

PINK CONNECTION

UBF Vol 9 Issue 3: Feb-April '23

Saasha

Foundation

Knitting breast
protheses for
cancer survivors

**'I don't
understand why
talking about
cancer is taboo'**

Chhavi Mittal

**A Weave of
Andhra Royals,
the Venkatagiri**

BEHIND The Scenes

We are so caught up in the mundane things of life that we forget to stop and look around us. We don't pause to feel a sense of wonder or feel gratitude for what we have. Sadly, it's our careers, marriages, or homes that consume and drive us every day. I ask, why can't we pause from this everydayness of our lives, and look at life with a new perspective? Why are we so steeped in the concerns of day-to-day living that we never enjoy a moment for what it is?

Personally, I have never had a moment I could call my own. I'm sure it's true for everybody. As I become aware of the passing years, and the time that is left, I have decided to take life one day at a time, and not let things overwhelm me.

I try to rest mentally and emotionally on weekends by not opening emails or taking official calls. I don't even call friends or go out because meeting people also takes energy. When I do go on a trip, I've decided not to see every monument kings have built or obsessively attend every talk at a literature fest. Instead, I want to absorb the place and people.

These pauses bring us to gratitude which is a very good thing to feel. There are many things we do *not* have, yet there are things we *do* have, which is our health primarily, and the people around us. Among the many things I have learnt to appreciate in my meditative pauses is the fact that I can work on a newsletter, like *Pink Connexion*, that makes a difference and gives courage to so many.

In this year, let's take off once in a while, connect with ourselves, our bodies and breath, and when we exhale, let go of the negativity.

Ratna Rao Shekar



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“I posted about my cancer because I did not want to live a lie”



At 41, Chhavi Mittal Hussein was diagnosed with breast cancer stage 2, grade 1, after an MRI scan revealed a lump in her right breast. The gutsy actor-cum-entrepreneur and mother of two, not only went on to make a full recovery, she posted about her ordeal on social media—becoming an inspiration to many women with cancer.

Minal Khona caught up with Chhavi Hussein when the cancer survivor had visited Hyderabad for an event

Chhavi Mittal Hussein is an actor who has worked in serials such as *Tumhari Disha*, *Krishnadasi*, *Bandini* and *Ek Chutki Aasman*; and in a film *Ek Vivah Aisa Bhi*. She quit acting to spend more time with her daughter Areeza when she was born; and now runs a web content and digital production company called Shitty Ideas Trending, that she set up with her director husband, Mohit Hussein.

Meeting Chhavi over breakfast for a chat proves to be a revelation. The bright-eyed, smiling, 42-year-old woman is brimming with positivity and one can never guess she has recovered from breast cancer a few months ago. In the course of the conversation, she reveals that it was a chest injury while working out that led to the discovery of the lump in her right breast in the first place.

“The gym is my happy place. I am a gym freak and I got an injury in my left breast. It turned out to be just fluid build-up but when we did the MRI scan, the lump in my other breast was discovered accidentally. This was in April last year.

After seeing the scan results, the radiologist insisted a sonography and biopsy should be done to rule out cancer. Later, when I was out for a walk, I got a call from the doctor with the biopsy report confirming it to be breast cancer. I did not panic at all. I went home and told my husband and he said that we will handle it," she recounts.

Chhavi was shocked, because like she says, you don't expect it to happen to you. For someone who stresses about little things, she was surprisingly calm in the face of this big challenge. Her main concern at that time was her kids.

She recalls, "I was 41 when it was diagnosed. I told my daughter the truth. She remembered that my grandmother had passed away from oesophageal cancer. Areeza started to cry and she asked me if I was going to die. I reassured her that I would not die. My son Arham was only two at that time, so when I came home after the surgery, I told him 'Mama is hurt and she can't carry you for some time'. I showed him the stitches and he accepted what I told him. He would come sit with me and press my feet and touch my scar."

Chhavi reveals that when she told her mother about it, she reacted by talking about something else entirely, till the news sank in. All through her treatment and recovery, her husband took charge of running the house and looking after the kids. Her mother flew down from Delhi and her in-laws who live nearby, also helped. Everyone rallied around her to ensure she recuperated to regain her strength.



Chhavi twinning outfits with her daughter Areeza

Chhavi confesses that her reaction to the cancer was different from her usual response to every challenge she has faced. She is the kind of person who questions everything and does her research on Google.

"In my circle, I am known as Ms Google. But this time, I asked cancer survivors and zeroed in on my doctors," she says.

Chhavi's tumour in her right breast was grade 1, stage 2 and along with the lump, a few lymph nodes were removed as well. She was clear she wanted a lumpectomy (breast conserving surgery) and reshaping of the defect in the breast using oncoplastic techniques, to ensure good cosmesis. The surgery lasted for seven hours.

Chhavi is self-admittedly a social media person but one who doesn't believe in filters. She asserts, "I am a social media entity. I post about everything and I never use filters. If I have dark circles, so be it, let them show in the picture. I posted about my cancer because I did not want to live a lie. I don't understand why talking about cancer is taboo. I got thousands of messages and what was common in all their tonality was that they were telling me not to be sad and they were sorry for me. I was quite sure I was not going to be sad; but that I would happily fight and remove the cancer from my body. There is scientific evidence which shows that if you are depressed and sad, cancer treatment doesn't work."

She stopped reading the messages which were overly melancholic in their tone.

Chhavi went on to share her ordeal on a day-to-day basis on social media despite the fact that she was trolled because a tiny portion of her breast was showing in the post, in which she had announced her cancer. And, with the chutzpah typical of her personality, when she had recovered, Chhavi posted a picture of herself with her cleavage showing in the same sports bra she had worn when she had announced her cancer on Instagram.

In fact, the trolling incident gave her a certain sense of freedom, she says. "I don't care what people say. I don't hesitate to share my emotions whether I am angry or crying. I don't see anything wrong with it. You do you and I will do me," she says defiantly.

