

Br. Christudas – Man of the year 2009

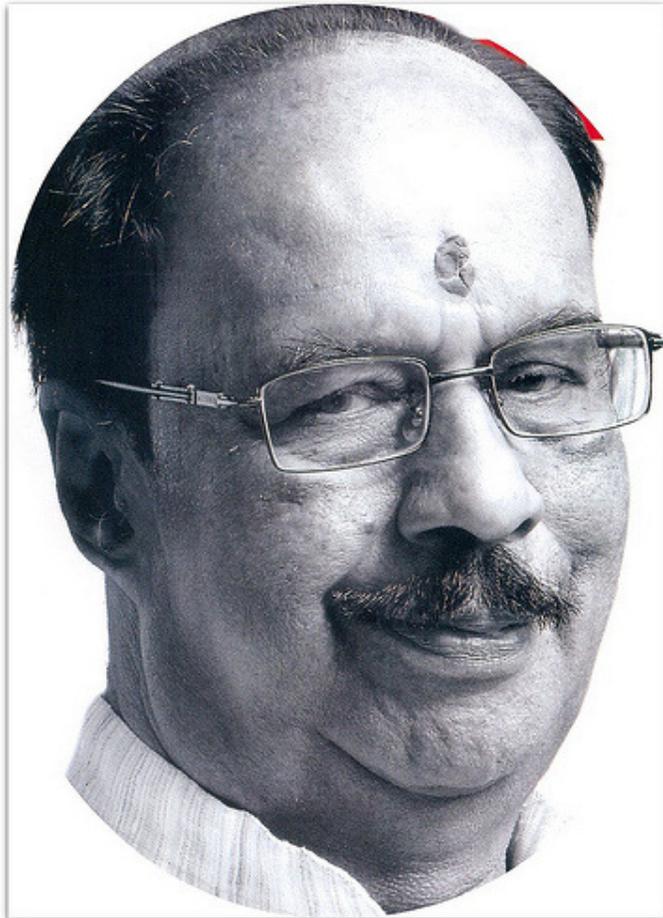


For millions in society who live in comfort and on other's labour and shut out their senses from reality he is an ostracized Man. A one man army who spoke against the apathy of humanity towards the downtrodden people in society. While fighting for their just cause, he was belaboured by the landed gentry, who with a force of 300 hired goondas, broke his bones and spilled his blood, as well as of those, for whose cause he was fighting and still fighting. But he is undaunted.

There are no NGOs to rescue him and his band of people. There are no electronic media to air their grievances to the outside world, let alone gather human sympathy and conduit it to their help and succour.

He is **Baba**. The Saint of Sunderpur, who has gifted life and laughter to his flock of more than 50,000 sheep, a minister and a messiah and brought hope and healing to 50,000 lepers and their families. An outsider, who was adopted by the downtrodden, as he himself adopted them, those who had been left as the living dead by this society which includes of all of us.

I worship my God daily and every day I entreat HIM to give me an opportunity to serve humanity; and today is the day he granted my wish. I was introduced to Br. Christudas, through the *pages* of the Week, a Family Magazine.



Br. Christudas

By creating an unselfish man like Br. Christudas, God has definitely compensated the existence of insensitive people like the landlord who took it upon himself to break the bones of Messiahs like Br.Christudas and the others who walk on the other side of the road the moment they espy a beggar who is afflicted with leprosy.

Whether young or old, society forgets that they also have a right to live in this world without any hindrance from the able bodied members of the society.

