

A brief biographic sketch of Dr. Bhau Daji Lad (1822–1874): A forgotten figure of Indian dermatology

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"I always look upon Dr. Bhau Daji as a man who has done excellent work in his life—and though he has written little, the little he has written is worth thousands of pages written by others."

-Max Müller

Introduction

The wrath of leprosy has made human life miserable since time immemorial. The untiring crusade of man ultimately succeeded in harnessing the march of this dreaded and deforming disease only in the last two centuries, though the effort had started since the early days of the history of medicine. Many great luminaries in the history of human civilization have dedicated their life to mitigating the agony of leprosy sufferers. Many of them are well known, some of them are little known and still others have remained unknown in the history of medicine. This account describes a man whose versatile genius made him walk effortlessly through the field of ancient Indian history, social works and politics thus acquiring the fame of a great medical man. This article focuses on the life and works of Dr. Bhau Daji Lad, a forgotten figure of Indian leprology.

From Goa to Mumbai

Bhau Daji [Figure 1] was born in 1822 to a very poor Saraswat Brahmin family in Manjare in Goa. His actual name was Ramkrishna Lad. His father Vithal used to call him affectionately as "Bhau." Bhau's father in 1832 planned to move to Bombay—an upcoming centre for trade and learning. Though Vithal had to struggle to maintain a decent life, he was gifted with his two bright sons, Bhau and Narayan.^{1,2}

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An Intelligent Student and a Promising Early Career

Bhau proved to be a prodigy from his early childhood and was a brilliant chess player which attracted the attention of the then Governor of Bombay, the Earl of Clare who exhorted Vithal to provide English education to Bhau Daji.² After completion of his early education, Bhau joined the famous Elphinstone College of Bombay in 1840.³ In 1843, he joined the same college as an Assistant Teacher of Chemistry and Natural Philosophy. In 1844, Bhau won the first prize in an essay competition arranged by the British Government on female infanticide in a particular section of the society in Kutch and Kathiawar.⁴

The Grant Medical College was established in 1845. In those days, it was very difficult to get native Hindu students for an English medical system as it required dissection of human cadavers that was forbidden in the society. But Bhau came forward and sat for the entrance test and topped the merit list. Soon, he became the favored student of the then Superintendent, Dr. Charles Morehead.² In April 1851, Bhau successfully completed the course and became one of the first eight students to be awarded the degree of Graduate of the Grant Medical College (G.G.M.C.).⁵

Fame, Fortune, and Philanthropy: Bhau Daji as Physician

Bhau had proved to be a brilliant student from the early days of his medical education. He was equally proficient in medicine, surgery and obstetrics. Dr. Narayan Daji Lad, the brother of Bhau Daji, passed his G.G.M.C examination in 1852 and started an independent practice.² He started giving free treatment at Nagdevi Dispensary and Bhau also joined this philanthropic endeavour. He was very sympathetic to his patients at times even giving monetary support to them. He used to take special care of his leprosy patients. Dr. Bhau Daji Lad developed a roaring practice very soon.⁶

Bhau – the Antiquarian

Bhau Daji had vast knowledge in the field of deciphering ancient inscriptions and numismatics. He published about twenty articles

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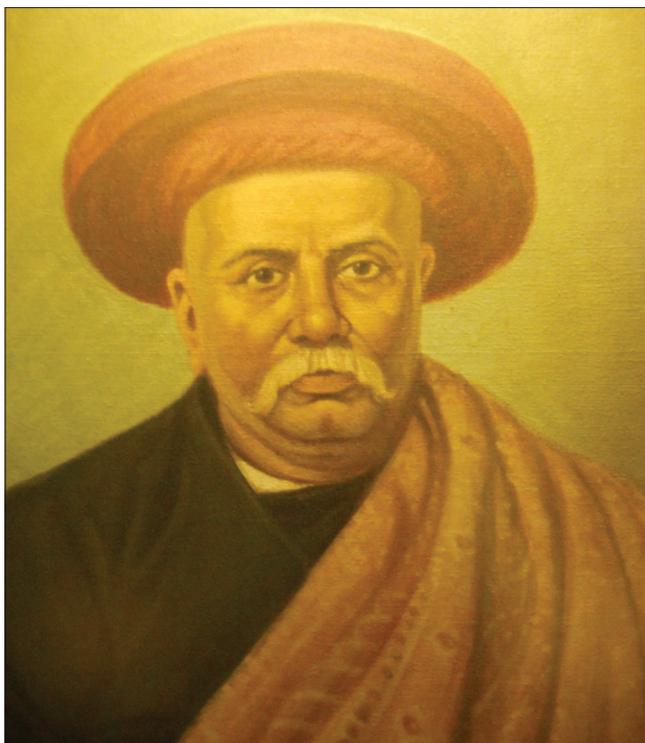


Figure 1: Dr. Bhau Daji Lad (1822–1874)

on history and archaeology in the Journal of the Bombay branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.⁷ His collection contained many rare manuscripts on the ancient Indian medical system including studies on the Elephanta inscriptions.