The spunky woman also adds that while every cancer survivor's journey is different, she didn't want people to undermine or deride her sojourn. "These are my breasts; I know what they have gone through with the surgery and everything. I was particularly protective of them and was very keen that my breast should be preserved. And I work hard at keeping my body fit, so why should I feel ashamed because some people see it differently?" she asks.

Through it all, her family has been her biggest support system. She says, "My husband took charge and didn't let me take on any stress. He would take care of the kids; he was there during the surgery and even today, he manages work



Supportive all the way: Chhavi with her husband Mohit

All through her breast cancer treatment and recovery, her husband took charge of running the house and looking after the kids. Her mother flew down from Delhi and her in-laws who live nearby, also helped. Everyone rallied around her to ensure she recuperated to regain her strength



and the kitchen. My mother also came down to help look after the kids; my in-laws live close by so they were there too when we needed them.”

Chhavi is no stranger to pain. After the surgery, she had to go through 20 cycles of radiotherapy. Luckily for her, the side effects were not as devastating as those experienced by patients who undergo chemotherapy.

She reminisces, “I was fatigued, my skin got darker and my period cycle changed to every 20 days. I had dry skin, mood swings and massive cramps. I couldn’t lift anything for six months. My son used to cry when he wanted me to carry him and I would explain that I was unwell and couldn’t carry him. There were times when my breast was swollen and I would walk around, even in public, holding an ice pack against it.”

Chhavi has had her brush with chronic health issues earlier too. When she had a slip disc, she lost sensation in her left leg due to the excruciating pain. This experience has made her threshold for pain quite high. She was also diagnosed with multiple sclerosis or MS in 2020.

She recalls, “I had the first undiagnosed episode with double vision back in 2005. Then, in 2020 and in 2021, I had many episodes of blurred vision and was diagnosed with Relapsing Remitting Multiple Sclerosis [RRMS], which has no cure. I take Vitamin B as a supplement as it shows up now and then.”

During the cancer treatment, placing the IV lines too was very painful for her as her veins were thin; and when she was



Chhavi playing with her son Arham

Kids are her priority: Chhavi with Areeza



@RRPillariseti



Delighted to meet up with @chhavihussein who flew down to Hyderabad. Heard her insights about how she fought breast cancer at a young age, with extraordinary courage & rock solid determination. Her indomitable spirit deserves much applause. wishing her good health. Power to her

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undergoing treatment for MS, the steroids were administered through an IV..

She has to now take Tamoxifen as part of the cancer treatment protocol for the next ten years. Despite all these issues, she fought the cancer with a positive attitude and has emerged stronger and better for it.

I have cut processed sugar out of my diet completely. I rely on jaggery and dates for my sweet cravings. I don't drink anymore, though I was a social drinker earlier. ... I even carry home-cooked vegetarian food to the sets

Reflecting on how the cancer has changed her and her lifestyle she says, "I used to be a perfectionist and I would stress about every little thing. Now I let go easily. I have cut processed sugar out of my diet completely. I rely on jaggery and dates for my sweet cravings. I don't drink anymore, though I was a social drinker earlier. Though mutton is my comfort food, I went off meat for four months. I wasn't able to relish it as much. I upped my fibre and eat a lot of vegetables now; I even carry home-cooked vegetarian food to the sets."

Chhavi and her husband have also bought farmland in Khopoli, near Mumbai where they grow their own vegetables and the kids love going to the farm. "We have dogs, chicken that run around and they enjoy their time there, playing with the animals and seeing how things are growing. I love being in nature and we go there as often as we can," she shares.

Chhavi is in many ways representative of the women of her generation. But it is her courage, positive attitude and taking life as it comes, which makes her an epitome of confidence and a role model for other women who are fighting breast cancer. ■

Knitting hope and love

for breast cancer survivors



Breast cancer diagnosis is invariably followed by months of gruelling treatment and uncertainties. To top it all, women who have mastectomies may experience fear, dejection, despair, and a negative attitude about their bodies.

But, here's crusader Jayashree Ratan, who made it her mission to stand by mastectomy survivors and let them know they are not alone. Her kindness and empathy have earned her an army of fans.

Ratan's quest to ease the lives of mastectomy survivors began in 2018 when she spoke to a relative who had undergone the procedure. In a chat with Pink, Ratan recalls that she had asked her what she was using after the mastectomy. Her relative told her that she was stuffing her bras and blouses with handkerchiefs and dupattas.

"All this was not easy as the skin had been exposed to surgery and rashes and infections would occur frequently. I then asked if I could send over some knitted knockers to her," said Ratan.

Ratan had stumbled across knittedknockers.org during a trip to the USA. Knitted Knockers, is an organisation comprising volunteer crocheters and knitters, who dole out free knitted knockers – handmade breast prostheses – to women who've had mastectomies and other procedures. Traditional silicon prostheses may be costly or burdensome. Knitted knockers are snug and comfy. When placed in a bra, they take the shape of a real breast.

Mastectomy is a painful process and many breast cancer survivors feel embarrassed. But, crusader Jayashree Ratan teamed up with knittedknockers of the US to knit and send handmade breast prostheses to breast cancer survivors. Today, she has a legion of grateful women who have now regained their confidence thanks to her efforts.

Nivedita Choudhuri speaks to the empathetic Jayashree Ratan



Knitted knockers are snug and comfy and when placed in a bra, they take the shape of a real breast. They offer slivers of hope to many distressed breast cancer survivors

They are a good solution for those who choose not to go in for reconstruction surgery. Ratan thought that in India, they can be a blessing for poor women who would not have heard of reconstruction surgery and would not be able to afford one either.



Saaisha's knockers – lightweight, breathable, and soft against the skin – provide slivers of hope to thousands of distressed women. They may be stuffed with polyfibres, but what they are really filled with is love and optimism

“I knitted a pair of knockers and sent them over to my relative. She phoned me in tears soon after. But these were tears of joy despite the difficult time she was facing. She said she had never felt better and wondered if I could make knockers for women going through the same situation as her,” recounts Ratan, who had always done a lot of handiwork, be it sewing, weaving or beadwork.

