

## **Socio-medical perspectives on leprosy in Indian religions**

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*Summary* Religion plays an important role in Indian culture, and greatly influences thinking and behavior around issues of hygiene and health. This study explored the religious texts of six major religions in India, and interviewed key informants, in order to identify religious precepts and proscriptions that may underlie current levels of stigma and social restrictions placed on people affected by leprosy.

The study found a historical basis for leprosy stigma in the scriptures of all six religions. Attitudes are changing, especially with the acceptance of modern treatment. It is essential to incorporate stigma reduction perspectives in religious preaching.

*Keywords:* Religion, leprosy, stigma, India, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism

### **Introduction**

The concept of hygiene and healthy practices which result in disease or health are embedded in religious proscriptions, as the behavior of the individual is molded to a great extent by their religion, which ‘refers to both the personal practices related to communal faith and to group rituals and communication stemming from shared convictions’.<sup>1</sup> It is well known that socio-religious texts impact the way people think and act, and some refer specifically to leprosy in relation to sins of either the present or a previous life; clearly the ancient texts used words like leprosy in a very different medical environment than today’s world, emphasizing the need to understand the context of religious texts.<sup>2</sup> In the case of leprosy, it is a challenging task to understand the religious scriptures and remove any negative impact, in the light of modern understanding of the disease. The holy books of all the main religions have degraded leprosy-affected individuals by referring to them as sinners and leprosy itself as the result of a curse.<sup>3</sup>

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The Indian Christian Marriage Act 1872, The Muslim Marriage Act 1939 and The Hindu Marriage Act 1956, permitted separation and later divorce on the grounds of leprosy;<sup>4</sup> The Parsi Marriage Act 1936<sup>5</sup> does not allow divorce, which explains the varying impact of different religious teachings on stigma against leprosy.

A comprehensive baseline survey done by The Leprosy Mission in three states of India, as a prelude to community based action research to reduce leprosy stigma, showed that important restrictions are placed on participation by affected persons in religious functions and worship (*pooja*). More than 70% of community members in many states feel that the affected person should not be allowed to take part in religious ceremonies or in family functions.<sup>6</sup> In order to prevent de-habilitation and unjustified discriminations and make maximum use of modern therapy in leprosy, this study was designed to screen religious scriptures and gather more specific data on this issue, with the following objectives:

- (1) To identify religious precept and proscription, if any, underlying leprosy stigma
- (2) To document specific reasons why leprosy affected persons face participation restrictions in religious ceremonies, and the extent of their restriction
- (3) To determine strategies to overcome leprosy stigma due to religious beliefs or superstitions

The study involved six major religions in India, including Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism.

## **Methods**

This is an exploratory, qualitative, cross-sectional study of multiple religions. The study was designed to explore the attitudes of currently active religious leaders, and the facts available from popular religious scriptures in India, concerning perceptions about the diagnosis and treatment of leprosy, and the acceptance of those affected.

Primary data is of a qualitative nature, collected through in-depth interviews of religious leaders, while secondary data came from the examination of religious books, for information pertaining to causes, treatment, cure and acceptance of leprosy patients by the different faiths (Table 1).

## **Results**

The earliest references to different types of leprosy were found in various Egyptian texts dated to 1550 BC,<sup>7</sup> Atharva Veda of the first millennium BC,<sup>8</sup> and the Sushruta Samhita, a treatise on Indian medicine from 600 BC, describing the disease 'kushta', a Sanskrit word for leprosy. Early references were also found in Chinese and Japanese literature.<sup>9,10</sup>

According to Hinduism,<sup>11</sup> the stigma attached to leprosy is rooted in the relationship between disease and religion. As physical beauty amongst men is appreciated as the gift of God, deformity in leprosy would be considered as divine punishment and thus leprosy is recognized as God's penalty for sin.

### TRADITIONAL SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF LEPROSY

The traditional signs and symptoms based on which a leprosy patient can be suspected and the diagnosis can be confirmed, were collected from different religious scriptures.

