

Ramakrishna Mission Hospital, Itanagar

The Medical Centre of Excellence in Arunachal Pradesh

Compiled by Ankur Acharya from Aradhana, the silver jubilee souvenir of Ramakrishna Mission Hospital, Itanagar.

This interesting and inspiring compilation about a pioneer medical institution in the remote North-eastern State of Arunachal Pradesh is a good read for all and sundry. This institution, the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital in Itanagar, the capital town of Arunachal Pradesh, is a living testimony of how an earnest intention to serve the ailing humanity can bloom into a formidable institution. But then again, no problem remains a problem if faced with, "...Trust within and God overhead." This hospital now enjoys the virtual status of the only referral hospital in Arunachal Pradesh. We learn from this compilation that the hospital was established in October, 1979 as a branch of the Ramakrishna Mission, which has its headquarters at Belur, District Howrah, in the state of West Bengal. Over the years, thanks to the selfless service by the monks in charge and the doctors and the staff, this institution has grown into a prestigious health-care centre in North-east India with fair amount of reputation for its services. Despite many odds, the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital with its devoted service to the ailing people has grown from strength to strength and illuminates our vision for a shining India. It is hoped that with time, the Hospital will extend even greater services to the suffering humanity.

A.A.

Introduction

Thirty years ago in the year 1979, a monk (sannyasi) from the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Mission at Belur in West Bengal, Swami Prathamanda or Preeti Maharaj, along with a few of his colleagues came to Itanagar, the capital of Arunachal Pradesh. He was equipped with just one thing: a resolution, firm as a rock, dyed in the colour of the ideal of selfless service as preached by Sri Ramakrishna. The Government of Arunachal Pradesh had suggested to the mission to start a school in Itanagar. But the Mission authorities thought of establishing a hospital to serve the local tribal community who suffered in the absence of adequate medical facilities. The Seva Yajna to serve the Rogi Narayan

(ritualistic sacrifice by way of service to God in the form of the sick and the ailing) thus began with a small dispensary and ten indoor beds.

The hospital has now grown into a 191-bed hospital with state-of-the-art modern diagnostic and therapeutic facilities. Life Line of Itanagar - a term used by many to describe this hospital speaks volumes of the appreciation the people have in their hearts for this hospital. It has a bright history of cooperation from people from all walks of life. And of course the blessings of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Ma Sarada, and Swami Vivekananda. The Ramakrishna Mission Hospital in Itanagar is a living testimony of how an earnest intention to serve the ailing humanity can bloom into a formidable institution. But then again, no problem remains a problem if faced with, "...Trust within and God overhead," as evident in the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital, Itanagar. It now enjoys the virtual status of the only referral hospital in Arunachal Pradesh.

The Background

Arunachal Pradesh is a state with a difference. It is not only backward but it is a State which does not have rail or air link. The rugged terrain of this remote State makes even the motorable roads undependable as chance blockade of the roads by landslides pose a threat. This is the State which still has interior places which can be reached only by foot and that too after two to three days or more of walking. This is the State where people still believe that illness can be cured not through medicines but by performing rituals and sacrifices. Arunachal Pradesh does not have direct links between its various districts and some districts can be entered through neighbouring Assam only. The Ramakrishna Mission with centres in almost all parts of the country has been rendering selfless service all over. But the service it has rendered in this remote part of the country is unique in itself. Unlike its centres in other parts of the country where it has access to all modern amenities, the Mission has to overcome a lot of problems regarding communication, and other aspects. The nearest big city is Guwahati, which is 500 km away.