She called a few friends and mooted the idea of making knockers for mastectomy patients. “Everybody thought it was a great idea. I registered with knittedknockers.org and became their provider in India. And so, Saaishaa India Foundation (saaishaindia.org) was born. Saaisha signifies ‘meaningful life’ and it seemed apt to have this name for our foundation because we wanted women to lead meaningful lives after their mastectomies,” relates Ratan.

Ratan, who worked as a banker for 18 years and then as a teacher for around six years, was fond of doing good from childhood. She would team up with her parents and sundry relatives to organise food donation drives. She visited organisations such as Mercy Home and Little Sisters of the Poor to read to children. The post-graduate degree holder in economics would collect household items and groceries from her students and distribute to the poor before Diwali.

She travelled all over India, thanks to her father who had a transferable job and had to resettle in a new location every two years. After marriage too, her husband had to relocate every two years. The frequent transfers broadened Ratan’s mind and made her even more eager to reach people.

They began their venture with four volunteers in 2018. Now, there are over 350 volunteers based in India, UAE, Kuwait, Oman, and Singapore who knit or crochet the knockers. “We have distributed around 10,000 knockers to patients so far. There are no targets for volunteers, and it takes around four to six hours to make a knocker. Our products are not for sale – we hand them out for free,” explains Ratan.

They use 100 per cent mercerised cotton for the knockers, she says. Branded yarns are not suitable for their products and their volunteers get the yarn from approved vendors. The knockers are available in cup sizes A, B, C, D and E. After they are knitted or crocheted, they are filled with virgin polyfibres. The knockers are always overfilled but they can be resized by the patients who may take out some of the fibre and keep it separately. The fibre can be put back when the patients have used the knockers and washed them a few times.

“Our patients test the products initially and give us feedback. They are supposed to last around 18-24 months. We give one pair of knockers to a patient who has had a single mastectomy and two pairs to whoever has had a double mastectomy,” explains Ratan.

In 2018, Saaisha India Foundation gave out around 250 knockers that year. Today, they make around 250 knockers every month. There is no shortage of knockers, which need to be washed by hand to make them last longer. Patients may get another pair when the earlier ones wear out. Instruction sheets are provided with the knockers with information on how to wash and care for them.

Their main dispatch centre is in Mumbai. “We are contemplating having another dispatch centre in south India. Initially, we shipped knockers mainly to older women, but we have started to notice, of late, that a lot of ladies aged around 30 or 35 years are requesting us for these knockers. Breast cancer is spreading among women in their 30s,” points out Ratan.

By 2020, they had enough volunteers. Many were breast cancer survivors who wanted to ally themselves with their cause.

During the lockdown, they held online training sessions for knitting and crocheting and their newer recruits benefited from these sessions, she says.



They offer knockers of hope to many distressed breast cancer survivors



Saaisha Foundation began their venture with four volunteers in 2018. Now, there are over 350 volunteers based in India, UAE, Kuwait, Oman, and Singapore who knit or crochet the knockers. They have distributed around 10,000 knockers to patients so far

They posted the samples they made to the trainers who were then able to correct them. They also make chemo caps and beanies for children. These are made by their younger volunteers, who may be as young as 14 or 15.

“Our older volunteers, on the other hand, are septuagenarians and octogenarians. Our helpers are a truly passionate and committed lot. This organisation will not function if it was not for their hard work and dedication,” says Ratan.



Jayashree Ratan: Standing by mastectomy survivors

Other than knit, crochet and stuff knockers, the volunteers maintain databases, accounts, webpages, and social media accounts. They pour over feedback from patients, design flyers and leaflets and create awareness videos. One volunteer knitter in Singapore gets her yarn from USA and dispatches her products to India. An 80-year-old volunteer comes up with 30 pieces every month, says Ratan, who had to tell her to take it easy, but she refuses to listen to her.

Breast cancer patients need loads of fortitude and strength to get over their ordeal. For somebody who has had a mastectomy, there’s additional embarrassment and discomfiture to deal with when facing the world. Saaisha’s knockers—lightweight, breathable, and soft against the skin—provide slivers of hope to thousands of distressed women. They may be stuffed with polyfibres, but what they are really filled with is love and optimism. ■

Venkatagiri:

Reviving A Royal Weave



Venkatagiri sarees were originally made only in cotton and were known for their finesse

There is no weave like the Venkatagiri for the 82-year-old Pramadwara Devi. Married into the Venkatagiri royal family, she has been associated with the weave synonymous with her in-law's family almost all her life.

Mallik Thatippali meets the royal matriarch and learns that efforts are on to preserve this precious weave which has lost its lustre of late

Venkatagiri, a heritage weave which dates back to the early 1700s, is indigenous to Venkatagiri that is in Andhra, near Tirupati. It has always been known for its delicacy, and fine cotton weaving. Pramadwara Devi, born into a Zamindar family near Eluru in Andhra Pradesh, was married into the Venkatagiri royal family in 1950. Her father-in-law was the last Raja of Venkatagiri. In a conversation, she recalls fondly how she has been wearing the Venkatagiri ever since she got married in 1950.

She recounts, "This is the only saree we wore, both for daily and festive wear. It has a high thread count and is very fine with a pure zari border."

Rich history

Venkatagiri sarees were originally made only in cotton and were known for their finesse. Pramadwara Devi's collection includes over 200 vintage sarees in subtle shades of creams and pinks with silver zari borders.

The weavers of Venkatagiri were supported by the royals of the Velugoti dynasty of Nellore. In fact, the pure zari border (used in the weft), fine weaving and unique design made it popular, both with the Andhra royalty and later with the Nizam of Hyderabad. The local zamindars had their own clusters of weavers who made sarees exclusively for them.

