 the work in the hospital was more strenuous. This made Nazareth more easily assessable from other villages. No gift in cash or kind was accepted by any member of the staff including the menials. Rev. Margoschis was the only European clergyman who had been in for twenty-seven years and in 1900 the viceroy made him a member of the order of the Kaiser-i-Hind as a recognition of his service to India. St. Luke's hospital, Nazareth was in the pinnacle of glory in providing medical service to the people for more than forty villages around Nazareth. People big and small, rich and poor, irrespective of caste or creed thronged the hospital for treatment. It was the second home for a few affluent people from Alwarthirunagari and Kayalpatnam.

KEYWORDS: Medical Mission , Alwarthirunagari and Kayalpatnam.

INTRODUCTION

The most important feature in the history of the S.P.G. was the introduction of Medical Mission. Nazareth was the village mission station of the S.P.G.¹ Medical mission was introduced in Nazareth under the superintendence of Rev. Strachan. The first missionary work done by Strachan was setting up of a hospital. He started his medical service at the present post office with wards for inpatients in the adjacent thatched huts close by. Nazareth had a population of 7000 people all living within a radius of one mile and there were two large towns within four miles which have no hospital. No illegal demands were made by those in charge of the Hospital and the patients were treated with kindness and sympathy. Unnecessary delay in keeping the patients waiting for many hours was carefully avoided and the sick-poor were fed besides being treated, but great care was taken not to encourage "hospital birds".

After the opening of the Tirunelveli – Tiruchendur railway in 1924 the work in the hospital was more strenuous. This made Nazareth more easily assessable from other villages. No gift in cash or kind was accepted by any member of the staff including the menials. It was a common sight to see patients coming to the hospital just for putting their offertory. Well to do patients paid for costly drugs and injections. But no poor was denied the necessary treatment however costly it may be because he or she could not pay it. This immense number has been made up, not only of the people of the immediate neighbourhood, but many came away from 40, 60 and even 80 miles for treatment.² Almost every caste and every grade have been

represented amongst the sick. These startling statistics proved that the natives were prepared to appreciate the advantage of European medical science. They were left in the hands of native doctors whose remedies were often worse than the diseases they were intended to cure. These doctors knew absolutely nothing of anatomy.

WORK OF DR. STRACHAN

Originally attached to the Ramnad district Dr. Strachan exhibited while in charge of that Mission so much Medical taste and talent, that it was thought advisable to set himself apart for the special work of commencing a medical mission.³ Before 1870 he came to Nazareth as a lay brother missionary. The number of death due to infections and cholera made him sad and hence he resigned his missionary work and got himself admitted to the Madras Medical College. As he was dissatisfied with the quality of studies, he left Madras and returned to Scotland and enrolled himself in Edinburgh Medical College and got the degree of M.D.⁴ He was offered personal physicianship to Queen Victoria who was the ruler of one third of the world then. He refused to the call of Her Majesty the Queen of England and came back to India in 1860. At the time of his return Rev. Brotherten passed away and in his place Dr. Strachan was appointed missionary in Nazareth in 1870.⁵

He was supported by Mrs. Lousia Shepherd daughter of Rev. Caldwell.⁶ She was interested in collecting medical fund from the natives. A prodigious number of patients have passed under his hands and so have they were more or less acquainted with the might and the mercy of the great healer himself.

Dr. Strachan was anxious to open a class for training medical assistants, a class for training nurses and a class for training midwives. European Civil officers preferred Strachan's treatment to that at the headquarter Palayamkottai, though it was presided over by an English officer of the Indian Medical Service. The present day football field all over was strewn with tents accommodating these English in-patients in the service of the Government of Madras. The sudden demise of Mrs. Lousia Shepherd in 1872 caused a great sorrow to the natives and the Europeans. As Dr. Strachan had to look after both evangelical work and medical work, he was assisted by Rev. George Billing M.A. in 1872.