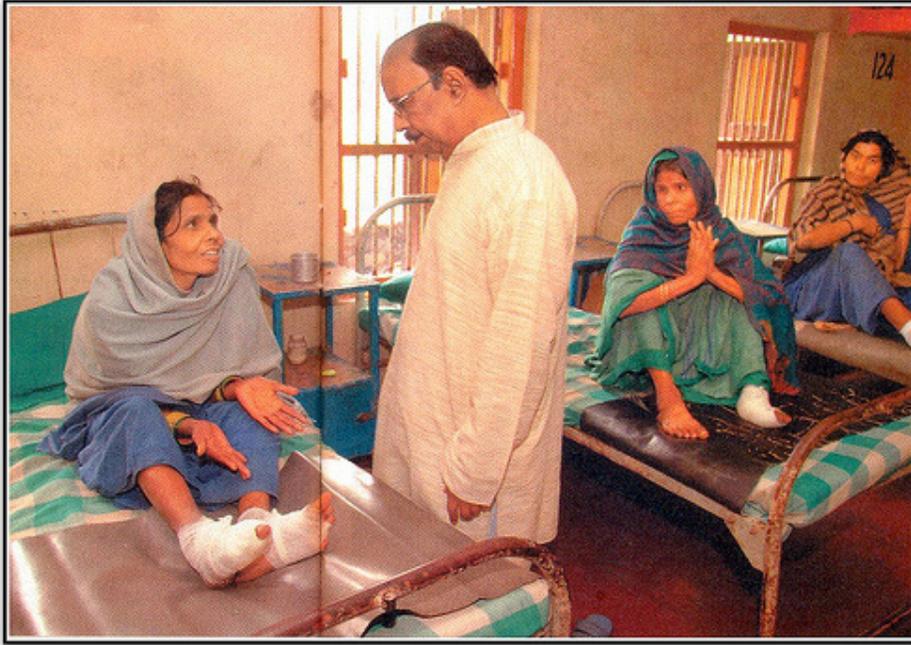
With this brief introduction, Ladies and Gentlemen, may I present before you the Saint of Sunderpur? Br.Christudas tells me not to be vindictive. So be it. All of us are God's creations most equal, but some more equal than the less fortunate's. VP.

By Nikita Doval/Sunderpur



“Bihar is like someone curled up and dead,” I was told before leaving. But a carcass implies an end. Bihar to unsuspecting eyes is like a curled-up animal, on its last legs, marked with wounds that seem to fester and pulsate with a life of their own. The landscape is dry and arid, tracts of land stretching out on both sides with a few spurts of green in between. It is a land in search of some beauty and some manna.

The narrow one-way street of Raxaul is choked with garbage and lines of trucks waiting for clearance to cross the border. Children defecate next to vendors selling freshly-slaughtered chicken and hawkers selling fried food. Though Raxaul defies words, I realise why there are the most leper colonies in Bihar.



Br. Christudas in the Leper Hospital.

“It was in 1978 that I first made inquiries about Bihar. I was told that right from Darbanga to Gorakhpur, leprosy was so widespread that it was almost endemic. It was important to do something for the people here and once realization comes, action is not far behind,” says Brother Christudas, *baba* to residents of the Little Flower Centre in Sunderpur village, near Raxaul. He is a one-man army who gave 50,000 lepers and their families a fresh start in life. He gave them treatment, dignity and more importantly, the will to live and smile again.

Christudas’s office overlooks a courtyard with a tree in the middle. The yard is ringed by rooms, lit with zero watt bulbs and with walls painted in blue and white. In the kitchen opposite the office, I see a young girl and a man talking animatedly. There is a quiet pride when Christudas says, “We have two kitchens. One is for the staff and students and the other for the hospital. We use bio-gas and solar energy for heating water. On 20 acres we grow wheat and have a poultry farm which takes care of almost 40 per cent of our needs.”

With a school, hostel, hospital, dairy farm, rehabilitation centre and a village of over 200 families—all cured leprosy patients—Sunderpur is a bright example of what man is capable of, when faced with extreme adversity.

Christudas's journey to Sunderpur began in Kerala's Edamaruku village. "We were eight children and I was sixth," he says. As a young man managing his father's toddy shop, he had vague dreams of doing good. The turning point came in class nine, when he read a book on Fr Damien, the Belgian saint who tended to the lepers of Molokai Island, Hawaii. Molokai was to lepers, what Australia was to English criminals. Eventually, Damien contracted leprosy and died on the island on April 15, 1889. In honour of his selflessness, on October 11, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed him St Damien of Molokai, the patron saint of lepers.

Says Christudas: "My first thought was that his was a life well lived. I remember thinking, if a young man could do this in an age rife with prejudice, then why couldn't I?" But work at the toddy shop called. "I used to drink," he says. "In a very strange way, alcohol fuelled my passion." The worsening condition of his father made Christudas stop drinking and in a burst of enthusiasm he wrote a letter to a missionary order saying he wanted to be a priest. There was no reply.