Pramadwara Devi recalls, "They were ideal for the humid summers of the region. When it is properly ironed and starched, it gives a regal look that is unmatched amongst the length and breadth of Indian weaves."

Traditionally, the weave was made from cotton, (as it is located in the cotton belt of Andhra) though now one can also find the sarees in cotton silk and silk.

These fine fabrics were decorated with Jala and Jamdani motifs, making it one of the few weaving clusters in the south that pioneered the technique of hand buttas. The USP of the weave remains that it uses Jamdani designs of peacock, parrot, and swan in the pallu.

The post-Independence era saw the weave falling on hard times. There are multiple reasons for this: its association with the elderly, the cheaper power loom alternatives and the fact that the maintenance of the weave is a laborious process, all led to its decline

Subramanyam Patnam, a third-generation weaver and a winner of the central government's National Merit Certificate for his saree, which has an embroidered Rama and Sita on the pallu calls this a weave for all seasons. He explains, "Its finesse is due to the high cotton count (300 and above). It is why they are also referred to as 'woven air'."

Changing tastes and methods

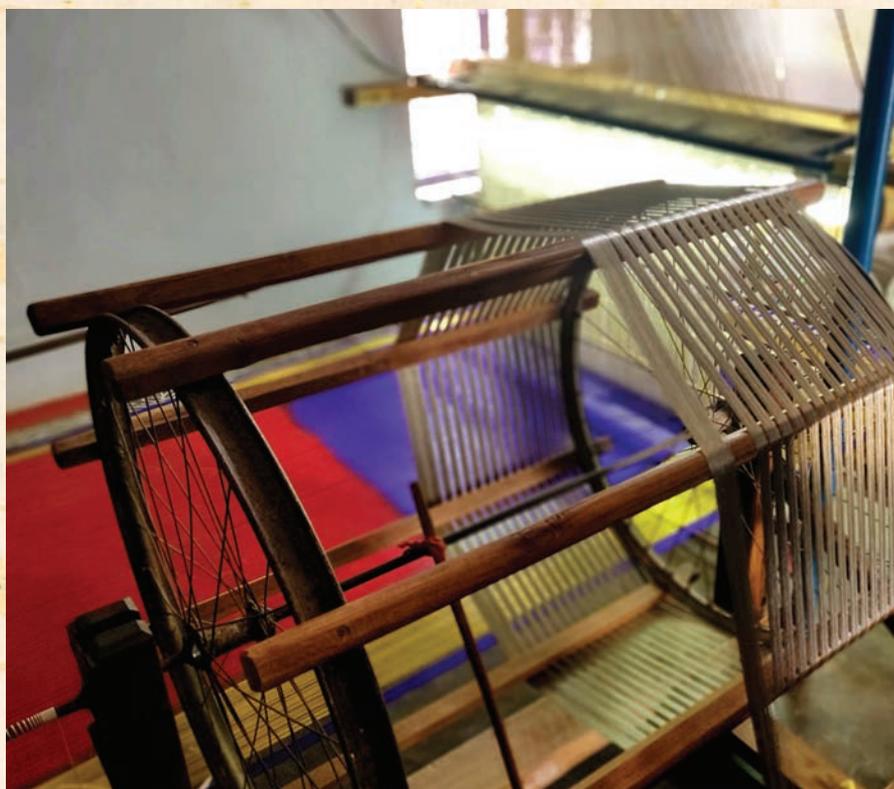
In the post-Independence era, the Venkatagiri weave fell on hard times.



A weave for all seasons: Traditionally, the weave was made from cotton though now one can also find the sarees in cotton silk and silk



A weaver at work. From over 10,000 weavers who worked on Venkatagiri sarees in the early 2000s, today there are just a mere 20



The cotton count has fallen from a high of 300s to coarser 80s because of high costs

There are multiple reasons for this: its association with the elderly, the cheaper power loom alternatives and the fact that the maintenance of the weave is a laborious process, all led to its decline. From over 10,000 weavers who worked on Venkatagiri sarees in the early 2000s, today there are just a mere 20. The quality has also been downgraded (cotton count has fallen from a high of 300s to coarser 80s), because of high costs.

One of the main reasons why even diehard enthusiasts stayed away from wearing the saree was the difficulty in maintaining it. This saree needs to be spread out, handwashed and starched. As people moved from independent homes with backyards to apartments, handling the saris became tougher due to lack of space.

Pradmadwara Devi agrees and says that even half a century ago, the weave had dedicated dhobis to maintain it. She recalls, "Not everyone could wash



Pramadwari Devi is trying her best to revive the weave close to her heart



Today's weavers have no idea of the intricate designs their forefathers had created due to the lack of documentation

Pramadwari Devi is trying to do her bit to preserve the weave for the future. From gifting it to eminent personalities like the late Carnatic doyen ML Vasanthakumari, singers P Susheela and Sudha Raghunathan as well as Sunil Gavaskar's wife Marshneil, to working with weavers, she is in the thick of it all.

and starch these sarees, we had special dhobis to handle these. The process involves two people having to hold the sari to starch and spread it out," she says.

However, now there is an active push to revive the weave. Initially, the weave was only five and a half feet, but over the years, Venkatagiri weavers have pushed the envelope and weaved in additional wefts to the body and the pallu of the saree.