STRENGTH OF THE HOSPITAL

Dr. Strachan in his report had mentioned that nearly 7,500 new patients came to hospital. Every day in the week except Sundays about 150 patients assembled at the Hospital. Muslims, Christians, Brahmins, Vellalers, Chanars, Rheddies, Naiks, Pariahs, Pallans etc. all sat together and thus bearing witness to a common humanity. The day's work commenced with two short religious services one for the men and one for the women. There were nearly 200 in patients during the year 1872. A Brahmin official was brought here who was in great pain caused by stone.⁷ Surgical aid was rendered and stone was removed.

Cholera of a virulent form broke out at Nazareth on 21st Dec.1883.⁸ In the northern street of the station many people suffered from diarrhea prior to Cholera. There were 17 deaths in 13 days. The number of new cases treated in the year 1885 was 8442.⁹ There was an out-break of cholera again in 1885 and 98 died of it. The most common diseases under treatment were fever, rheumatic affections, diarrhea, conjunctivitis, otitis and ulcers. In the year 1892, nearly 16,000 patients and in 1893, 12,500 patients were treated. The number of out-patients treated 1901 was 13,564 and in-patients was 216. In the year 1902 out-patients was 11,334 and 132 in-patients.

St. Luke's hospital stands first in the district with regard to the attendance of patients.

The work and popularity of this hospital increased every year. Major operations performed increased from 134 to 470. Being committed to the medical service, the staff looks upon Christ for his blessings and guidance to run the hospital. According to the report of Rev. Stapley in 1922 nearly 30,690 out patients were treated and 530 were operated. Dr. Vedabothagam was given the freedom to plan and carry out his work. His motto was "Selflessness, Purity and Honesty". The out-patients in 1923 was 47,450. The number of gynecologist operations performed was more in 1923. Dr. Vedabothagam reported that in the

year 1925 there was increase in patients. The year 1933 had been the year of progress all around. There was an increase in the number of in-patients. The number of patients who received free treatment in 1966 as in-patient was about 25 to 30 a day and those who received free treatment and food from the hospital was about 20 a day. The number of out-patients was 32,118 and in patients was 2,080 in 1971. The number of out-patients in 1972 was 25,069 and in-patients 5,912. In 1973 medical care was extended to 30,128 out patients and 15,840 in-patients.

INFRASTRUCTURE

The natives generously presented a very eligible piece of land as a site for the new hospital. The people loved the mission hospital more than the government hospital. For the convenience of patients who came from afar, the hospital erected a line of houses which as a rule was occupied by caste patients. A convenient house was built for the hospital assistant at a cost of Rs.200 which was the contribution of patients mostly Hindus.

The increase of patients urged Margoschis to build a new hospital. As the expected fund was realized the construction was started in the end of 1891 and was completed in 1892. He christened the hospital as St. Luke's hospital on the feast of St. Luke's on October 18th 1892.¹⁰ Landlords, well-wishers and people of other faith came to witness the ceremony. The then collector G.S. Forbes I.C.S. was the chief guest. A ward for 30 beds, compounding room and a room to store medicines were constructed. In the year 1912 N.E. Parson tried to build a separate ward for women patients but that plan was dropped later.

The increase of patients demanded an extension and so a new operation theatre and a separate men's ward with 18 beds were put at a cost of Rs.6000. The entire expense was met by the friends of the hospital. Not a single pie was spent from the mission funds side by for the additional infrastructure. However, the efficiency of service was not lost.

Dr. Vedabothagam and his wife undertook extension activities for the hospital. On July 13th 1935 the foundation stone for Mukuperi Asirvatha Nadar memorial block was laid by Zilla Board president I.C. Eswaranpillai and opened in 1936 by the then collector.

The year 1947 saw many changes in the history of the 77 years old hospital. The main block built over 60 years ago became unusable with a bad leaky roof. The renovation which cost about Rs.25,000 was contributed mostly by Hindus and Muslims. In the same year, a new pay ward with two beds for richer class of patients was donated by a Muslim friend at a cost of Rs.12,000. A second floor was also added which served as a drug store.

Surgical, anaesthetic and other equipments for about Rs.8,000 were purchased in the year 1965.¹¹ The urgent need of the hospital in 1966 was adequate water supply, sterilizer equipment and theatre equipment.

A separate building and modern equipments were provided by the Christoffel Blunden Mission, Germany at the cost of 40 lakhs. They were dedicated on 2.4.1997 by Rt. Rev. Vasant P. Dandin the then Moderator.