He was elected as a Board member of the Bombay branch of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1851.⁸ He was made the Vice-President of the society in the year 1865 and served till 1873. Bhau was a key member in the foundation of Victoria Garden and Albert museum in 1872. This museum was later rechristened in his honour as Bhau Daji Lad Museum in 1975 [Figure 2].⁹

Social Works

Bhau Daji's essay on female infanticide shows his keen interest in the various prevailing social evils and a dedication towards creating social reforms. He participated and donated many books to the library movement of the Bombay Presidency. He became the founder member of the Native General Library. He also decorated various important posts like member of the board of education in the Bombay Presidency, Vice-President of the Grant Medical College, the first native sheriff of Bombay, and played a vital role in the establishment of the Bombay University in 1857. He attended the first widow remarriage that took place in Bombay in 1869.¹⁰

The Leprosy "Cure": The Famous "Bhau Daji Treatment"

As already mentioned, India suffered from the curse of leprosy since its early days. The use of various herbs is mentioned in the ancient Ayurvedic texts long before Christian era.¹¹ Bhau Daji's intense interest in the Indian system of medicine and profound knowledge of Sanskrit and other ancient Indian languages made him search for remedies of diseases within the indigenous system. He had a great collection of old manuscripts written in Sanskrit, Arabic, and Pali.



Figure 2: The Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai

Of these, many were on medical subjects. He developed a garden that nurtured various herbs of medicinal importance. It is said that Bhau was suggested by his teacher, Dr. Morehead, to study the treatment of leprosy, and accordingly he started his work on leprosy. His request for a ward to try his remedy at J. J. Hospital was refused initially, but in 1868 he was allowed to treat a few patients with leprosy. One of them died of small pox, another two left, and four patients, including the son of Police Superintendent, Mr. C. Hallums, got remarkable relief.¹² His fame for "curing" leprosy spread widely and patients started coming from all corners of the country with great hope. Bhau made arrangements for them and took special care in this regard. After being satisfied with the result, Bhau sent his medicine to a leper hospital at Ratnagiri for trial. He preserved photographs of leprosy patients at different stages of treatments. During the third quarter of the 19th century, his treatment became a topic of discussion in the medical world.^{13,14}

Bhau Daji probably started his work on leprosy on or before 1859 and continued for the next few years. He had a plan to study the effect of his remedy in a systematic and scientific manner so that any query arising in the scientific world could be answered with evidence and logic. Hence, he assembled a corpus fund to establish a hospital to study his remedy. He preserved notes, details of management, sketches, etc., Bhau Daji kept his method secret. Even his brother Dr. Narayan Daji Lad did not know it. It has been reported that only three of his European friends were told about the method on the precondition of secrecy.

Bhau Daji's Method of Treatment

Bhau Daji probably used the extracts from *Hydnocarpus inebriens* known as *Kauty* among Indians. He used it for both systemic as well as external application. The patients were instructed to take a certain amount of the oil with milk (sometimes tinted to mask the identity), some oil was applied to the mucosae (such as nostrils), and the whole body had to be massaged with the oil. A warm water bath had to be taken after two hours. Patients had to put the oil again to keep till the evening. Afterwards it had to be wiped off. They were then instructed to have a walk till they perspired. Others were advised to apply the oil after a warm bath in the morning and had to repeat the application in the evening and to sleep with the application. Patients were also asked to refrain from pork, beef, fish, alcoholic drinks, tea, coffee, etc., They were allowed to take plenty of milk, fruits,

mutton, etc., They were followed up regularly with examination and serial photographs. The duration of treatment and endpoint criteria are not known.¹⁵

Was it Really a “Cure”: Different Views?

As soon as the report of “cure” of leprosy by Bhau Daji’s method came into the news, various comments – some in support and others opposing the view – started a debate. This wave even reached England as was evident from the contemporary medical literature. Certificates from European physicians examining the cases personally were available as well as declaration from the patients themselves in support of the method.^{15,16} On the other hand, some famous dermatologists of the western world, Erasmus Wilson (famous for his description of lichen planus) and others were sceptical about the success of the treatment.^{14,17} To resolve the controversy and scepticism, Bhau Daji started assembling his results with a plan of publication, though it did not materialize due to his sudden illness and death. The obituary note in the Times of India of 5th June, 1874 mentioned that, “while ill, he was most anxious that his manuscript should be collected and got ready for publication.”¹⁵

Bhau Daji’s Treatment: Under-evaluated at Home and Abroad

Whether Bhau Daji’s method was really a “cure” may be a historical controversy, but his endeavour had definitely attracted the attention of the modern medical world about the use of chaulmoogra oil in leprosy.¹⁸ This initiated a number of scientific trials and in consequence, chaulmoogra oil remained the only hope in the management of leprosy till the discovery of dapsone in 1941.¹⁹ As far as the literature on leprosy written by both Indian and foreigners goes, due importance to Bhau Daji’s work in the evolution of antileprotic management has not been given.

Epilogue

The last few years of this great man passed through a sad phase. His financial base was shaken due to losses incurred in some projects and he had to live on small pensions from the *Nizam* of Hyderabad and some other noble men.² Bhau Daji suffered from apoplexy in the year 1873. On the 31st of May, 1874 this great man left for his heavenly abode.² His sudden demise left his mission about the “cure” of leprosy incomplete. The famous science journal *Nature* expressed: “This very remarkable native of India, the true friend of his fellow countrymen as well as of science and learning, died on May 31st at the comparatively early age of 51.”²⁰

Once Abraham Lincoln said, “And in the end, it is not the years in your life that counts, it is the life in your years.” This holds true for the life and works of Dr. Bhau Daji Lad. The Asiatic Society has published a commemorative volume in his memory. Books have been written on his life and works.^{7,21-23} Though his work regarding

the treatment of leprosy could not be substantiated with clear and established way of scientific examination from the available evidence and he might not be considered as a recognized leprologist, his endeavour and sincere effort influenced the then world of leprosy management at a time when leprology was yet to emerge as a new branch of medicine.

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