
WORLD HEALTH DAY

"Preserve Sight, Prevent Blindness"

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Blindness : The Problem in India

By

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THE last two decades have been a growing awareness, both on the part of the Government and the public, of the problem of blindness in India. Many more schools and institutions for the education and training of the blind have been established both by the Government and voluntary agencies and a beginning has also been made in the employment of the blind. Today over 3,000 blind persons are under the care of institutions and approximately 500 have been found gainful employment alongside the sighted in factories, mills and at a variety of other occupations. In spite of these efforts, however, only the fringe of the problem seems to have been touched and much still remains to be done.

What is most surprising is that hardly any attention appears to have been paid to the all-important problem of preventing blindness. In the more progressive countries blindness is now regarded mainly as

a disease of old age. In India, however, a large number of children and adults of working age still lose their sight as a result of diseases which have been eradicated in the West, such as smallpox, ophthalmia neonatorum etc.

There are no reliable statistics relating to the blind in India. The last attempt at estimating the blind population of India was made in 1944. According to the Government of India "Report on Blindness" published in that year the incidence of blindness in India was estimated at 250 totally blind persons per 100,000 of the population. For every totally blind person it was believed that there was at least one person "whose sight was so damaged as to make it impossible for him to earn a living without the special assistance of blind welfare services". Thus the incidence of blindness in India correctly would be 500 per 100,000 of the population. In comparison the incidence

of blindness in Britain is 205 per 100,000 and in the U.S.A. 198. Except for Egypt and a few areas in Africa, the incidence of blindness in India is the highest in the world.

The provisional returns of the 1961 Census estimate the total population of India at 438 million. On this basis the blind population of India amounts to over two million. The figures published by the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind in 1956 estimate the world blind population at approximately 942 millions. India therefore has more than 1/5th of the world blind population. It is also believed that 90% of blindness in India is preventable. These figures, although displaying a somewhat gloomy and dismal picture, should, I think, help to shock us out of our complacency and to urge upon the authorities concerned the need to devote greater attention to the vast task of preventing blindness. It is also worth remembering that 80%

of India's population is to be found in the rural areas. Hence it is only to be expected that 80% of the blind population would also be found in the rural areas. Any attempt at a reduction in the incidence of blindness must include measures for prevention of blindness among the rural population:

The main causes of blindness in India are (a) trachoma and allied inflammatory conditions of the conjunctiva and cornea, (b) cataract and glaucoma, (c) smallpox, (d) keratomalacia and other results of malnutrition, (e) venereal diseases etc. To these causes may be added the effects of ignorance and poverty of the masses with the resultant insanitary conditions of personal hygiene and daily living and most important of all the inadequate medical services available in the rural areas.

Most of the causes of blindness are today preventable. Trachoma and conjunctivitis if treated in the early stages, would not result in blindness. In the rural areas a large proportion of blindness results from the use of irritants and 'surmas' offered to the simple-minded villagers by quacks. Wide-spread publicity as to their injurious effects and the availability of adequate medical facilities would in time put an end to this. Vaccination and revaccination would almost certainly take smallpox off the list of main causes of blindness in India:

Under proper conditions almost 90% of cataract operations are successful in restoring useful vision. Unfortunately, many persons have lost their sight as a result of 'couching'. The itinerant 'couch' offers immediate restoration of sight by means of needling. In 90% of these cases sight is lost either immediately or soon after. Glaucoma is often mistaken for cataract and treatment is sought only when it is too late and sight is completely lost.

It is tragic that so much of blind-

ness in our country with its resultant hardships and misery, is the result of causes which are preventable and diseases which, if treated early in their onset, are curable. It is time that a determined effort was made to reduce the unnecessarily high incidence of blindness in our country. As stated in the Government of India (Report on Blindness, 1944), "Our attack upon the whole vast incidence of blindness must therefore be twofold—the medical work of dealing with eye diseases as they occur; and secondly the vast task of removing the indirect causes".

It is essential that adequate medical facilities are provided throughout the country. All district hospitals should have an ophthalmic section under a qualified ophthalmologist. Wherever mobile health units are developed these should include an eye specialist. Visits to rural primary health centres by the ophthalmologist attached to the nearest hospital should also be encouraged as are visits from other specialists.

It would be relevant here also to refer to eye camps which have been the subject of so much controversy. In the past they have been regarded as the only means of offering treatment to the mass of people who find their way to these camps. Most of them followed a set pattern, widespread publicity, cursory examinations and operations by the thousands. Newspaper accounts included such items as "500 operations per day" or "one operation per minute". No one bothered to find out how many of the patients ultimately recovered their sight and retained vision. In cataract operations the post-operative care is regarded as most important but this unfortunately was rarely available at these eye camps. However, it would be wrong to say that eye camps should be banned entirely. Eye camps, if properly organised, can be a great blessing. They should

be allowed only if adequate facilities for examination of patients, operations and post-operative care are available.

In addition to providing increased and improved medical services, it is important that steps are taken to educate the people in the simple methods of preventing blindness and the care of the eyes. All available means of propaganda may be used for this purpose e.g., the press, radio, films, posters, etc. In this campaign the services of the health visitor, the midwife, and school teacher could be used to good purpose. A short course of lectures on the care of the eyes could be included in the training courses for the *Dais* and *Gram Sevikas* who are in close contact with the women of the rural areas. For example, if the *Dai* or midwife used a few drops of silver nitrate solution as a matter of routine at the birth of a baby, it would save the sight of so many babies who lose their sight as a result of ophthalmia neonatorum.

The task of preventing blindness is an enormous one which so far has received very little attention. The Association for the Prevention of Blindness in Bengal and the Blind Relief Association in Bombay have been confined to limited areas. Realizing the need for a national agency which could devote its efforts to this problem, workers for the blind in India at the Second All India Conference for the blind held at Bombay in June, 1959, adopted a resolution bringing into existence "The National Society for the Prevention of Blindness". A number of eminent ophthalmologists in the country have associated themselves with the Society and the Society has been fortunate in having Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur as its first President. The Society, which aims at preventing blindness and eliminating the causes which lead to it, will, we hope, in the years to come, succeed in reducing the high incidence of blindness in our country.

Every great advance in science has issued from a new audacity of imagination.

—Johan Dewey.