Just a few years back, whenever there used to be rains, the road communication would break down for days together due to landslides. Thanks to GREF the problem has been solved. Imagine the situation twenty-five years back, when even Assam was not adequately developed. There are about 26 major tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, who have a different and distinct identity of their own. Itanagar being the capital city has people of all these tribes. The hospital receives patients belonging to all these tribes, each having a separate identity. Moreover, the hospital being a referral hospital, people from the interiors are referred to the hospital for treatment. The monks posted in the hospital often have a tough time handling these people. The people from the

interior parts of Arunachal Pradesh often do not understand any other languages apart from their own language. In dealing with such cases, the monks have to understand their body language and gestures to guess their problems. Moreover, the monks have to be very cautious in dealing with the elderly patients of the interior places of the State as the people of this beautiful State are often emotional and get perturbed easily. Moreover, care also has to be taken to see that the religious and cultural sentiments of the people are not hurt. Arunachalee people as a whole are very peaceful, but by nature they are very conservative about their cultural and religious practices and do not tolerate any disrespect shown to them. The patients who come from the interior are not well-to-do economically and often come to the hospital with the help of financial aid of some well-to-do personalities. The remoteness of the State also hinders easy availability of super specialists to come over and work in the hospital. Even in cases of extreme emergency, the hospital cannot afford to call over specialists as they are available only at places as far as 500 km away.

In spite of all these problems, the hospital has grown at a rapid pace and has served the people with dedication and patience.

How it all Began

"If you want any good to come, just throw your ceremonials overboard and worship the Living God, the Man-God, every being that wears a human form - God in his universal as well as individual aspect," - said Swami Vivekananda. (Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, VI, 264).

Further, "you may invent an image through which to worship God, but a better image already exists, the Living Man. You may build a temple in which to worship God and that may be good, but a better one, a much higher one, already exists, the human body." (Complete Works II:311).

Swami Vivekananda's scheme of national reconstruction is based on a single goal - uplift of the masses. Swamiji was a monk dedicated to the welfare of the masses. His great ambition concerning India was to rouse its masses and improve their living conditions. He had felt that unless the masses are given their share India would never prosper. He cautioned, "Remember that the nation lives in the cottage."

In order to fulfil this vision of mass uplift, Swamiji had envisaged a modern concept to the ancient idea of religion - the Practical Vedanta. In his concept of Practical Vedanta, man is the greatest symbol for worship of God. While giving importance to the worship of God, the invisible in various ways, he also pointed out an equally important aspect of worship in 'the service of God in man.' His unique message, 'Service to Man is Service to God,' not only has a deep spiritual import but it also

has the widest social relevance for it is beyond the reaches of any religious prejudices, frenzies and passions.

With the aim of fulfilling Swamiji's scheme for the uplift of the masses and with the motto of "Service to Man is Service to God," the Ramakrishna Mission started providing medical care services in this remote part of India to the tribal population of Arunachal Pradesh which was then a Union territory. The Ramakrishna Mission had already started its activities in the field of education in the year 1965, on request of public leaders of the State, the then Lt. Governor Sri KAA Raja and the Prime Minister late Smt. Indira Gandhi. Taking its leap towards Health Care, the birth of the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital took place on the morning of December 28, 1977 when Lt. Governor Sri KAA Raja laid the foundation stone for the hospital premises. This was the start of a great journey by the hospital whose only aim was to provide solace to the suffering. Nobody at that time had any idea as to what level this hospital will grow or for how long it will stay. But as time has proved the hospital has grown from strength to strength and has attained great heights, which at that time may have looked uncertain.

On October 19, 1979, the hospital was formally inaugurated and declared open by Srimat Swami Vireshwaranandaji Maharaj, the 10th President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. A small out patient department with a clinical laboratory was opened in a modified residential quarter near the proposed site of the hospital. With this also began the construction work of the hospital complex. It may be mentioned here that the hospital is now situated on 26 acres of land leased by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh. The hospital is managed by a local managing committee, in which there is a good representation from the tribal community which the Mission serves. Monks take an active part in the day-to-day administration of the hospital. Moreover, it is blessed with a dedicated team of doctors, nursing staff and paramedical staff. The hospital was providing health care to the people absolutely free of any cost, in the first decade of its establishment, from 1979 to 1989. As the grants-in-aid started to taper down, the hospital management decided in the month of May, 1989 to levy charges for costly investigations and operations from people who can afford to pay for their health needs and from government servants, whose medical treatment is reimbursed, with a hope that this would supplement the revenue to meet up with expenses.

