

# PINK CONNECTION

UBF

Issue 37: April - June '24

## Susila Kaila

I never questioned why  
God gave me cancer

## Dr Prema Dhanraj

A beacon of hope  
for burn victims



Women at  
leisure

Poignant portrayals

# BEHIND The Scenes

I was in Uzbekistan recently, a young democracy (given independence from the mighty Soviet Russia in the last decade or so) and supposedly a developing nation. Yet, I saw a strong sense of pride in the Uzbeks for their democracy, culture, language and religion.

Though their grandparents appreciated a life under Soviet Russia as everyone had jobs and prices were under control, the young people confessed they were not happy since they could not practise their religion or speak their own languages. Neither could they pursue their stunning local crafts like weaving and pottery.

But what made me happier is the pride they took in their cities making sure they kept them spotlessly clean. Once when we were dropping crumbs while tucking into their famous and freshly baked breads, the guide, actually bent down to clean up the crumbs. (After that we were more careful with our litter). Their streets were clean and there were parks everywhere.

We, in India, are so far ahead of these newly independent nations, being governed by visionary leaders since Independence. We have the best healthcare systems, world's best doctors, excellent infrastructure, world's best minds running the IT industry. Yet, I find we seem to lack a sense of pride in being Indian or of belonging to a great nation. Just a few of us take pride in being an Indian being truly proud of our culture, language or heritage.

With a new government soon, hope we are joined in our nationhood, and look upon this country with pride. We need more people like Dr Raghu Ram bringing pride not only to the city Hyderabad but to the country as well, even as most recently, he met Prime Minister Modiji to present his vision for breast cancer awareness.

*Ratna Rao Shekar*



## Contents

- 3 **CANCER CONQUEROR**  
Susila Kaila fought breast cancer with amazing grit and recovered and went on to start a YouTube channel to reach out and help other survivors
- 7 **REAL LIFE HEROES**  
The life-story of Dr Prema Dhanraj, a burn victim who became a respected plastic surgeon, dedicating her life to caring for burn victims through her NGO Agni Raksha, is hugely inspiring
- 11 **WOMEN IN FOCUS**  
Surabhi Yadav's photography project on Instagram evocatively captures unguarded and carefree moments in women's lives and marks the importance of free time
- 15 **MY VIEW**  
Dr Raghu Ram in his quarterly column gives valuable suggestions on how the country can lower its cancer burden by improving measures for cancer prevention, detection and treatment
- 17 **UBF DIARY**  
A round-up of key activities and events at UBF last quarter

EDITOR  
Ratna Rao Shekar

CONTRIBUTORS  
Minal Khona  
Mallik Thatipalli  
Nivedita Choudhuri

DESIGN  
Malvika Mehra

COPY EDITOR  
Kavitha Shanmugam

PUBLISHED BY  
Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer  
Foundation

PRINTED AT  
Pragati Offset Pvt Ltd.,  
17, Red Hills,  
Hyderabad - 500 004

KIMS-USHALAKSHMI  
Centre for Breast Diseases  
Krishna Institute of Medical  
Sciences, Minister Road,  
Secunderabad - 500 003

+91-91009 13217

ubfhyderabad@gmail.com

www.breastcancerindia.org

Follow us on  <https://www.facebook.com/ubfoundation>  <https://twitter.com/rpillarisetti>

 <https://www.youtube.com/c/UshalakshmiBreastCancerFoundation>

# ‘Cancer is not a death sentence’



Susila Kaila, a teacher from Kakinada, was diagnosed with breast cancer during the second lockdown. Though it was an ordeal, she fought the disease bravely and recovered. She now shares her experience with others on her YouTube channel (knowledge bricks) to raise awareness and help others

**Minal Khona**

It is often said that one’s fears can become self-fulfilling prophecies. And, we all harbour some fears inside us – real or imagined. That’s what happened to Susila Kaila, a teacher from Kakinada, who had always felt that she may be prone to cancer.

However, when her worst fears came true and she was actually confronted with the ordeal of breast cancer, she fought back and did not let the disease overwhelm her and bring her down.

A year after her marriage, Susila, had an ectopic pregnancy (fallopian tube pregnancy, instead of uterus). A life-threatening condition, it needed emergency surgery, after which she didn’t get pregnant again.

In a conversation with *Pink*, Susila recalls, “Due to the ectopic pregnancy, I had this fear that women who don’t have children are prone to cancer. And other than one cousin brother who had cancer, there had been no family history of the disease. Yet, I would get tested for breast cancer off and on.”

Before being diagnosed with breast cancer, Susila, who suffered from excruciating back aches for seven years due to a growth at the end of her spine, had to undergo a surgery.