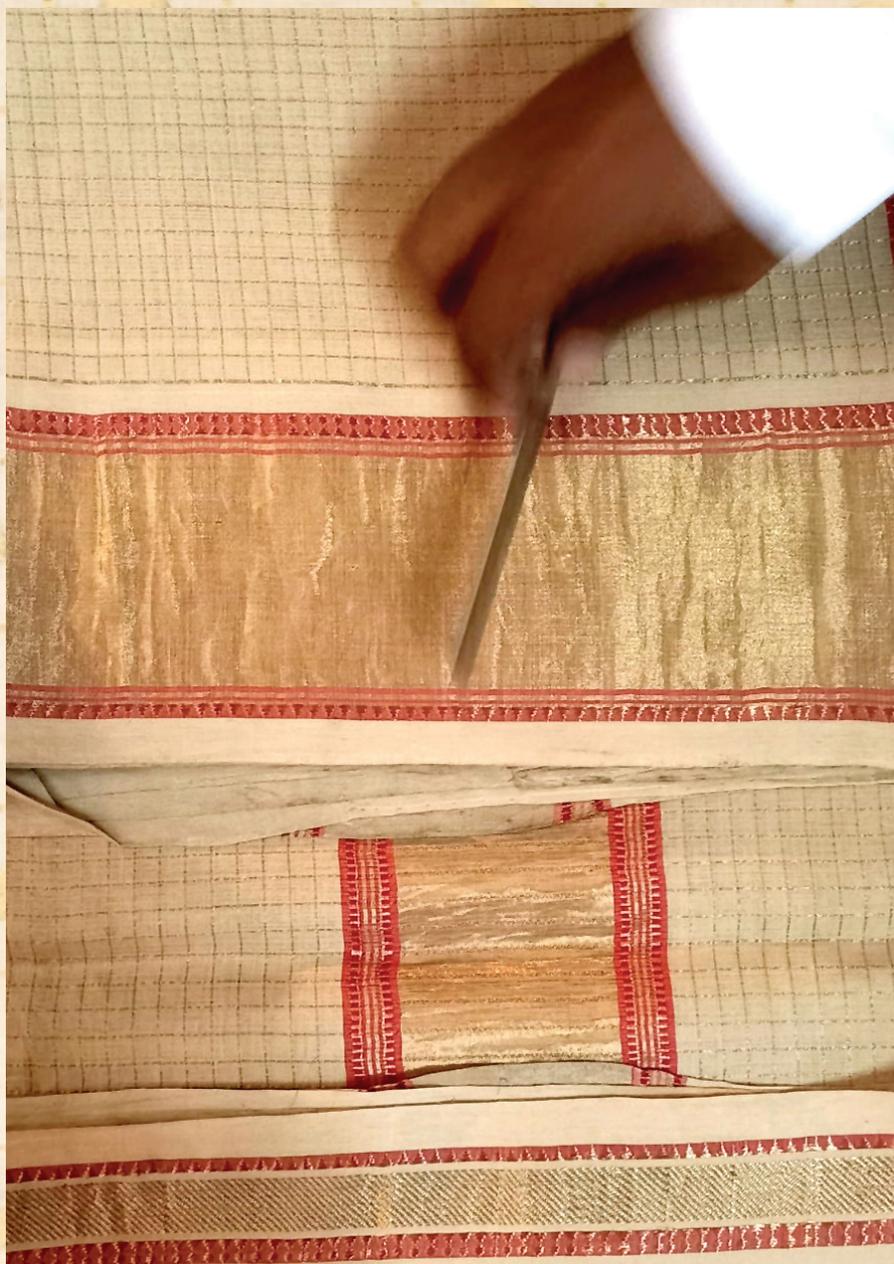
Rema Kumar, who runs the brand Textile Tales and works exclusively with Indian weavers says, "The weave needs to be reconnected with the young. Today's weavers have no idea of the intricate designs their forefathers created due to the lack of documentation. Also, the weavers tried to copy the Kanjeevaram sarees, which caused the Venkatagiri weave to lose their uniqueness."

Designers like Kumar and initiatives like the Tata Antaran Incubation and

Design Centre (based in Venkatagiri) are trying to address these issues. From embracing newer, colours and styles, they are actively working towards helping the weave regain its luster.

Patnam also points out that they are now on WhatsApp and Instagram and are creating fabrics for men's shirts and women's kurtas for the first time. "Traditionally the saree was in gold and cream but we are trying natural colours (greens and pinks) and new motifs (tear drops, *bindis* and trees) for the younger generation," he adds.

Kumar is also collaborating with the weavers of Venkatagiri for an upcoming collection in summer. "This endeavour was to give them exposure to the traditional heirlooms from the family wardrobes of textile enthusiasts of Hyderabad, who are eager to see the old designs revived. Over the years, the beauty of this weave has been diluted by the influence from



The time-honoured Venkatagiri weave is at a crucial juncture

other popular weaves due to market demands and the original essence was lost," she adds.

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The octogenarian royal too is actively trying her bit as well to ensure that the weave is preserved for the future. From gifting it to eminent personalities (the late Carnatic doyen ML Vasanthakumari, singers P Susheela and Sudha Raghunathan as well as Sunil Gavaskar's wife Marshneil) to working with weavers, she is in the thick of it all. Even today, she buys her Venkatagiri sarees

from the descendants of weavers she initially encountered in the 50s.

The time-honoured Venkatagiri weave is at a crucial juncture. One hopes that it springs back to life and the visuals of brightly-toned, crisply starched Venkatagiri sarees are not consigned to people's memories. Pramadwara Devi, though doubtful, remains hopeful and signs off saying, "There is no weave like the Venkatagiri." Truly, this is a sari that is beloved to the Telugus and in fact, it is popular all over south India. ■



In the 1950s, actress Nargis Dutt received a white Venkatagiri saree from Pramadwara Devi, the royal scion from the town of Venkatagiri near Tirupati. She wrote back with a thank you note saying that she wore the saree for a dinner party and she was much appreciated by her fellow guests. This was also recently recounted by actor Sanjay Dutt when he shared that his mother's fan following far surpassed his and that she even got sarees gifted by royalty!