"After my matriculation I decided to go to Mumbai to St Paul's Society to study to become a priest," he says. "In my second year I was sent to Allahabad, where I failed the exam. I was told that I was useless and was asked to leave." Sent back to Mumbai, he was booked on a steamer to Kochi. The three days on sea were the most harrowing in his life. It was not easy to go home labeled 'useless'; he even contemplated suicide.

But God had different plans for him. Christudas's call came within days of landing in Kochi. "There was an ad in the papers about brothers who had come from Tamil Nadu to recruit young men for the church. I applied and was

selected,” he says. He was taken to Yercaud, Tamil Nadu, for studies. He studied Latin and enjoyed it immensely.

Then came an year as novitiate, when aspirants are tested for their commitment to priesthood. After that, he was sent to Bangalore to study philosophy and theology. Students were expected to work in projects during their summer break and Christudas chose a leprosy hospital.

In the six weeks he spent in the hospital, Christudas was struck by the complete absence of joy among patients. He sought for an answer and found that this was what the disease did to everyone. “All the patients in that hospital had attempted suicide at some point of time,” he says. Christudas refers to the **disease as a five-fold wound—rejection from family, society and God along with loss of trust and faith in their own selves.**

The holiday assignment shook him up and Fr Damien came back to haunt him. Christudas had been studying to be a priest for close to 11 years by then. He had six more months of studies left when a senior brother asked him to accompany a mentally-ill colleague to the Christian Medical College and Hospital, Vellore. “I was mostly free as my colleague did not require much help,” Christudas says. “Near CMC there is a leprosy rehabilitation centre called Navajeevan and I frequented it.”

There were about 40 patients in Navajeevan, most of them disfigured. But the atmosphere was drastically different from the hospital where he had summered. “The patients were happy, content and I realized that the cue to that lay in their being gainfully employed,” he recalls. Christudas took this as a divine sign. “I sent a telegram to my superior informing him that I was not going back,” he

says. Christudas recalls how he wept that day and then adds, “It has been 29 years. I have not wept since, not a single tear.”

Armed with his superior’s advice he went hunting for a mission working with lepers. The Little Brothers of Jesus in Pondicherry helped him by giving the address of the Missionaries of Charity, Kolkata. A German lady who ran a leprosy hospital elsewhere was willing to let him work for her, but where would he stay? Christudas came to know about a religious centre nearby and went there seeking a roof. But the bishop made him wait for several hours and dismissed him cruelly. He says, “He asked me where my cassock was and said ‘You are a vagabond, I will not have you sully my diocese’.”

Christudas stops narrating what obviously is a bad memory for him even now, and it is then that streams of children walk past wishing him a good night. Some stare curiously at us, some giggle. “We run a school for 400 students. All of them are children of patients. Some are from the village here, some come from leper colonies in the region,” he says.

Resuming his story, Christudas recalls how hungry, tired, desperate and humiliated he set off for Madurai to meet his superior. “It was an all-night journey and when I reached in the morning I realised I had been pick-pocketed.” As the saying goes, it was the darkest moment, but it was just before dawn.

Eventually, a group of sisters who ran a hospital in Kumbakonam agreed to have him for three months. One night, he saved a man who was about to throw himself into the hospital well, and spent the rest of the night talking the man out of suicide.

As his time there drew to a close, Christudas wrote to the Missionaries of Charity, requesting permission to join. This time a reply came, but with some tough questions. The Missionaries of Charity Brothers, as their name suggests, did not allow priests. “Brother Andrew was in charge and he asked me what if I would succumb to the temptation to complete my studies and become a priest?” he says. Christudas was sure he would not.

It was the beginning of a 14-year association which incidentally saw the Brothers sending Christudas to Bangalore to finish his studies and get ordained. “There came a stage when they needed a priest to take care of the spiritual needs of the patients and it was decided that I should be ordained.” He was also sent for leprosy treatment training.

Christudas had been there seven years when he found a leprosy patch on his ankle. Says he: “I was shocked. You might think you are ready for it, but when it happens to you your mind breaks down.” He decided to go to Bihar’s Sandal Pranas for treatment. “I had decided to spend all my time there, after all I was one of them now,” he says.

Suddenly a chorus of tuneless but enthusiastic voices fills the courtyard outside. It is time for the evening prayer. The children from the hostel sing with gusto, though some stop to look at us and smile shyly. As the prayer ends, it is time for dinner for the children and Christudas continues with his tale.