**Table 1.** Sources of information

Religion	Secondary data (religious scriptures)	Primary data (no. of in-depth interviews)
• Hinduism	1. Charak Samhita (Hindi)	20
	2. Shusrut Samhita (Hindi)	
	3. Aarogya Ank (Hindi)	
	4. Garun Puran (Hindi)	
	5. Atherved (Hindi)	
	6. Kalyan (Hindi)	
	7. Suksagar (Hindi)	
	8. Shri Mad Bhagavat Gita (Hindi)	
	9. Fulbahari (Hindi)	
• Christianity	10. Bible (English)	20
	11. Savstha Jivan Ka Aadhar Aayurved (Hindi)	20
• Jainism	12. Aastha Aour Aaradhya (Hindi)	20
	13. Maina Sundri (Hindi)	
	14. Dharmik Pasnotter Khajana (Hindi)	
	15. Maine Suna Hai (Hindi)	
	16. Man Ko Kaise Jiyen (Hindi)	
	17. Parbudhon Ke Bich Budh Ke Isare (Hindi)	
	18. Sant Sadhna (Hindi)	
	19. Guru Nanak Dev (Hindi)	
• Sikhism	20. Guru Nanak Dev (English)	20
	21. Sikh Itihas (Hindi)	
	22. Suraj Prakash (Hindi)	
	23. Kuran Mazid (Hindi, Urdu)	
• Islam	24. Bukhari Sarif (Hindi)	20
	25. Bhagawan Buddha (Hindi)	
• Buddhism	26. Tripitak Digidarshika (Hindi)	18
	27. Yoga Our Sadhna (Hindi)	
	28. Dhamm Pad (English)	
	Total no of interviews	

- (a) *Hinduism*: As described in Charakasamhita, a Hindu religious scripture, as well as a book of reference for Ayurvedic treatment, leprosy affects certain areas of the human body, which may be identified based on symptoms, such as absent or excessive sweating; roughness of skin or excessive smoothness; distortion of the natural skin color, itching, sensation of pins and needles, sensory loss, burning sensations, dryness, etc.<sup>12</sup>  
*Diagnosis by Vaidya in Hinduism*: According to Hindu religious leaders, a *Vaidya* (Ayurvedic doctor) would examine the skin. If the hair around the diseased skin patch is bright as compared to other areas then it is confirmed as a case of leprosy.
- (b) *Christianity*: A wide range of signs of leprosy in both people and objects are discussed in the Bible, which is the religious scripture of Christianity. During Old Testament times, the chief priest played the major role in the diagnosis of leprosy. For example, in case of swelling, dry skin or a bright spot appearing on the skin, the person is taken to the priest, who examines the skin; if he finds that the hair of the diseased area has turned white, the individual is pronounced ceremonially unclean.<sup>13</sup>

The Christian faith of the New Testament promotes an attitude of acceptance and forgiveness of sins, as fulfilled by the miraculous healing of leprosy by Christ (Bible: Mark 1:42).<sup>13</sup>

- (c) *Jainism*: According to Jainism, the occurrence of leprosy was recorded since the days of Satya-yug, and symptoms such as a foul odour or changes in the limbs of the body confirmed the diagnosis of leprosy.<sup>14</sup>
- (d) *Sikhism*: With regard to Sikhism, the religious scriptures say that leprosy is identified by changes appearing in the body parts and changes in the colour of the skin.<sup>15</sup>
- (e) *Perceptions of Islam and Buddhism*: No specific description of signs and symptoms of leprosy were found in the scriptures of Islam and Buddhism. According to Muslim religious leaders and Buddhist monks from Sarnath, however, leprosy is a disease in which the nature and features of the body undergo a change; leprosy is suspected when the colour of the skin becomes pale or dark reddish, in specific areas. However, the majority said there are no clear criteria to confirm a case of leprosy.

