



Bhaggubhai of Bhavnagar: A Case Study in Primary Intervention

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It is always an experience to work in India, particularly in villages those days of 1970s or so. We were following patients with oral precancer lesions on a yearly basis in a house to house survey.

I vividly remember, amongst many experiences, the one that stands out, and the repertoire that goes on and is exchanged in villages with 'native intellect' and the so called 'learned intellect' of ours, where one does get dumbfounded with the kind of questions that come up.

One such incident of my life took place in Bhavnagar district.

It was around 1972, when I was given to understand by our team leader Dr. Sinor that one of the villagers had a definite lesion suspicious for malignancy, and this particular man was the Sarpanch (head) of that village, where his word held highest power. He was refusing to stop his tobacco habit, leave alone agreeing for treatment or intervention of any kind. I, of course, assigned myself to go see this 'patient'.

Picture the scenario.

In the vast open farm in Bhavnagar district, a tall moustached man with a bright turban on his head- Bhaggubhai, the village Sarpanch, standing with a dramatic flair of power as the Head of village. There he was, throwing gems of knowledge in the typical Gujarati dialect to all. Yet he had within him a certain innocence and love.

I went up to him and said "Please give up your tobacco habit. If you do it right now, probably you will be free from cancer." Bhaggubhai, in his inimitable style spoke to me in Gujarati in his loud strong voice, in a confronting tone, "Doctor Saheb, why are you wasting your time and my time on this? Saheb, it is the 'khel of naseeb' (play of luck/destiny) in this world. If cancer is written in my 'naseeb' what can you possibly do about it, what is your capacity?"

Now all of this was happening in front of a large crowd of villagers who had gathered (as is typical in India) and everyone was waiting to see how I would respond.

I said, "Bhaggubhai, I came all the way to this place to meet this Bhaggubhai. It was a struggle for me to get here. I woke up at 3.30am, caught a flight to reach Bhavnagar at 6.30am, drove one and a half hours through these uneven roads to reach this village and meet Bhaggubhai.

I was born in Rangoon, Burma and I came to India. I studied oral pathology and oral cancer. We all know that our government has no money to save lives in this case, so I went to 'vilayat' (abroad) to study. America gave us the research money and our Tatas gave me a place to work. So Bhaggubhai, you realise now that I come here with all this background, to tell you that if you give up your tobacco habit, you will be saved, but if you continue you will get cancer and suffer also, as there is no treatment for this. I have never known you; we are meeting for the first time. Why is it that I am meeting you? Can you answer that question Bhaggubhai?"

The suspense was now getting built. People watching were waiting to see how things would unfold. Bhaggubhai had no expression on his face.

I only said, "It was written in my naseeb (destiny) that I had to go through all this and come from Rangoon, Burma to this village in Bhavnagar in India just so that Bhaggubhai's life can be saved. God's designs are never understood and this is my naseeb versus your naseeb- you can choose. This is a play of destiny and I am lucky to have fulfilled mine, now it is up to you. If you do give up tobacco as a leader, you will not only save your life but also the lives of so many of your villagers as they will follow you."

This logic came to me at the spur of the moment.

Scientifically, it has been shown in our study that, among all measures like TV, ads, cinema, videos etc. personal communication is the best intervention procedure.

As soon as I completed my statement, Bhaggubhai threw his bidi to the ground with a flourish as he said, "Doctor Saheb, aa lo bidi feki (I am now throwing my bidi), aaj thi (from today) no bidi no tobacco" and saying this he emptied all his tobacco on the ground, crushed it with his typical shoes in a very dramatic manner. It was impressive.

The best was that all of this action was immediately supported by spontaneous applause of the people who had gathered around and had been watching throughout. It truly was a sight.

I smiled and said, "Our destinies came together today, Bhaggubhai; not only have you improved your life, but mine also, as well as those all the people standing here."

P.s- It is noteworthy that this was the same village where we documented the largest number of people giving up tobacco habits, all due to the personality and charismatic character called Bhaggubhai!