General medicine, Surgery, Obstetrics, Gynecology, Pediatrics, Ophthalmology and Dermatology were routinely carried out. Eye care and family welfare work was approved by the government of Tamil Nadu.

Dedication of Margoschis

After Dr. Strachan left the hospital in 1876 it was run by Indian Dressers till the arrival of Rev. Margoschis who was fondly called as the "Father of Nazareth"¹² Rev. Margoschis was a pharmacist of the London school of medicine. In the year 1895 the health of Rev. Margoschis declined due to hard labour. So, in 1895 the S.P.G. appointed Dr. Smith. His salary was borne by the S.P.C.K. But he left his service after six months. So, the entire responsibility again fell on Margoschis. Rev. Margoschis was the only European clergyman who had been in for twenty-seven years and in 1900 the viceroy made him a member of the order of the Kaiser-i-Hind as a recognition of his service to India.¹³ The testimony of the Bishop of Calcutta on

his visit to St. Luke's hospital was that he watched the work of Margoschis while he personally attended to the out-patients and prescribed for them. He was surprised to see that the sick, non-Christians as well as Christians, resort to this institution from all over the country.

Visitors

The dispensary was inspected by the Collector of the district and by the Zillah Surgeon. He was interested on seeing the hospital cottages and the caste patients from different places. Some of them came from Authoor and Tiruchendur. The Collector carefully inspected all the books and returns of the dispensary and was satisfied in the way they were kept. The dispensary was visited in the year 1992 by Bishop Caldwell, the Collector, Zillah Surgeon, Rev. A.C. Taylor and Father O'Neill. One third of the 9400 case treated in 1881 were non – Christians. In the year 1883 the dispensary was visited by the Collector and Rev. E.F. Willis of the Oxford Mission, Calcutta. The Governor of Madras Sir. A Havelock visited Nazareth in 1897.¹⁴

The District Medical officer paid visit to the hospital and was pleased with what he saw. Major Pandalai the Government Inspecting Officer was surprised to know that the government did not render any help to the hospital.¹⁵ The District Medical Officer who visited the hospital in 1934 remarked that Mr. & Mrs. Vedabothagam deserved great praise for their work. He also mentioned the need for a delivery room.

Funds

A nominal fee of one anna to each patient was resolved from June 1882. As a result, the out-come of patients reduced. So, in March 1883 Rev. Margoschis abandoned this policy. The SPCK gave a sum of 150 and since then a grant of 200 a year for three years was sanctioned for a qualified surgeon at Nazareth.¹⁶

The net cost of running the hospital was Rs.14,000 of which grant from England was Rs.2,000. The district board grant was Rs.750 local church and schools gave Rs.2500. The amount given by doctors through private practice was Rs.450 the alms box amount was Rs.450 and the rest was got through the sale of medicines. The total expense of the hospital was Rs.10,395. Of this cost one third was met from Mission funds and the rest was raised locally. The District Board gave an annual grant of Rs.1000to the hospital.¹⁷

The need for a ambulance was realized by the Provincial Welfare Fund at Tirunelveli which sanctioned a grant of Rs.4000 for the purchase of a second hand jeep which was remodeled as an ambulance van to carry patients and was further fitted with loud speakers, amplifiers and gramophone sets. The total cost of running the hospital in 1947 was over Rs.60,000.¹⁸ The red-cross ambulance presented to the hospital by the District Welfare Association in 1948 rendered good service to the patients. The Central Government of India in recognition of the Christian service in this area granted Rs.25,000 for a 150 M.A. X ray machine and the total cost for installation was Rs.31,000.¹⁹

With the aid given by CASA, powdered milk and cooked oats were distributed to 60 deserving patients. The Central Evangelical Agency, Bonn, West Germany gave finance for the Extension Project of the hospital at the cost of Rs.18,60,000.²⁰