Significance of evaluating the arm pit during breast cancer surgery

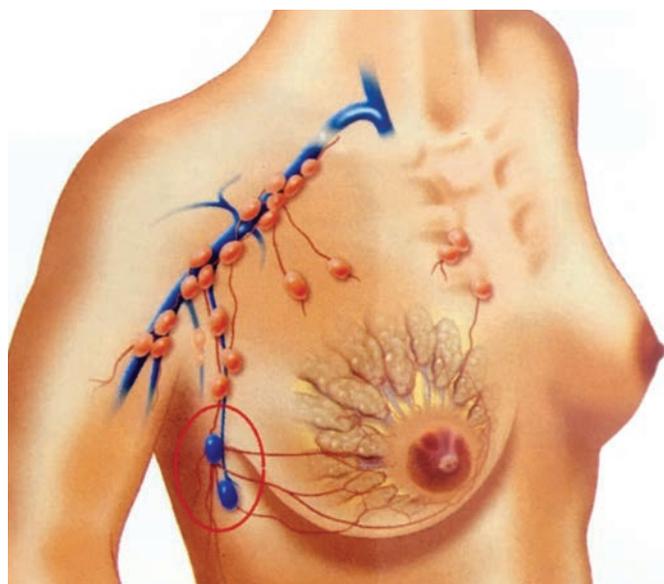
In his quarterly column, **Dr P Raghu Ram** discusses the options to assess whether the cancer has spread to the lymph nodes in the axilla (arm pit) or not. Knowing this will help in the further treatment of the patient



Along with surgery to the breast, i.e., wide local excision (lumpectomy)/mastectomy (removal of the breast), evaluating the axilla (arm pit) is a vitally important component of breast cancer surgery. Knowledge regarding the spread of cancer to lymph nodes in the axilla has a bearing on further treatment.

The options for assessing whether the cancer has spread to the lymph nodes in the axilla are:

Axillary node clearance: This is a time-tested standard procedure where most of the lymph nodes in the axilla (arm pit) are removed. However, it can cause significant morbidity and the common side effects include shoulder stiffness, numbness and pins and needles sensation in the inner part of the arm. This usually happens during the first few months after the operation. There is also a small possibility that a permanent swelling of the arm (lymphoedema) may affect about 10-20 in 100 women (10-20 per cent).



Pictorial representation of sentinel nodes in the arm pit (axilla)

Sentinel Node Biopsy (SNB): Sentinel Node Biopsy is a minimally invasive procedure that has evolved to become the standard of care for women, who are unlikely to have spread of cancer to lymph nodes in the arm pit (axilla). The risk of side effects such as arm swelling, and altered sensation in the inner aspect of the arm are significantly reduced with SNB, when compared to Axillary node clearance.

Sentinel nodes are the first lymph nodes in the axilla, which drain from the area where the breast cancer has been found.

Sentinel Node Biopsy is a minimally invasive procedure that has evolved to become the standard of care for women, who are unlikely to have spread of cancer to lymph nodes in the arm pit (axilla).

Traditionally, SNB is performed using both the blue dye and radioactive fluid. More recently, Indocyanine green (ICG) Fluorescence Navigation System is being increasingly used in some centres to undertake SNB, with equivalent accuracy and relative ease. In this technique, SNB can be identified and resected more rapidly and easily, and equally, this technique has the major advantages of lower cost and fewer adverse effects.

The theory in doing SNB is that if the sentinel node/s are clear of cancer cells, all other nodes in the axilla should be clear. If cancer cells are found in the sentinel node/s, the patient may need to have the remaining lymph nodes removed (axillary node clearance) at the same time as surgery to the breast.

It is also possible to have radiotherapy instead of additional surgery. A multi-disciplinary team will decide the best option. ■

UBF Diary

November 2022

Osmania University students learn about breast health

Dr Raghu Ram was invited to address an enthusiastic group of students at Osmania University on November 4. The event was organised by Women in Engineering (WIE), one of the largest international professional organisations dedicated to promoting women engineers and scientists which encourages girls to pursue a career in engineering.

Dr Raghu Ram outlined the importance of early detection of breast cancer and presented evidence-based facts, relating to various aspects of breast health in an easy-to-understand format. The students gave Dr Raghu Ram a standing ovation.



Dr Raghu Ram at NIMS

On November 5, Dr Raghu Ram gave a lecture, titled *UK to India: Celebrating 15 positively eventful years (2007-2022)*, to a packed hall comprising faculty and trainees at the prestigious Nizam's Institute of Medical Sciences (NIMS) in Hyderabad. In his lecture, the doctor reflected on his journey and talked about the various strategic initiatives implemented by him, to improve breast healthcare in India in the last 15 years. Dr N Bheerappa, acting director and dean, NIMS and other staff paid rich tributes to Dr Raghu Ram's contribution to the community.



A Generous Donation to the Foundation

Madhumita Chakraborty, Dr Raghu Ram's patient and breast cancer 'conqueror' contributed a generous amount to Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation on November 11. Her donation will be used to provide treatment for under-privileged patients presenting with breast cancer at KIMS-USHALAKSHMI Centre for Breast Diseases.

Her equally generous and highly supportive life partner - Saumen Chakraborty (the much accomplished former CFO of Dr Reddy's Laboratories) presented a cheque for the same. Madhumita's inspiring journey in the fight against cancer was featured precisely six years ago in the 2016 (Aug - Oct) issue of *Pink Connexion*.

"When I was diagnosed with Stage 3 Breast Cancer, my life was shattered. I went into denial, depression & anxiety. Dr Raghu Ram has been a pillar of strength throughout my treatment journey & beyond. Using oncoplastic techniques, he preserved my breast without any deformity, which has tremendously boosted my self confidence. I'm very much indebted for everything he did to save my life & also ensuring excellent cosmetic outcome."

Madhumita Chakraborty
Homemaker
9 August 2016



Guest @ Resofest 2022



Dr Raghu Ram was invited to the Gachibowli Indoor Stadium in Hyderabad, as part of the Resofest 2022 programme on November 12, to share some of his thoughts that shaped his life, with more than 4,000 bright young students preparing for their NEET and IIT.