Services Provided at a Glance

* 191 beds, * Serves as a Referral Hospital for whole of the State, * Outdoor clinics in General Medicine, General Surgery, Orthopedics, Ophthalmology, Pediatrics, Obstetrics & Gynecology and Dentistry, *

Emergency & Casualty, * Laboratory, * Blood Bank, * Four Operation Theaters, *Radiology & Imaging Services (Ultrasonography & Echo Cardiography, Whole Body CT Scanner, Colour Doppler), * Upper GI & Lower GI Endoscopy, * Physical-Occupational Therapy, * Artificial Limbs Fitting Centre, * Free 24-hour Ambulance Service, * Free diet for all indoor patients, * Free Beds in indoor section, * Free doctor consultation for indoor patients, * Free nursing care for indoor patients, * Free registration for outdoor clinics, * Free doctor consultation for outdoor patients, * Free essential medicines for outdoor and indoor patients, * Apart from the above free services, many poor and deserving patients are beneficiaries of huge concessions in already nominal investigations charges, operation charges and other allied service charges, * BPL (Below Poverty Line) patients are given absolutely free services in the following areas in both indoor and outdoor sections: Laboratory investigations, Blood transfusion/testing charges, Surgeries/Operations, X-Rays, Ultrasound Scanning, Upper GI and Lower GI endoscope investigations, CT scanning, Physical-Occupational therapy, Artificial Limbs Fitting Services.

Some Other Services

Not content with only providing medical services to the people of this remote State of India, the hospital started a School of Nursing in the year 1985 for training tribal as well as non-tribal girls of Arunachal Pradesh. The school offers a three-year certificate course in General Nursing and Midwifery. The School was accorded recognition and was affiliated to the Assam Council for Nurses, Midwives, and Health Visitors in the year 1987. It is also registered and licensed under the Indian Nursing Council. The School of Nursing, apart from conducting its regular course, also extends its course to a good number of in-trainees deputed from various hospitals of the State who come to the hospital at regular intervals. The trainees are given training in different departments of nursing in batches and issued certificates by the School of Nursing.

Besides this, the hospital has a Medical Reports Department, Medical Library, Dietary Services, Laundry Services, Maintenance Department, Ambulance Services, Mortuary System, and a Dairy and Poultry Unit of its own.

Services for the Staff

The hospital has its own Staff quarters premises within its own boundary wall. It has a Staff Cooperative Society Limited which has double storied building of its own. It runs a Medicine shop, a fair price shop and a canteen. The hospital has a Staff Welfare Fund which provides essential help to the staff members including loans at low interest as and when required. The hospital has a sub Post office in its own premises, named

as the Ramakrishna Mission Post Office. The hospital has an auditorium of its own named Vivekananda Hall, which can seat 400 people. Besides, the Government of Arunachal Pradesh has constructed a Helipad within the hospital premises which helps in airlifting critically ill patients to other major hospitals for further treatment and to bring patients from interior parts of the State. Finally, the hospital has a Monks Quarters where all the monks reside. The Monks Quarters has a shrine which conducts various religious festivities, irrespective of religion. The Shrine and Quarters lend an atmosphere of spirituality to the entire hospital.

Other Activities

Over and above the medical services, the monks of the Ramakrishna Order, attached to the hospital, also cater to the spiritual, intellectual and value-based needs of the society. Besides, the monks also offer counselling to the people in need of this service. The hospital also holds various conferences to keep its staff abreast of the latest developments in various fields. Cultural functions are also organized every year.

Recognition

It may be mentioned here that all important dignitaries visiting Arunachal Pradesh pay a visit to the hospital, which has blossomed into a prestigious health care centre in North-east India with a fine reputation for its services. It has received awards and letters of recognition from time to time, some of which may be mentioned:

1. The District Administration of Papum Pare District in which the hospital is situated, awarded the hospital in a public function with the First Annual Verrier Elwin Award and a citation in recognition of its outstanding contribution in Community Work.
2. The Itanagar Chapter of the Indian Federation of Working Journalists felicitated the hospital. A citation was awarded to the Secretary of the hospital in a public function.
3. All Itanagar Market Association felicitated the hospital with a Letter of Credit in recognition of the selfless services rendered by the hospital for the people of Arunachal Pradesh.