#### CAUSES OF LEPROSY

Specific causes of leprosy are discussed in certain scriptures:

- (a) *Hinduism*: According to Shri Tulsidas ji, as stated in '*Ramcharit manas*', God pays great importance to deeds in this world. Hence, the individual bears fruit according to his/her *karma* (deeds). Holy deeds bear good fruit and evil deeds bear bad fruit. Suffering from any particular disease is due to bad *karma* (evil deeds), either in one's present or a previous life.<sup>16</sup>

According to Ayurveda,<sup>17</sup> there are specific reasons for leprosy:

- Consuming improper combinations of food: milk with fish, milk with brinjal, milk with mullet
  - Telling lies
  - Being unfaithful/ungrateful
  - Indulging in sinful acts
  - Overeating and indigestion
  - Insulting of Guru/teachers
  - Preventing the passage of urine and stools
  - Cursing the holy spirits
  - Killing other humans
  - Sins inherited from a previous birth
  - Emotions of depression, sorrow, anger, fear and jealousy etc
- (b) *Christianity*: According to Judaism, as described in the *Tora* texts, *Maimonides* says that leprosy in a person is something different from 'leprosy' in an article of clothing or a house. Leprosy is not a natural thing, but rather a divine sign and warning that a person was speaking slander. *Maimonides* refers to the story of Miriam's leprosy (Bible: Number 12:1-15) to support the link between leprosy and speaking against others.<sup>18</sup>
  - (c) No specific causes of leprosy were found in the scriptures of Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism.

#### TREATMENT FOR LEPROSY

Evidence regarding treatment of leprosy patients was found mainly in the Hindu scriptures.

- (a) *Hinduism*: Lord Ashwani Kumar, the son of the Lord Sun, was a great Ayurvedic physician who could cure leprosy. The daughter of a sage named Kakshivan, was suffering from leprosy; she made a specific act of worship (*Tapasya*) part of her life, as a result of which, Ashwani Kumar cured her of leprosy.<sup>19</sup> The Sushruta Samhita (600 BC) recommended treating leprosy, or kushta (meaning 'eating away' in Sanskrit), with oil derived from the chaulmoogra tree; this remained a mainstay of treatment until the introduction of sulfones.<sup>20</sup>

*Ayurveda*: A detailed account of treatment for leprosy is provided in '*charaksahmita*' the sacred book of Hindus. According to Tripathi,<sup>21</sup> a paste made of mixing the powder of various flowers with mustard oil, was used as Ayurvedic treatment for leprosy. The paste is applied on wounds, ulcers and patches of leprosy.

Leprosy, according to Hinduism, is also believed to be cured by chanting the name of God. Sins can be destroyed by remembering the name of God and as a result, the diseases caused by sin, including leprosy, will be cured. It is suggested in the *shaashtras* to remember the name of God regularly in a disciplined manner, as there is great power in chanting the name of God for reducing or wiping away sins.<sup>22</sup>

According to Hindu religious leaders the cure of leprosy is confirmed by *Vaidya*, an expert in Ayurveda; leprosy can be cured by:

- Bathing in the river Ganges,
  - Having a morning sun-bath
  - Offering prayer to God
  - Application of specially made paste
- (b) *Islam*: According to Islam, as stated by Khan in the Quran, everything is decided and made to happen by Allah. 'Whenever Allah says 'let it happen' it happens, so worship of God is the only direct route for the cure of all diseases.'<sup>23</sup>
- (c) *Christianity*: The Bible does not mention any specific treatment, but assumes that leprosy may clear spontaneously, or be healed miraculously, as occurred through the ministry of Christ. Another example is the incident in which Naaman, a brave soldier and commander of the Syrian army, who was healed of leprosy by a prophet called Elisha from Samaria; it describes Naaman walking down to the river Jordan and dipping himself into the water seven times, just as Elisha had told him. Right away, he was cured and his skin became as smooth as a child's (Bible, Old Testament: 2 Kings 5:14). In both Old and New Testament times, any cure had to be confirmed by the high priest (Bible: Leviticus 14:3-9; Matthew 8:1-4).
- (d) *Sikhism*: Singh indicates that leprosy was treated by Guru Nanak Dev, the first Guru of the Sikh religion, born in the year 1469. He cured a leprosy patient by his grace, and instructed him to chant the name of the Lord.<sup>24</sup> According to today's Sikh religious leaders, leprosy can be treated by taking a bath in the lake situated opposite the golden temple of Amritsar, construction of which was initiated in 1577. The religious leaders also said that Guru Nanak Dev ji, by his gracious vision, used to make the deformities of those with leprosy disappear; when the deformity and body scars disappeared, people believed that the leprosy had been cured.
- (e) *Buddhism*: No specific information pertaining to treatment methods of leprosy were found in the Buddhist scriptures, but Lord Buddha laid stress on service of the ill until cured; he instructed his followers to take care of the sick, by quoting God: 'whoever