Donors

The non-believers also voluntarily gave funds for the hospital. In 1894 a Brahmin gave Rs.1000. Another Brahmin who was cured of a deadly disease after coming to St. Luke's hospital gave Rs.500. In the year 1901 the Brahmins of Tiruchendur Subramanian Temple gave Rs.100. The Tuticorin Taluk Board gave Rs.700 per annum. A considerable number of Muslims came here for treatment from Kayalpatnam. One Muslim man gave a donation of Rs.200. In the same way a Brahmin gentleman (a graduate in Science of Madras University) gave Rs.900 for providing food and comfort for the sick. Meeran Abdul Kadar of Cambalabad constructed a separate patient's block to meet the increasing demand.²¹

The lady doctor worked under very difficult conditions in an open verandah and on seeing it a well wisher promised to meet the cost of women's out-patient block and deposited Rs.500. Six kitchens donated by a grateful patient was ready to be used. The nurse's home was also on the verge of completion. The plan and execution of the new building at the estimated cost of Rs.75,000 was taken over by a Hindu lawyer and a

Muslim landlord. Two huge buildings were constructed in the year 1957 at the cost of about Rs.31,000 by two generous donors.

Doctors and staff

Dressers Gnanamuthu, Devapriyam and Dr. S. Maduram successfully ran the hospital. After the death of Rev. Margoschis the S.P.G. sent Miss. N.E. Parsons M.B.B.S. in 1908 as a missionary.²² Miss. N.E. Parsons was the first women medical missionary in Nazareth and her work was remarkable. She was the superintendent of St. Luke's hospital. Her work was among women and children. In Dec.23, 1910, Rev. Weston married Miss. N.E. Parsons.²³ Mrs. Weston was greatly missed in the hospital but the work was maintained after her departure by an Indian sub-assistant surgeon. The most important need of the hospital in 1911 was a nurse.²⁴

Dr. Frank Wells of Sawyerpuram hospital was appointed as supervisor of the hospital after Dr. Weston had resigned. For the help of Wells, Lady Miller an English nurse was appointed in 1914. Owing to the rapid growth of the hospital a lady doctor was appointed in 1921. On account of over work, the health of Mrs. Dr. G.R. Vedabodagam broke down. Doctors went to different hospitals to renew and replenish their knowledge in the different branches of their professional work.

In 1916 Dresser S. Maduram retired. In his place Dr. R. Vedabodagam was appointed. Bishop Waller appointed him as an assistant to Dr. F.M. Welsh. He took charge in 1916 and his wife Dr. Ruby Vedabothagam L.M.S assisted him ably. After her appointment the treatment for infants and women increased.

Permission was given to the hospital by the Madras government to train compounders. It partly solved one of the problems of the hospital. It was impossible to do the work with men trained in government hospitals here the aim and ideals of the medical missionaries might not be known. Till then only the doctors holding degrees or diplomas registerable in England were qualified to train compounders and send them up for the government public examinations. When the Surgeon – General with the Government of Madras inspected this hospital, he was so much impressed with the efficiency of this hospital that he granted the privilege of training men.

The work of the hospital was hamstrung in the year 1930 due to the continued illness of Dr. Mrs. Vedabodagam.²⁵ During the absence of Mrs. Vedabodagam, Dr. Miss. G. Slater from the Women's Hospital at Ramnad came to this hospital. But owing to her impending marriage she left at the end of Nov.1930. During the year 1933 three young men were trained in dispensary work and appeared for the government examination.

The surgical work of the hospital was looked after by Mr. Vedabothagam and the gynecological work by Mrs. Ruby Vedabothagam.²⁶ The woman doctor Mrs. Vedabothagam succumbed to the serious malady of Carcinoma of the intestine on 15th Oct.1949. The year 1949 was a dark period in the annals of St. Luke's hospital. She passed away at the age of 53. Her contribution to the welfare of the poor was remarkable. She spent her entire life for the patients. She was an ideal medical evangelist. She was a lover of high class literature. She was the founder and life President of the local Y.M.C.A. She gave training to the wives of the students of Theological College on First aid and mother craft.

After a lapse of 12 years the dreadful epidemic Cholera made its appearance in Kadyanodai and Udayarkulam. The staff with Dr. Thomas Gnanamuthu visited these places and rendered the efficient treatment. Dr. T. Gnanamuthu took a weekly class on "First Aid".