Over the Years - A Recollection

1. Swami Gautamananda - Senior Trustee of the Ramakrishna Order.

“Let me, at the outset, say that I had a wonderful time for 13 years from 1976 to 1989 in Arunachal Pradesh. I was in charge of the Ramakrishna Mission, Along, during the whole period. I had to visit Itanagar from 1979 onwards for administering the wonderful school complex at Along....

“Along with the Lieutenant Governor (Shri K A A Raja) and the Chief Secretary (Mr. I.P. Gupta) of the State, we had an excellent Chief Engineer, Shri Rama Rao, and a very gentlemanly Tribal Chief Minister, Thungon. All these people insisted that the Ramakrishna Mission should start at Itanagar a residential school on the lines of a public school for the tribals. Our Headquarters agreed and sent Swami Tanmayananda, who is at present (2004) the Head of our centre in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In the meanwhile, the administration wanted urgently a modern hospital also. So they appealed to our Headquarters to start a hospital also simultaneously. For want of monastic workers, our Headquarters said, 'We can take up any one project, but not both.' It was decided by the administration that Hospital should get priority and for this work Swami Prathananda, more intimately called Preeti Maharaj, the Swami who headed the hospital from its beginning in 1979 to almost 2002 (23 years), was posted to start the hospital. Somehow or other there was some delay in starting. Revered Swami Vireswarananda ji, President of our Order, who was almost 90 years of age at that time, wanted the project to be started at the earliest.

“The new Lieutenant Governor, Shri Haldipur, decided to bring the President Maharaj from Assam to Arunachal Pradesh, that is to Itanagar and from there to Along, and take him back to Dibrugarh by his helicopter. President Maharaj, accordingly, arrived in Itanagar sometime in 1979. It was a great day and the first and the biggest hospital of the State was started in four residential buildings at the present site - one building for the monastic workers, another was for the indoor hospital with 10 beds, 5 each for male and female patients, the third one for outdoor dispensary and the fourth block was the quarters of the medical and paramedical staff.

“An interesting conversation took place between the Lieutenant Governor, Shri Haldipur and Revered Swami Vireswarananda Ji. The Lieutenant Governor asked the Swamiji, 'How old are you, Swamiji?' The Swami replied, 'I am 90 years young.' In fact, he looked very agile and active for his age. Why shouldn't he be? He was a good sportsman and the captain of the college hockey team during his college days.

“The inauguration being over, the hospital started off with 3 or 4 doctors and 3 or 4 nurses. If I remember right, Dr. Mrinmoy Ghosh was the senior-most physician. His diagnosis was liked by one and all, from the ordinary tribal patients to the Lieutenant Governor himself. He became very popular. Among the monastics, Swami Prathananda, his assistant Swami Chinmayananda and Br. Dhanraj, along with some others were there. Later came Br. Sundar, Swami Krishnarupananda, etc. The doctors attended to the patients in the morning and they were sufficiently free in the evenings, when we would all go out for a long walk towards the

village called Ganga. Once or twice, we climbed up to the lake at a higher level in the hills.

“One day Dr. Ghosh found a tribal patient suffering from dehydration due to dysentery. The tribal people were lamenting that he would die. But Dr. Ghosh assured them that he would be saved. The patient was brought to the hospital in the evening and was put on intravenous fluid the whole night. Next day the patient became absolutely normal. The tribals were extremely pleased. One of them remarked, 'Why shouldn't he (the patient) survive? They gave him injection throughout the night. Even one injection saves people and he was given injection throughout the night.'

“Swami Prathamananda had a very good knowledge of common medicines and injections because of his association with so many doctors in the hospital. The tribals used to love the Swami and revered him for his generous and loving behaviour with them. They would almost always show him the prescription of the doctors and only when he okayed them, they would go to the compounder for injections or medicines.

“Once the Chief Minister, Gegong Apang, got his emergency operation done at the hospital. It was, if I remember right, a case of burst appendicitis. Swami Prathamananda arranged to bring one of the best surgeons, Dr. Basu, from our Ramakrishna Mission Hospital in Kolkata. In the meanwhile, Swami Prathamananda had a call from Rajiv Gandhi from Delhi, asking if he (the Swamiji) required any doctors from Delhi for the Chief Minister's operation. Swami Prathamananda later told me, 'I said 'no' because if there were more doctors, there would be only more meetings, deliberations and delay in taking decisions.'