serves the sick serves me'. If someone does not take care of sick, it would be considered sin; so one has to serve the sick until he recovers.<sup>25</sup>

According to today's Buddhist monks, chanting the mantra '*Buddham Sarnam Gachchhami*' will cure leprosy and any other diseases, as Lord Buddha is the only one who can remove all griefs and relieve discomfort.

- (f) *Jainism*: In one of the stories of the Jain religion, a princess suffering from leprosy and was cured by the touch of a monk.<sup>26</sup>

#### ACCEPTANCE OF LEPROSY PATIENTS

Scriptures of different religions provide evidence of how leprosy patients were stigmatized in history, a few details of which are discussed below:

- (a) *Hinduism*: Almost all illnesses are contagious. One may receive infection from the patients by touching, sitting in close contact, eating or sleeping together, using the clothes or things used by the patients, etc. Keeping this in mind, it was essential to keep leprosy patients away from other people.<sup>27</sup> In a legend explaining chaulmoogra oil's therapeutic origins, a king banished for his leprosy was instructed to eat the curative seeds of this tree, illustrating the cultural response to leprosy in antiquity: loss of social position and expulsion, even of kings, from the community.<sup>28</sup>
- (b) *Islam*: Among the collections of *Sahih muslim hadis*, it is found that a statement was made by Hazarat Zahir Bin Abdulla that 'One leprosy-affected individual was found in the group of delegates who came to you. He was ordered to go back..'. It is stated by Hazrat Abuhurraerah that according to Hazrat Muhammad, leprosy is not such a disease that can fly to catch people. But run the same way from a leprosy-affected individual, as running from a lion.<sup>29</sup>

Among the teachings of Hazarat Mohammad, we also found instructions saying that separation of a leprosy patient is wrong; and he himself lived among people with leprosy. The real summary of Islamic teachings is about how to be protected from leprosy, but not to hate those affected. Leprosy is an infectious disease, that spreads when someone is in contact with the patient for a long time, so we can help him with his immediate requirements. There is no problem in touching a leprosy patient, if the disease is in the early phase or in the cured stage. He also took food with a leprosy patient from the same plate, and advised him to believe in God. He also emphasized that Islam does not permit separation of leprosy patients. All these interpretations show that leprosy is an infectious disease but that we can help them when needed, keeping ourselves protected from infection.<sup>29</sup>

- (c) *Christianity*: Christ's healing miracles were referred to by all the religious leaders interviewed. It was emphasized that Christ's touching and healing someone with leprosy in public, stands as one of the guiding principles for the whole of Christianity, promoting an attitude of acceptance and service. It may be noted that there are currently several hospitals and treatment centres for people affected by leprosy run by Christians. No restriction is found in any Church, showing the ongoing practice of Christ's attitudes in the New Testament towards serving the needy as well as leprosy-affected individuals.
- (d) *Sikhism*: Guru Nanak Dev Ji went to see a hut where a leprosy-affected individual lived; he said to the saint, 'my family has left me in this hut and because of leprosy no one comes to me. I have leprosy, so please do not come close to me'. Thus, as long as the patient has not recovered from leprosy, he was kept away from normal life with others.<sup>30</sup>

- (e) *Buddhism*: Lord Buddha emphasized service to those who are ill; he ordered his followers to take care of the sick. Lord Buddha preached: 'whoever serves the sick serves me'.<sup>31</sup> According to Buddhist monks, there is no concept of discrimination and untouchability in their religion and all are treated equally. As such, there used to be no stigma against leprosy patients in Buddhism; patients are accepted before cure as well as after cure of the disease.
- (f) *Jainism*: In Jainism, the leprosy-affected individual was kept out of the house. Regarding acceptance of leprosy patients, if a leprosy patient was freed from the disease and became as healthy and beautiful as earlier, only then he will be accepted again. (Jain:2008:26)