When Mother Teresa got news of his condition and decision, she dissuaded him and asked him to get better treatment in Pune. A new drug, Dapsone, was on the market and a three-month course killed his leprosy. Emboldened by the experience, he opted for extensive training to deal with leprosy.

The year was 1973 and Christudas had spent almost a whole year away from Kolkata when the phone rang one day. It was the Mother on the other end; she wanted him to come back. It was becoming difficult to manage violent patients at the Missionaries of Charity's hospital in Kolkata. There were instances of sisters being attacked. Christudas was made a director of the hospital and he started a rehabilitation programme to reform the lepers.

One day he was shaken as he had to turn away a 90-year-old woman for lack of beds in the hospital. "We were situated next to a railway track and there was plenty of marshy land next to the tracks. It belonged to the railways, but was going waste." And while yes, there is no excuse for encroaching on government land, Christudas says it was all for a good cause. "Almost overnight we erected a structure and since there were no complaints, we made it bigger. Apart from putting in more beds, we also started a spinning and weaving programme."

As the encroachment grew, railway authorities came, abused Christudas and the lepers and asked them to demolish the structure. While pleading did not work, Christudas moved to threats. "I told them I will take all the patients to railway platforms across the city and treat them there. After all if they took away our hospital what other option do we have?" he says. Later the chief general manager agreed to the priest's demands.

Despite all these, Christudas's landmark experience was yet to come. In 1978, a leper family—Palat Majhi, his wife and son—set off from Bihar to Kolkata for treatment. After three days of travelling by train they reached Kolkata, but were disoriented and did not know where to get off. By the time they figured it out, the train was rolling out of the station. The family tumbled out on to the platform. Majhi and son escaped, but the wife had a fatal fall and died shortly.

Says Christudas: “That incident shook me up. Did she come all this way just to lose her life?”

In 1981, he left the Missionaries of Charity and set off for Motihari, Bihar. Joining him on this fool’s mission were a few of his former patients. “I told them, I have no money. I do not know how I am going to live. They told me that they would starve with me, but wanted to come with me,” he says.

In Motihari, he was told about a big leper colony in Raxaul. Shunned by the villagers, the lepers were staying on a plot which Christudas says was “no man’s land”. There were about 200 lepers, all begging for a living, including the children. The lepers gave him a hut when they came to know of his decision to live among them. “There was a Nepali family with me and they, too, needed a house,” he recalls. So Christudas used a clothesline to divide the hut into two, hung a sheet over it and created two homes.

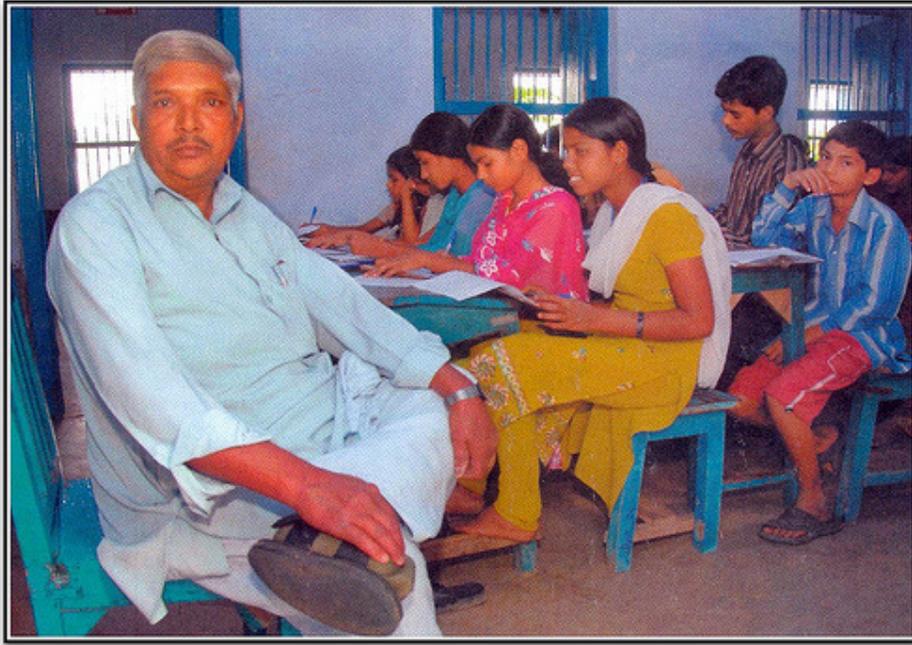
Christudas says the villagers were extremely generous with the lepers and him, as they gave them land to start the settlement. “The land was used as a common toilet and when it was offered to us, we grabbed it.” He describes cleaning it, along with the patients, with his own hands and a shudder of revulsion passes through us. But the man himself seems unconcerned. “You must understand, they offered that land to us on their own, it was a large-hearted gesture,” he says.