## Learning she had breast cancer

In 2021, Susila noticed a fist-sized lump in her left breast. Her attention however, was diverted towards a more pressing health issue at that time – severe abdominal pain.

She remembers, “It was so bad I thought I was going to die, since the pandemic was also on. I didn’t even tell the

**“My body was not able to take the chemo. My hair fell off, including my eyelashes. I would sleep for 24 hours at a stretch. I had loose motions, mouth ulcers, and lost muscle control in my bowels**

gynaecologist who examined me about the breast lump. When she was checking where the abdominal pain was, her hand accidentally brushed against my breast. She immediately asked me to go for a mammogram. This was on January 28, 2021, and the mammogram showed that I had breast cancer.”

Understandably shocked, Susila didn’t cry or panic. She told herself that ‘cancer is not a death sentence’ and decided to focus on the treatment and the recovery process.

## Finding the right doctor

Her first reaction was to get the treatment started, with the right doctor. Her husband, G Vijay, and she were advised to go to Hyderabad for treatment. Luckily, her two sisters also lived in Hyderabad.

Her brother-in-law suggested she meet Dr Raghu Ram. She recalled watching him on YouTube giving an interview.



Susila Kaila felt she was in safe hands after meeting Dr Raghu Ram for the first time



Susila with her supportive husband, G Vijay

“I was touched by the way he spoke; he came across as a kind and soft-spoken person. I felt he was the right doctor to treat me and we met him on February 4, which coincidentally was World Cancer Day. After a thorough triple assessment (mammogram, ultrasound scan and ultrasound guided core needle biopsy), staging and unhurried counselling from Dr Raghu Ram, I felt I was in safe hands,” she says.

The cancer size was 2.5 cm and grade 1 (slow growing), but there was an abnormal node in the left axilla (arm pit). Needle biopsy confirmed that the cancer had spread to the lymph node in the axilla.

Fortunately, hormone receptors (estrogen receptor and progesterone receptor) were positive and HER 2 neu receptor negative. The staging PET scan did not show any spread of cancer in the body.

## Two surgical options

She says, “Dr Raghu Ram reassured me that the tumour was not aggressive and explained the two surgical options I had – oncoplastic breast conservation surgery (removal of breast lesion with reshaping of the breast) along with axillary clearance (removal of axillary nodes) or mastectomy (removal of breast) with axillary clearance, with the option for immediate or delayed breast reconstruction. I was made aware that with the breast conservation option, I needed to have three weeks of radiotherapy to the breast. As an active



*Despite the effects of chemo and radiotherapy, Susila kept her chin up and faced the difficulties with a positive mindset*

member of my church, I am in the midst of people, and so, didn't want my appearance to get affected. I chose breast conserving surgery."

After the surgery, Susila was up and about on the same evening and discharged in a day. The second lockdown was on and she had to stay in Hyderabad at her sister's home for 40 days.

Susila reminisces, "Dr Raghu Ram and his team risked their lives to take care of me. For me, he was god in human form. For no one in my family had any experience of cancer. I had an excellent outcome from the surgery as well. Although the lump in the breast was removed, there was no defect in the breast, which has given me a lot of confidence and am very grateful to Dr Raghu Ram for his outstanding surgical and counselling skills."

Further, she says, "I wish more women in India opt to undergo breast conserving surgery and facilities since oncoplastic

breast conserving surgeries are now more widely available across India."

#### 'On fire'

Susila had finished two rounds of chemotherapy under the care of Dr Mounika Boppana, consultant medical oncologist at KIMS Hospitals, before continuing with the rest of the cycles in Kakinada. She needed eight rounds in total and the side effects that followed were quite devastating.

**What's commendable is that Susila has her own YouTube channel called 'knowledge bricks', where she talks about the importance of early breast cancer detection, the kind of care that should be taken during treatment and provides the much-needed confidence to those affected by the disease**

She says, "My body was not able to take the chemo. My hair fell off, including my eyelashes. I would sleep for 24 hours at a stretch. I had loose motions, mouth ulcers, and lost muscle control in my bowels. But, being a strong-willed personality, I continued doing the housework at home with my husband helping me as much as he could."

Susila describes her experience with chemo and radiation therapy as like 'being on fire'.

"Our pastor's wife, who had fourth-stage multiple myeloma, would give me pep talks and moral support. My cousin, who had a rare form of spleen cancer for the second time, would guide me from Germany. My treatment finally ended on November 26, 2021," she recollects.