Governor's interaction session

Dr PV Chalapathi Rao Memorial Awards

The Dr PV Chalapathi Rao Memorial Awards were bestowed by Dr B Bhaskar Rao, chairman and MD of KIMS Hospitals, on the best outgoing trainees for the second consecutive year, on the eve of the late Dr Chalapathi Rao's birth anniversary.



Dr Mrs TAMILISAI Soundararajan, governor of Telangana held a brainstorming session with intellectuals and prominent citizens at Raj Bhavan on November 24 to discuss diverse topics. And, Dr Raghu Ram presented his views on different strategies to improve breast cancer care in the region.

Demystifying myths about breast health at FLO Hyderabad chapter's 'Healthcare Conclave'

Dr Raghu Ram demystified some of the common myths associated with various breast health issues, including breast cancer at the "Healthcare Conclave" organised by FICCI Ladies Organisation (Hyderabad Chapter) on November 21.

Highlighting the ABCs of breast health, he empowered women by creating awareness about the importance of 'early detection' and emphasised the need to spread hope and courage in the fight against breast cancer. Dr Raghu Ram was part of a panel discussion along with Chaavi Mittal, a celebrity breast cancer 'conqueror', at this event.

The discussion was moderated by Shubhrra Maheshwari, chairperson, FLO Hyderabad chapter.



Chaavi Mittal with Dr Raghu Ram and Shubhrra Maheshwari



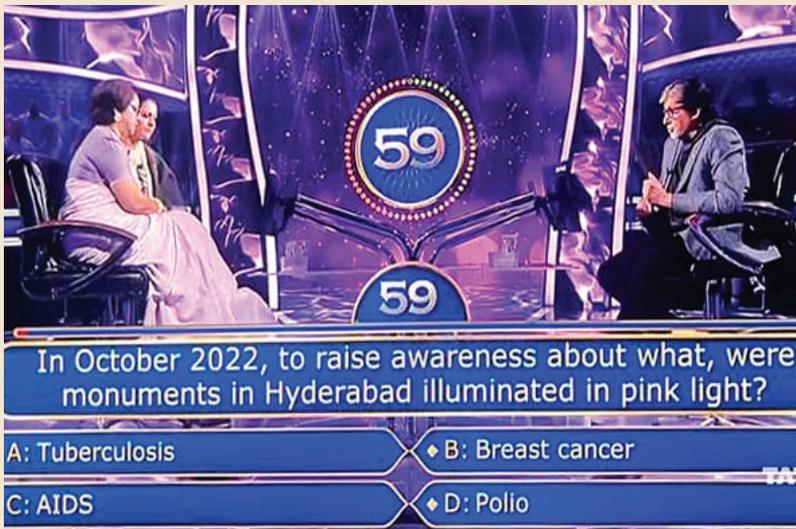
Dr Raghu Ram lighting the lamp



Dr Raghu Ram with FLO Executive Committee

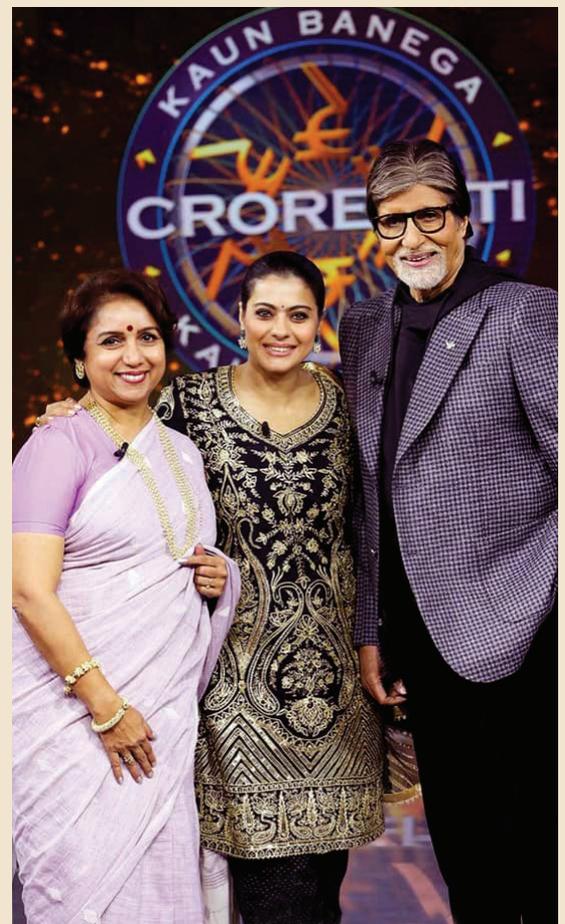
December 2022

UBF initiatives on Kaun Banega Crorepati show



18

On December 5, on the extremely popular KBC show hosted by Amitabh Bachchan with actors Kajol and Revathi as the contestants, a question was posed, which brought to sharp focus the nationwide impact achieved through the various innovative breast cancer advocacy initiatives championed by Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation, over the past 15 years (2007 - 2022).



Chief Guest at Bengali Film Festival

Dr Raghu Ram was invited along with Anindya Dasgupta, accountant general, Telangana and Mamidi Harikrishna, director, department of language and culture, government of Telangana, to felicitate awardees and present the jury awards to best director, actor, actress at the 5th edition of the Telangana Bengali Film Festival - Aayna 2022 at Prasad's Preview Theatre on December 11.

Speaking on the occasion, Dr Raghu Ram said, "Over five lakh Bengalis have made Hyderabad their home. The fact that there are seven associations representing this most vibrant community speaks volumes of the diverse range of activities being held in the region. Delighted that Aayna 2022 is celebrating five positively eventful years curating classic and contemporary Bengali films."



Dr Raghu Ram with Anindya Dasgupta and Mamidi Harikrishna

Visit by eminent breast surgeon from Arizona to KIMS-Ushalakshmi Centre

Dr Beth DuPree, an innovative thought leader in breast cancer care and eminent breast surgeon from Arizona, visited KIMS-USHALAKSHMI Centre for Breast Diseases at KIMS Hospitals on December 18. She was highly appreciative of the state-of-the-art breast healthcare provided at the breast centre and the innovative breast cancer advocacy initiatives championed by UBF. Living and practising in America, she has integrated healing therapies in her practice —yoga, meditation, Reiki, grief counselling, exercise and reflexology. These shared interests have strengthened the 17 years of friendship between Dr Raghu Ram and Dr Beth Dupree.