But soon the enterprise ran out of cash. “All my savings were directed towards this but we were running low on funds,” Christudas says. And it is here that Dutch businessman Peter Derkson helped. The Derksens had visited the Kolkata hospital and had assured Christudas of help, anytime he needed it. So he sent out a plea.

What followed was quite like a scene in a thriller. Christudas describes being a little overawed by the five-star hotel where Derkson was staying and had invited him over for coffee. He says, “We talked, and in the end, he offered me 16 bundles of hundred-rupee notes.” Christudas was thunderstruck. Then there was the problem of transporting the money. “We bundled it in plastic bags, covered it with leaves and grime to make it seem like manure and then we set out,” he says.

It’s 9 p.m. and we have been listening to him talk for almost three hours. Young Manisha comes running when he calls out for her and nods enthusiastically when he asks her to prepare dinner for us. “Subzi, parantha, achar, papad, dahi... garam garam achcha,” he jokes, and she laughs.

Some part of the money that Derkson gave him went towards the construction of a 47-bed mud-walled hospital, built by the patients themselves. And on January 1, 1982, barely two months after he came to Raxaul, the hospital opened for treatment.



Leprosy has a very strong social stigma, but over here, I am a man with dignity. I am cured and I do go back to visit my family but this is home now - Ameen Mansoori, Principal, Little Flower School.

Next was a school. Building the school was easy, but no one wanted their children to go, since they brought in money by begging. Eventually, the parents were given money to cover for what the children might have earned through begging. Soon the hunt for a teacher was on and Christudas was adamant that he wanted a leprosy patient for the job.

Vishwanath Jha's story enters our narrative at the same time as Manisha joins us laden with dinner plates. She urges us to try out the curd, since the milk has been sourced from Little Flower's dairy farm and then leaves.

Jha, Christudas tells us, was like all lepers in Raxaul, unmindful of his daily hygiene, with a change of clothes coming along probably once in a few weeks. He was with the railways, but even his family abandoned him after he was infected.

Every day, Jha would beg at the station along with the others, but one evening he happened to go to Raxaul town to buy something. Ostracism at the hands of the town people was nothing new to the lepers. That evening as Jha went to a shop to buy something, the shopkeeper threw a bucket of hot water at him and asked him to wash his clothes and himself. That proved to be a turning point for Jha, who straightened up and applied for the teacher's post.

He went back to the same shop a year later. The shop keeper gave him a seat, offered him tea and when he was making the payment Jha asked him, "Do you remember me?" The man looked at him long in the eye and said, "Yes. But I do not regret what I did, if this is what the result is."

Currently, the school has 125 students and an impressive alumni. There is Reena, the third daughter among five, who is pursuing her MBBS in the UK and Manjur Alam, a lawyer in Madras High Court. Christudas teaches English, as education is now his sole focus. "I have slowly, but steadily, passed on the functioning of Little Flower to the next generation," he says.

We make our way to Little Flower the next morning at 9 a.m. and by that time it is bustling with life. The school rooms are packed and elsewhere everybody is rushing around intent on their task. Life, we are informed, begins here at 4 a.m., thanks to the dairy farm.

It all began with one cow that was given to a former patient as part of the rehabilitation programme. Today the farm produces 300 litres of milk, which is sold to Raxaul and Birganj in Nepal. When the farm first started producing excess milk, efforts to sell it were met with extreme hostility. No one wanted to touch "lepers' milk". Christudas eventually persuaded shopkeepers to sell it, but

then the people would not buy. Finally a couple of doctors and engineers in the town bought the milk to convince others.

Today, the milk brings in Rs 2 lakh per month. Says Christudas: “Every paise we earned since 1984, which is when the farm started, has gone into a bank account. We have not touched it and in another two years it is going to be our first step towards being self-sufficient.” Little Flower requires close to Rs 1 crore annually.