“As I have said, the hospital had minimum buildings and had a common dining hall where all the Swamis and monastics, doctors, paramedical staff and the servants had to have lunch, etc. Only 6 persons could eat at a time in the dining hall because of its small size. Many times the head, Swami Prathamananda, myself and other monastic members, not to speak of doctors, had to wait for half an hour until the nurses and other staff finished their meal as they had come earlier. So it was a real communist beginning, in the communist way of life of the tribals.

“Many doctors from our Kolkata Hospital (Seva Pratisthan) came to help in the newly started hospital at Itanagar. Two such doctors wanted to read some medical books for their higher exams. After quite some time, I asked them, 'Could you read your books?' They said, 'No Swami.' I said, 'Why not?' They said, 'Because of the 'piercing silence' of this place.' These two doctors, Shri Kishore Choudhury and Shri Somnath Ganguly, are well established surgeon and gynaecologist respectively in Kolkata. What they said about the 'piercing silence' was true. Once night came,

the whole area in Itanagar, especially the isolated area of the hospital, was so dark and silent, it was really 'piercing' as the doctors said. Once Kishore Choudhury, the surgeon, operated on a tribal patient with thyroid problems. The patient was having a huge growth around his neck, called goitar. The patient looked so smart and beautiful after the whole growth was removed by the surgeon. It was a case which impressed the simple tribal people of the efficiency of our doctors.

"We had a 'sick' jeep which would stop anywhere and everywhere, especially on the uppish roads in the hills. We had often to go by jeep to attend the dinner hosted by the Chief Minister whose residence was on a hill. Invariably our vehicle used to stop on the road and the police, who knew us as great friends of the Chief Minister, had to rush to our help every time. Once an angry policeman remarked, 'Swami, why don't you administer medicine to this jeep also as you are doing to so many patients. Every time you get stuck in your jeep we are put to hard labour.'

"There were interesting cultural evenings later on when Sameer Maharaj joined Swami Prathamanda. Both were musicians and there were long singing sessions, drama, etc., by the tribal nursing students, celebrations of Sri Ramakrishna's birthday, some tribal festivals, etc. Many tribal employees visited our shrine and joined us in our prayers."

Some Interesting Incidents - as Related by the Staff Members of the Hospital

1. Dr. GC Roy, Senior Medical Officer

"There are many incidents which happened during these long years of service in the hospital. However, one incident remains very vivid in my memory. In March 1980, on a dark rainy night, at about 2 a.m., I heard someone knocking on the window of my bedroom. There was a power cut at that time. I picked up my torch and looked out. Outside I saw our then Secretary late revered Preeti Maharaj (Swami Prathamandaji) standing with an umbrella and torch in hand. I immediately opened the door. Maharaj came inside and told me that a patient with a cut injury had come for treatment. I and Maharaj immediately rushed to the OPD, (which was in the Type IV/6 Qtr.). As there was no power supply at that time, Revered Preeti Maharaj held the torch while I examined the patient. There was a huge gash in his scalp and it required nine stitches. After doing the needful, we returned to our quarter at 3 a.m. The incident reminds me of the dedication of Late Revered Preeti Maharaj who left no stones unturned to see that patients were attended to."

2. Dr. Sekhar Das, Senior Specialist, Orthopaedics

“I remember an interesting story of a young lady in her teens, who was crippled down her waist with contracture of hips and knees since her childhood. She was kept inside the dark corners of her parents' thatched home in a remote village. When she was brought to the hospital, she was totally devastated. Taking up treatment of the girl, four or five surgeries were performed on her and she was provided braces. Gradually, with crutches she was able to stand up and then finally walk. When she returned to her village, one of her friends of the yesteryears fled in panic on seeing her thinking her to be a ghost. When I met her last she was very grateful to me and expressed her desire to take me along with my family to her village someday. I thanked her amply, felt the depth of her gratitude.”