#### REASONS AND LAWS ABOUT TREATING LEPROSY PATIENTS AS UNCLEAN/CLEAN

Various reasons were mentioned in different religious scriptures for treating leprosy patients as unclean, one of the main causative factors for stigmatization of those with leprosy; prominent details are discussed below:

- (a) *Hinduism*: It was often believed that treatment of leprosy was ineffective, because the skin and body parts (absorption of the nose and fingers) remained affected (Charak Samhita: 5: p 629). According to Sunil Kumar<sup>32</sup> the main reasons for keeping a leprosy patient separate are:
- The public are afraid of infection
  - Obvious changes in the body of the sufferer - ulceration, discharge of blood and pus and decomposition of body parts
  - Marriage-related problems in the families of a leprosy patient

As described in *Charak Chintan*, the patient can escape from bodily deformities if treatment could be provided early on and the patient can get well quickly, without deformities; once the patient is cured, he is treated as normal and pure (quoted by Tripathi:2009:82).

Early texts, including the Atharava Veda (circa 2000 BC) and the Laws of Manu (1500 BC), mention various skin diseases translated as leprosy. The Laws prohibited contact with those affected by leprosy and punished those who married into their families, effectively ostracizing those with the disease.<sup>33</sup>

Ancient Indian society marginalized those with leprosy because of several factors: its chronic and potentially disfiguring nature; inconsistently effective therapy; association with sin; and the fear of contagion. This combination endowed leprosy with a unique stigma that persists today and resulted in its treatment with both seclusion and medical therapy.<sup>34</sup>

- (b) *Islam*: Leprosy is an infectious disease and it progresses after prolonged contact with the sufferers. That is why leprosy patients were staying separately in special hospitals to stop and prevent the progress of the disease. (*Key informant*)  
If this disease persists for a prolonged period, the body parts of the patients will be absorbed and deformed. As this disease causes degeneration of body parts over time, it is treated as unclean, even by Muslims. According to Muslim religious leaders, the patient is considered pure and clean, once he gets well after treatment. (*Key informant*)
- (c) *Christianity*: While the Old Testament contains numerous rules about what is clean or unclean, and leprosy was the prime example of uncleanness, the New Testament points to a new approach, one of acceptance and service to people affected.

- (d) *Sikhism*: According to Sikh religious leaders, the disease is considered unclean because it is believed to be contagious, and on progression develops ulcers on the legs and other parts. The Sikh scriptures assume that the patient is clean and pure after completion of treatment, but no specific reference was found.
- (e) *Buddhism*: According to the perception of religious leaders in the Buddhist religion, if the patient recovers after receiving treatment and service, he is treated as normal and pure. In the Buddhist scriptures, serving a sick person is considered as religious work and leprosy is not considered unclean.
- (f) *Jainism*: The scriptures emphasize that if a patient becomes free from leprosy through devotion and by the grace of God, then they assumed him clean and pure.<sup>35</sup> Normally, however, the disease is considered impure and untouchable, so the infected individuals are kept aside from others.

#### PATIENTS PARTICIPATION INSIDE THE PLACE OF WORSHIP

Different religious attitudes towards patients' participation inside the place of worship were found in different religions, the details of which were investigated and presented below in a comparative manner (Table 2). Many have a legacy of discrimination, which is being reduced through modern treatment.