ASICON 2022, Mumbai

After a gap of three years, The Association of Surgeons of India (ASI) held its flagship annual Congress in Mumbai, from December 21 to 24, 2022. Over 5,000 surgeons from all over India and a few distinguished surgeons from all over the world participated in the meeting.

As there was no onsite Congress in 2020 due to the pandemic, Dr Raghu Ram was invited to address the delegates during the inaugural ceremony at ASICON 2022, in his capacity of having served as the ASI president in 2020.

Dr Raghu Ram was one of the youngest presidents in ASI's 84-year-old history. He expressed his gratitude to the membership for giving him an opportunity to serve at the apex position of the world's second largest surgical association, during the most challenging times.



Dr Raghu Ram addressing the delegates



Dr Raghu Ram, president ASI 2020, Dr G Siddesh, president ASI 2022 and Dr Palanivelu, president ASI 2007



L-R: Dr Sanjay Jain, ASI president 2023, Dr G Siddesh, ASI president 2022 and Dr P Raghu Ram, ASI president 2020



Dr Raghu Ram with Prof Rowan Parks, president, The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh



L-R: Dr Raghu Ram, Prof Rowan Parks, Dr G Siddesh, president ASI 2022, Dr Beth Dupree (USA), Prof Sanjay Jain, president ASI 2023



Presentation of the Oration certificate

Bringing light to a dark situation: A grateful patient says thanks through a work of art



Grateful patient from Delhi presenting her painting to Dr Raghu Ram



Christina Scott appreciating the painting

As painting is her hobby, a New Delhi-based patient took the time and effort to create a work of art to share her gratefulness to the “dedicated, thoughtful, compassionate” Dr Raghu Ram, who brought “light to a very dark situation”. Her work of art featured a butterfly - which symbolises rebirth, hope, and bravery. It also showed the power of transformation and the incredible outcome a patient could achieve by trusting her doctor.

Christina Scott, British deputy high commissioner to India and Gareth Owens, British deputy high commissioner to Telangana and Andhra Pradesh appreciated the painting during their visit to the KIMS-Ushalakshmi Centre for Breast Diseases in January.

January 2023

KIMS-USHALAKSHMI Centre for Breast Diseases hosts Christina Scott, British deputy high commissioner to India



Christina Scott, British Deputy High Commissioner to India and Gareth Owens, British Deputy High Commissioner to Telangana & AP being felicitated by Dr B Bhaskar Rao, Chairman & MD KIMS Hospitals

“I commend Dr Raghu Ram for being a “living bridge” between the UK and India for over 15 years and replicating the best of British practices to improve breast healthcare in India” - Christina Scott

KIMS-USHALAKSHMI Centre for Breast Diseases hosted Christina Scott, British deputy high commissioner to India, and Gareth Owens, British deputy high commissioner to Telangana and Andhra Pradesh on January 13, 2023.

Welcoming the gathering, Dr B Bhaskar Rao, chairman and MD of KIMS Hospitals said, “I gave a free hand to Dr Raghu Ram to develop a world-class breast centre and he achieved much more than what he promised me when he met me 15 years ago. I extend my unstinting support to him and I am confident that he will achieve many more milestones in the coming 15 years.”

Addressing the visiting high-ranking British delegation, Dr P Raghu Ram, director and consultant surgeon at KIMS-USHALAKSHMI Centre for Breast Diseases said, “Due to the lack of awareness about the absence of a robust population-based screening programme, more than 70 per cent of women with breast cancer present in the advanced stages, with consequently poor survival.

I wanted to make a difference to these statistics in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Since relocating from the UK to India in 2007, I have been working to the best of my ability for the past 15 years, to ensure early detection of breast cancer by transforming breast cancer from a “taboo” issue to a much commonly discussed one, through a



Breast cancer conquerors with Christina Scott



Christina Scott appreciating the remarks made by Amitabh Bachchan at the Breast Centre



Dr Jwala Srikala explains the state-of-the-art 3D mammography system at KIMS USHALAKSHMI Centre for Breast Diseases



Christina Scott and Gareth Owens with Dr B Bhaskar Rao, Chairman & Managing Director of KIMS Hospitals



Dr Aban Daver, Dr Raghu Ram's first patient addressing the gathering



Ananda Shankar Jayant, a breast cancer conqueror, shares how she fought breast cancer with courage and determination



Christina Scott interacting with Dr Kotha Ushalakshmi, Founder Chairman of Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation

number of innovative initiatives. This most definitely ensures long term survival from the most common cancer affecting women in the country."

Further, listing the work he has done, he added, "Establishing south Asia's first dedicated comprehensive breast health centre at KIMS Hospitals; founding a "not-for-profit" breast cancer charity to raise awareness about the importance of early detection; spearheading south Asia's largest population-based breast cancer screening programme in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh; playing a pivotal role in the formation of The Association of Breast Surgeons of India - a dedicated organisation that brings together surgeons practising the art and science of breast surgery under one platform and undertaking life-transforming initiatives in my adopted village, Ibrahimpur through personal philanthropy, are the main activities championed by me for well over a decade."

Meanwhile, addressing the staff and patients, Christina Scott, minister and British deputy high commissioner to India said, "I commend Dr Raghu Ram for being a "living bridge" between the UK and India and replicating the best of British practices to improve breast healthcare in India. What he has achieved in a decade and a half is phenomenal and I wish him and his team all the very best."



A patient taking a selfie with Christina Scott



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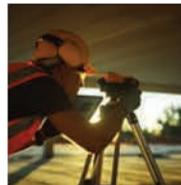
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