3. Mr. Amalendu Maity, Laboratory Assistant

“During these long years I have come across many interesting incidents. I will just narrate a few of them.

“Once a tribal patient was advised to have his blood tested. I told him about it. The next day, the person brought some blood on a leaf and in a bamboo container to me. He had collected blood by cutting himself just near the thumb of the leg.

“Apart from these incidents, what I very much remember about those days was when I saw our former Secretary, Late Revered Preeti Maharaj, doing the duty of Emergency doctors and even nurses due to lack of staff.

“I also remember the day when I, along with some doctors and Revered Preeti Maharaj went to Naharlagun for some work. As the vehicle in which we went broke down, we came back very late at night. Preeti Maharaj took us to the Monks quarters and gave us fish fry which he fried himself at around 11.30 in the night. These are occasions, which I will always remember and cherish throughout my life.”

Conclusion

To conclude, the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital at Itanagar is indeed an institution with a difference. Since its humble beginning 30 years ago, it has indeed come a long way. After having being lovingly nurtured by the founder-Secretary, Swami Prathamananda Ji or Preeti Maharaj, and under the devoted and dedicated supervision and monitoring of Swami Vishwatmananda Ji, the present Secretary of the Hospital, the hospital has justly earned a reputation of being a prestigious health care centre of Arunachal Pradesh. It is promoting the development process of the State it serves, i.e., Arunachal Pradesh, by providing medical treatment

of a high quality. As of today, the tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh are in the process of transition - transition to modern way of life; transition from isolated community life to closer integration with the rest of India. The Ramakrishna Mission Hospital by offering medical service with honesty, sincerity and cordiality is cementing the human bond between tribal people and doctors, nurses and employees coming from various other parts of India. That is in turn subtly and slowly accentuating the process of integration and holding out the promise of long years of service with a difference for this unique medical institution - the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital at Itanagar.

Preeti Maharaj or Swami Prathamananda Ji
(Founder Secretary of RKM Hospital, Itanagar)



Swami Prathamananda, popularly known as Preeti Maharaj, joined the Ramakrishna Order at its Karimganj center (in the state of Assam) in 1951. He was an initiated disciple of Swami Virajanandaji Maharaj and had sannyasa (formal vows of monkhood) from Swami Shankaranandaji Maharaj in 1961.

He also served at Ramakrishna Mission Saradapitha and Ramakrishna Mission Sevapratishtan centers in West Bengal besides his joining center. He assumed the charge of the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital at Itanagar in the year 1978 and built up the hospital to its present state. He served the hospital for twenty three years.

He was an adept in construction jobs. The rehabilitation projects of the Ramakrishna Mission that he carried out at Surat (Gujarat), Maner (Bihar), Panisagar (Tripura), Puligadda/Divi Seema (Andhra Pradesh) during the 1970s had earned him accolades and are being appreciated by many even now. The Vivekananda Hall of the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital at Itanagar, which has become a central attraction of all organizations for holding meetings and seminars was constructed by him with an estimated cost of Rs 8 lakh which nobody could believe. As per the government estimate, the auditorium of such standard would have cost not less than Rs 20 lakh. The sitting and sound arrangements are superb and added to it are decorated pieces depicting cultural traditions of the people of the State.

He was a person of large heart and empathic nature. Besides, he was an affectionate, jovial, and hard working person. He endeared himself to all who came in contact with him.

Preeti Maharaj was a man of action and a true follower of Swami Vivekananda's Karma Yoga. He seldom consented to speak in public gatherings. He had a child-like shyness in this respect.

The Swami was also a good classical singer and on many an occasion performed in congregations and on stages. He also used to organize musical nites by inviting classical musicians of national repute. The Itanagaris were fortunate to enjoy the performance of great violinist VG Jog, Dagar brothers and many others, thanks to the Swami.

Preeti Maharaj was a great planner and an organizer par excellence. He was very punctual and never compromised with it. He had excellent public relations and had wide contacts with people from all walks of life. He was always on the move.

Preeti Maharaj is no more in this material world, but the hospital he founded in the remotest part of our country with devotion and love would remind everybody of his dedicated services to the ailing masses with the ultimate vision of, "Serve Man, Serve God."