- (a) *Hinduism*: In the Hindu scriptures, those with leprosy are unclean and are not permitted to enter the temple; the religious leaders follow this, but state that sins can be forgiven by remembering the name of God. Leprosy patients may enter Hindu religious places after completion of treatment.
- (b) *Islam*: In Islam there is no objection to leprosy patients entering the mosque to perform religious duties. According to religious leaders intermixing with leprosy patients is not prohibited. The patient can take part in social and religious life, even before or after completion of treatment.
- (c) *Christianity*: Christianity has a well-known legacy of intolerance and discrimination against those affected, but now promotes a medical approach to treatment, with acceptance of anyone to participate in religious activities.
- (d) *Sikhism*: According to the perception of Sikh religious leaders, leprosy patients can perform their religious duties only from outside the temple. After completion of treatment they can enter the religious places.
- (e) *Buddhism*: In Buddhism, there was no objection to patients entering religious places. According to the perception of religious leaders, leprosy patients are not subjected to any sort of restrictions; they can participate in worship inside the place of worship, even before or after completion of the treatment.
- (f) *Jainism*: In the Jainism there are some restrictions on entering religious places, before treatment of leprosy has been completed.

#### Discussion

Several reviews relating to leprosy and religion have been published, including the Moslem attitude<sup>36</sup> and the Christian attitude,<sup>37</sup> which suggest that religion is certainly one among the several contributing factors to stigma.

A study in north-western Botswana<sup>38</sup> emphasized the need to educate traditional and religious healers, as well as patients and the community in general, on various aspects of the



**Table 2.** Items relating to leprosy found in religious scriptures

Items relating to leprosy found in religious scriptures	Hinduism	Islam	Christianity	Sikhism	Buddhism	Jainism
Early signs and diagnosis of leprosy	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y
Treatment for leprosy and confirmation of cure	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N
Keeping away or non-acceptance of leprosy patients	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Deformities and ulcers as reasons for treating as unclean	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Laws pertaining to leprosy in religious scriptures	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y
Restriction of patients' participation in places of worship	Y	N	Y/N*	Y	N	Y

\*In the case of Christianity, despite the severe restrictions given in the Old Testament, those affected by leprosy are now accepted unconditionally, whether uncured or deformed; this is now the practice in all Christian centres for treatment, or religious worship.

disease, especially causation; this is essential to achieve a change in health seeking behaviour. The present un-repealed state of above mentioned Marriage Acts applicable to leprosy-affected from different religions in India suggests that, although the leprosy scenario now has changed quite significantly in the MDT era, public opinion is slow to change.

The interviews with religious leaders show that allowing people with leprosy to enter places of worship and to participate in rituals does not yet apply uniformly. Those with leprosy are not allowed inside the temple, *gurudwara* or any other place of worship by Hindus, Sikhs and Jains before cure, but they are allowed after cure; among Muslims, Christians and Buddhists people with leprosy are now allowed to participate inside the place of worship, both before and after cure.

## Conclusions

- (1) Leprosy is one of the earliest diseases known to history and its causes and treatment have been associated with supernatural forces in all religions.
- (2) There is a historical basis for leprosy stigma in the scriptures of all religions in India, which is well known to the religious leaders.
- (3) Religious scriptures and some preaching can be regarded as sources of leprosy stigma.
- (4) Attitudes are changing, especially as regards the acceptance of modern-day treatment and cure.
- (5) It is essential to incorporate stigma reduction activities in religious preaching.

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Discover answers to leprosy frequently asked questions, including ones about leprosy symptoms and treatment. A doctor at a partner hospital in India examines a patient's hand clawed by leprosy. A: A germ, or bacteria, called *Mycobacterium leprae*. It causes an infection that affects the skin, destroys nerves and can also cause problems in the eyes and nose. Q: Why is leprosy also called Hansen's disease? A: The medical name for leprosy is Hansen's disease. Norwegian doctor Armauer Hansen was the first to view the bacillus under a microscope in 1873. Q: Do fingers and toes fall off when someone gets leprosy? In conclusion, the continued need for implementation of leprosy services in Indonesia is very evident. The diversities in people's experiences with leprosy indicate a demand for responsive leprosy services to serve the diverse needs, including services for those formally declared to be "cured." This paper analyses the narratives of the people by drawing upon in-depth interviews with 53 participants and 20 focus groups discussions. The participants were purposively selected. We provide insights into the experiences of people and the meaning they give to leprosy and highlight aspect of aetiology, spirituality, religion, darkening of the skin, and sorcery. We also examine experiences of seeking care and focused on the impact of the disease in particular on the elderly and children.