We are then introduced to a slight, middle-aged man with a shy smile. Bir Bahadur Yadav was brought to Little Flower from Birganj on a bed and abandoned. A driver with the Nepal government, he would lie huddled, refusing to interact with anyone. “He would be buried under layers of blankets and no one could get a word out of him,” recalls Christudas. Even the medicine was not working.

Finally Christudas managed to get through to him. “He said ‘I have lost my job, I have nothing left to live for’. To which I replied, ‘well, are we both not lucky? You are a driver and I am looking for one to drive the new ambulance’. He threw off the blankets and within months was well on the road to recovery.”



Christudas's clothes are spun in Little Flower. The silk scarves blankets are exported to Australia and England and sold through NGO outlets in New Delhi.

We reached the spinning centre while listening to Yadav's story. Kunti sits there with her children trying to spin the yarn and is clearly too busy to talk. Says she: "Chawal, dal, subzi, tarkari... yeh sab khareedte hain kamai se [Rice, pulses, vegetables, I buy all this from the money I earn here]." She makes Rs 2,000 every month and Christudas tells us his clothes are spun here. The silk, scarves, blankets and tablecloths made here are exported to Australia and England and are sold through NGO outlets in Delhi.

Ameen Mansoori is the current principal of Little Flower School. "I am from East Champaran and I came here in 1985. Baba ke saath humein bhagwan mil gaya," he says humbly. "Leprosy has a very strong social stigma, but over here I am a man with dignity. I am cured and I do go back to visit my family but this is home now."

According to Christudas, the biggest problem associated with leprosy is the social stigma. Curable and the least infectious among infectious diseases, it is victim to centuries of prejudice. "It is not hereditary; none of our children here suffer from it. In fact, most of us have a natural immunity to the bacteria," he says.

A group of young men who had been cured completely left Sunderpur to seek their fortunes elsewhere, but no one was willing to employ them. They came back and started a poultry farm. "3,000 broilers," Shanti, a former patient, informs us with pride. "We supply the market and the centre."

The hospital in Sunderpur village has treated over 50,000 patients and most of those who come now suffer from early symptoms. As there is no mutilation, they leave after they are cured. From 47 beds, the structure has now grown to 140 beds. Rizwana Khan, 25, is a mother of three and came from Delhi to be treated. Shabana, her one-year-old daughter, plays next to her; Khan is waiting to complete her course and go home.



The Shepherd and his Flock - Br. Christudas with the people at Sunderpur.

It has been a fulfilling journey for Christudas, but by no means easy. Raxaul has one hospital where Little Flower now keeps a room on standby in case of emergencies. The hospital is 2km away from Sunderpur and the villagers wanted to build a road from Little Flower to the hospital. Says Christudas: “The land belonged to 32 landowners and I went to each to beg for land.” All, but one, agreed.

One morning, the dissenter gathered a 300-strong lathi-wielding mob which beat up the lepers and Christudas. He also filed a case of encroachment against Christudas and the villagers, and got a warrant issued against the priest.

However, the local MLA was a sympathiser and he ensured Christudas was not arrested. But the case dragged on for 15 years before the court ruled in favour of the lepers. Says Christudas: “The road was important to us not just for medical purposes, but also because it would mean easy delivery of supplies. But after we broke our bones and split blood for it, it united us in a way nothing else had.”