Dr. Mrs. Patience Thomas, M.B.B.S. succeeded Dr. Ruby Vedabothagam in 1950 after one year of service at Erode. She took charge of the Women's section and filled the gap created by the demise of Mrs. Vedabothagam. Dr. Thomas Gnanamuthu resigned after five years. The laboratory assistant also left the hospital after serving it for 15 years.

The chief function in the year 1951 was the unveiling of the portrait of late Dr. Mrs. G.R. Vedabothagam by the president, District Board Tirunelveli. The portrait was presented by three citizens at Srivaikuntam, a Muslim landlord, a Hindu advocate and a Christian lawyer. A general supervisor was

appointed for the hospital Non-professional activities like sanitation, accounting and supervision were locked offer by him. There was also a need for a doctor.

Dr. Vedabothagam, the Medical Superintendent of the Diocese mentioned at the Biennial All India Medical Missionaries Conference which met at Baroda in Nov.1951 that only men and women doctors with positive convictions and first-hand experience of Christ Jesus alone could man the church hospitals. Vacancies which arose after the death of Mrs. Vedabothagam and resignation of Dr. Thomas Gnanamuthu was not filled till 1952.

In the year 1954 there were four doctors' two men and two women, seven nurses, two compounders and one lab – assistant.²⁷ The poor got their treatment free and in some cases free boarding and clothing too was given. All branches of surgery including E.N.T. and eye were conducted. The work in Nazareth suffered due to the failure of monsoon and for want of lady doctors in the hospital.

After a hard and faithful service as a medical evangelist for about four decades Dr. Vedabothagam retired from service in May 1958. Dr. Jeyaraj succeeded him. In 1957 the hospital had 120 beds, 3 doctors, 3 compounders, 7 nurses and 11 attendants. Owing to the non-availability of woman doctor for a long period the maternity section suffered a lot. From March 1966 to the end of July 1966 Dr. S.B. Augustus managed the work of the hospital by himself. Dr. R. Vedabothagam relieved Dr. Augustus of night duty by sleeping in the hospital and attending emergencies. He was joined by Dr. Thomas Gnanamuthu who took charge of the hospital from Aug. 1st 1966. The vacancy of a lady doctor was filled by Dr. Chellam Rajasingh a graduate of Tanjore Medical College. Since her arrival there was a steady increase in the number of women patients.

Of the two doctors appointed in Feb.1968 one left to become Medical officer in-charge at Nagalapuram. The lady doctor also left in March 1968. The death of Dr. S.B. Augustus in June 1968 was a great loss to the hospital. An administrative officer and a nursing superintendent were appointed in 1969. This improved the quality and efficiency of their respective departments. Dr. A. Venkataramanan, B.A., M.S., former Head of the Dept. of Operative Surgery, Madurai Medical College was appointed as General Surgeon in 1976.

As Dr. Vedabothagam was keen on keeping abreast with the most modern developments in surgery he took a three-month course of study under Dr. Somerwell one of the heroes of Mount Everest, at Neyoor where he received much valuable help.

CONCLUSION

St. Luke's hospital, Nazareth was in the pinnacle of glory in providing medical service to the people for more than forty villages around Nazareth. People big and small, rich and poor, irrespective of caste or creed thronged the hospital for treatment. It was the second home for a few affluent people from Alwarthirunagari and Kayalpatnam.

One of the feathers in the cap of the hospital was the treatment given to the poor was absolutely free. Besides, undernourished patients were given multi-vitamin tablets free of cost. Such a renowned hospital faced problems after Kamali doctor demitted her office in 2002. The Management is not able to transfuse blood to the acting hospital. Meanwhile, the Christian Medical College of Vellore offered to have a tie – up with the sick hospital for a period of ninety-nine years. As the Management found it too long a period, it declined the offer. Had it accepted the offer, Nazareth would have had a mini Christian Medical College. How unfortunate the people in and around Nazareth!

Even though St. Luke's missed the bus, all is not lost. The diocese can give fresh lease of life to the hospital. By pumping more money, it can improve the infrastructure and pay more for the staff. The diocese should not interfere in the administration of the hospital unless there is perversity in the administration.

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