

# **A Belgian turned Indian (V. Vedadri)**

## **Glimpses of Hemerijckx Government Leprosy Centre – Polambakkam and the role played by Dr.Claire Vellut, a Belgian turned Indian**

by V. VEDADRI  
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As far as my memory goes, Polambakkam Centre was an off shoot of former Lady Wellington Leprosy Teaching and Research Institute re-named as Central Leprosy Teaching and Research Institute of Chengalpattu.

The Director Dr. Robert G. Cochrane a Scottish missionary who was doing research on leprosy – cause, course, and treatment, had started a night segregation camp at Polambakkam in 1936 in the land donated by a local philanthropist, Mr.K. Muthumalla Reddiar, who happened to be the foster father of the Belgian team through out his life time.

There, small tenements were built to house the infectious type of leprosy patients and to isolate them from home during night, to avoid close contacts from his family and children, and to study the impact of this segregation from home, help to avoid development of new cases.

After Dr. Cochrane leaving from Chengalpattu, Polambakkam satellite project was handed over to former Hind Kusht Nivaran Sangh who was managing it with assistance from CLTRI. They continued to treat leprosy patients who volunteered for treatment with the injection of chaulmoogra oil, an abstract from the bark of a tree.

In the year 1955 the government of Belgium sent a team under the leadership of Dr. Frans Hemerijckx to India to give some assistance to India for leprosy control, as a sign of reciprocal activity in response to the Indian help during a flood in Belgium.

The team consisted of Dr. Frans Hemerijckx, Dr. Claire Vellut, Madam Helen Eenberg and Madam Simone Liegeois, nurses. This team had started the project in 1955 – officially inaugurated on 9th July 1955.

They have started functioning with what ever infrastructure was available, and built up gradually. They have started training people with basic knowledge needed for the field work and named them as rural leprosy worker. They could train a team of 10 to 15 people in a batch. After completion of training they were posted in the villages with one or two subcentres under their control. Their main duty was to identify the early leprosy cases and bring them for confirmation and treatment by the medical people. Also they have to examine the contacts of the patients every year and keep visiting them and motivating them for regular treatment.

52 sub centers were started in an area of 60km radius covering 950 villages with 1 million population. 30 field workers were posted, in charge of one or two subcentres each. 3 non medical supervisors to supervise the work of field workers.

At the head quarters 5 medical doctors, 3 staff nurses, one occupational therapist, one physiotherapist, 2 psychotherapy technician, 2 laboratory technician, 2 ministerial staff at the office, 2 injectors, 2 shoemakers, 2 dressers, 2 cooks, 2 sanitary workers, 4 gardeners, 1 weaving master to teach weaving mat, were employed. No driver, no office assistant were employed because those 2 jobs were managed by the others. With this infrastructure the centre was functioning successfully and became known the other parts of the world as a single largest leprosy

unit in the world and attracted visitors from all around the world, till June 1960 when the centre was handed over to Tamilnadu Government .

Among the visitors few noteworthy people are mentioned here.

During 1944 when Dr.R.G. Cochrane was doing his research, their Excellencies the British Governor general Lord Mountbatten, and Lady Edvina Mountbatten visited Polambakkam.

In 1959, their Royal Highness King Leopold the IIIrd and Princess Lilian of Belgium and in 1964 the Royal Highness King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola of Belgium have visited followed by his excellency Sri Sri Prakasa, the Governor of Madas. Her Excellency Union government Health Minister, Rajkumari Amrit kaur, Sri OV. Alagesan, the deputy Minister of Indian Railways. Sri Anbazhagan the Health Minister of Tamilnadu Government. The Nobel Laureate Mother Teresa for a few days to learn leprosy control work, count Raoul Follereau a French Barister and Madam Follereau who contributed for leprosy control all over the world on a large scale, Prof.TN. Jagadesan General secretary of Hind Kusht Nivaran Singh.

After handing over of the Belgian leprosy center to the government of Tamil Nadu, the name of the centre was changed as Leprosy Centre, till 1969 when Dr. Frans Hemerijckx left for his eternal home, the centre was re-named as Hemerijckx Government Leprosy Centre (HGLC) and Dr.Claire Vellut was made the Principal Medical officer in June 1960 with 100% grant from Tamil Nadu Government for maintenance of the centre.

Dr. Claire Vellut always with a broad smile was easily approachable by anybody at any time of the day from office administration to the sickness of people she was note worthy of her discipline and punctuality in keeping up here promise to others and in helping others in distress guiding the innocent in their life, personal or official.

HGLC Polambakkam was running an out patient department in the evening 3 to 5 p.m for surrounding 9 villages, for general sickness other than leprosy. For cases unmanageable they were taken to nearby general hospital with conveyance, and emergency like snake bite, diarrhea etc. they were attended any time of the day.

There were 5 medical doctors regularly for the daily routine work. At one time Dr.Claire Vellut was alone for a few months attended to the leprosy clinic in the morning, ward round, office administration and evening general out patient department and emergency at night time, and she never murmured and never complained of tiredness or sickness. She was very much interested in the welfare of the poor and down trodden leprosy patients and staff, treated everybody with due respect and human consideration. My mother was calling Dr. Claire Vellut as a goddess, as she was curing the sick.

To sum up Dr. Claire Vellut was a big Banian tree shading people from hot sun, sheltered birdies with fruits and nest. She was living a very simple life as one of the visitors called her residence as a monastery.