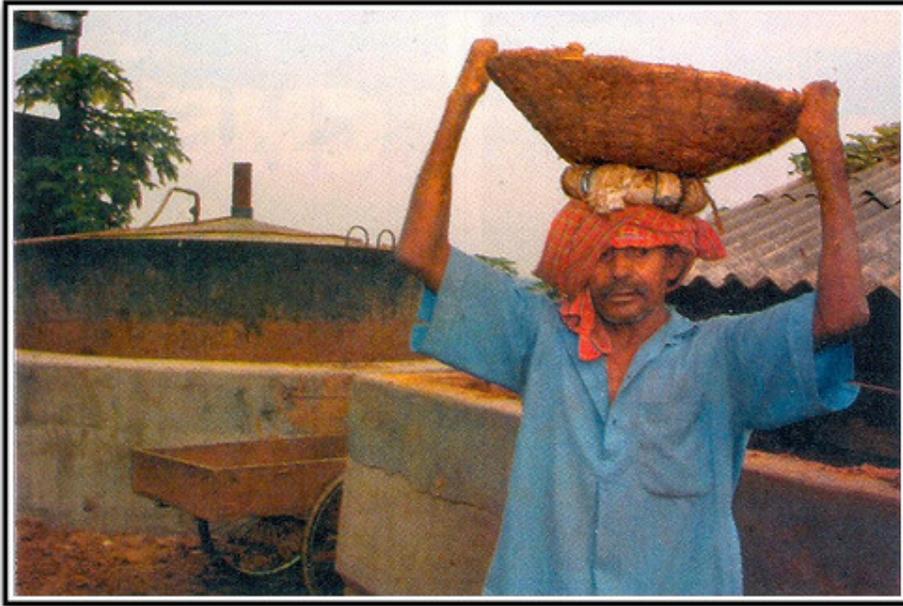
Today, north Bihar has 22 leper colonies, 10 less than when Christudas came here. And the only patients are the older generation. “We are looking at a future where no one is a patient,” he says.

And what about the future of Little Flower? “A flower blooms in the morning and wilts by evening but as long as it stands, its fragrance makes the world a beautiful place. That is our guiding principle, too,” says Christudas. He wants all the rehabilitation centres to flourish, but is also looking forward to a time when the hospital has no patients. “Then I will know that my life has been a worthy one.”

A first Hand Experience:

Father to two boys—one studying in Patna and the other in Haridwar—Bharat is a sprightly man rushing from one end of the Little Flower Leprosy Hospital to the other with alacrity and a smile on his lips. He inspects a jeep recently purchased by the ashram with the delight of a child. The only give-away about his traumatic past are his milky eyes and mutilated hands.

He was a young man, he recalls, when Christudas first came to Raxaul and was already in the throes of the disease. “Hum kharab ho gaye the,” he tells THE WEEK. “But Baba saved me and my life. Today I travel all across the country with him. I wish I had known about this disease earlier.”



Dignity of Labour at Sunderpur Farm.

A middle-aged man has come from East Champaran to admit his wife. She has been a patient for the past five years, but the infection keeps coming back. “Everyone in the village kept telling me to abandon her but I could not,” he says. “But what I am worried about is whether I would also catch the infection.” Bharat looks at him and asks, “Kisne bola tumko? As long as you stay clean, nothing happens.” He returns to his post in the outpatient department of the hospital.

Shanti is a petite middle-aged woman with a grin on her face as she rushes from the poultry farm to the cattleshed. “Baba parmashwar hai,” she says, adding proudly that she has four children, all of whom are well settled. “My husband and I came with Baba and he shared a hut with us,” she says proudly. While her two sons are training in “cities”, one of her daughter, she informs us, is a “staff nurse”. “If it was not for Baba, I don’t know where life would have taken us. But Sunderpur is our home now and he is our God,” she says.



INTERVIEW WITH BROTHER CHRISTUDAS

How did you decide to dedicate your life to the treatment of leprosy?

I was probably 14 years old when I first read this inspiring story of Fr Damien [who was canonised this year for his work among lepers].

How did you zero in on Raxaul?

I was working with the Missionaries of Charity in Kolkata. A couple travelled for over three days to reach us and the wife succumbed to an unfortunate accident. I made enquiries about the place they came from. I was told that in north Bihar, leprosy is almost endemic and no treatment was available. So in 1981, I came here.

What are the activities of Little Flower?

We have a 140-bed hospital which is manned by a trained staff. The initial structure of the hospital was built by the patients themselves. We have a dairy farm which supplies milk to all of Raxaul and the nearest Nepal town, Birganj.

That apart we have a poultry farm, agricultural land and a spinning centre. Little Flower also has a school till class 10, which has 450 students and 13 teachers. 300 families live in the village and we have 450 housing units.

Has the social stigma around leprosy finally been removed?

Leprosy is a 3,000-year-old disease and till the 1950s no cure was available. Today, almost 95 per cent of the population do not contract the disease because of immunity to the bacteria. Now most of the patients come to us for treatment in the initial stages and require no rehabilitation since there is no mutilation. But for some it can be an uphill climb. More than physical, it is the psychological impact of the disease which destroys a patient. But ignorance levels about the



disease are now coming down.