*Susila has now made several lifestyle changes and cooks healthy food regularly at home*

## 'She fought breast cancer with grit and fierce determination'

Susila Kaila is an extraordinary breast cancer 'conqueror'. She not only fought the disease with grit and fierce determination during the peak of the COVID pandemic, but is also creating the much-needed awareness about the importance of 'early detection', in addition to counselling women undergoing treatment for breast cancer through her YouTube channel.

I am delighted that she has had an excellent aesthetic outcome from her oncoplastic breast conserving surgery, which has played a huge role in the healing of her body, mind and soul. Fortunate to be involved in her care

**Dr Raghu Ram**



*I never questioned God about why he gave me the cancer, says Susila seen here after her recovery with her husband and Dr Raghu Ram*

### Sharing her story

After her recovery, Susila's hair has grown back, and besides her teaching job, she spends time giving interviews about her ordeal and recovery. What's commendable is that she has her own YouTube channel called 'knowledge bricks', where she talks about the importance of early detection of breast cancer, the kind of care that should be taken during treatment and provides the much-needed confidence to those affected by the disease.

She also shares information about the awareness campaigns organised by Dr Raghu Ram.

Susila points out, "I have counselled more than 100 patients and people call me from all over the country. I help them as much as I can."

### Lifestyle changes

Susila has now gone back to teaching and has made several lifestyle changes. Earlier, the couple had to travel 40 kms to their place of work, as her husband too is a teacher, which meant they ate out a lot. But now, she cooks regularly at home.

She does yoga for 45 minutes a day and has given up sugar besides eating salads and healthy food. The one lasting effect of the cancer treatment is that Susila cannot handle the hot summer months anymore, so she has an understanding with the school that she won't attend school during that time. She needs to be closeted inside an air-conditioned room.

Despite all these challenges, Susila stays positive. She ends the interview on an upbeat note: "I never questioned God about why he gave me the cancer. I think he chose me to prove my strength to the world and to help others going through similar pain, with dignity and grace." ■

## 'Raghu Ram was god in human form'

Dr Raghu Ram and his team risked their lives to take care of me. For me, he was god in human form. For no one in my family had any experience of cancer. I had an excellent outcome from the surgery as well. Although the lump in the breast was removed, there was no defect in the breast, which has given me a lot of confidence and am very grateful to Dr Raghu Ram for his outstanding surgical and counselling skills

**Susila Kaila**

# Dr Prema Dhanraj

## A Test of Fire



*A respected plastic surgeon, Dr Prema Dhanraj, has given a new lease of life to many burn victims*

Dr Prema Dhanraj, who was treated as a burn victim when she was eight years old in CMC Vellore, went on to head the plastic surgery department in the same institution. A respected plastic surgeon, she has dedicated her life to burn victims to ensure they receive proper treatment and care, without discrimination.

**Nivedita Choudhuri** talks to the doctor, who started her own NGO Agni Raksha in Bengaluru to help burn victims, especially those from poor families

**A**t the age of eight, bandages were her body armour. Soothing salves brought little respite from the agony while the hospital became her second home. Though she was left with scars, she did not let her burns or the 28 surgeries she had to undergo at that time get her down and rule her life. She chose to fight back.

What is amazing is that many years later, due to her grit and willpower, she returned to the hospital, where she was once treated, as a specialist to save thousands like her. Today, Dr Prema Dhanraj, a Padma Shri awardee is actively involved in the rehabilitation of burn survivors, especially women, through her non-profit organisation Agni Raksha.

Born into a large Christian family in 1955, she grew up in a large house in then garden city Bangalore, passionate about music. Her mother, Rosie Dhanraj, worked as a pharmacist and her father, CS Dhanraj, was employed in the computer division of a company. They sang in the local church and little Prema inherited her mellifluous voice from them.

### Tragedy strikes

However, tragedy struck in the year 1963. Prema, who was eight years old was pursuing her music practice



Many of the staff at Agni Raksha, seen in this picture, are burn survivors themselves

and secretly harbouring hopes of becoming a singer. But while playing in the kitchen one day a stove burst, severely burning her face and neck. A neighbour who saw her first jumped over the fence and rushed in to douse the flames, but the damage had been done in just a matter of seconds.

Narrating the incident that devastated her childhood, Dr Dhanraj recalls, "The first month was horrendous. I had suffered 50 per cent burns and my neck was in a bad shape. My dressings were changed once a week. I used to cry for three days after the dressings were changed and for three days before the ayah came to change the dressings. It was so painful."

**At the tender age of eight, bandages were her body armour. Soothing salves brought little respite from the agony while the hospital became her second home. Though she was left with scars, she did not let her burns or the 28 surgeries she had to undergo get her down and rule her life. She chose to fight back**

This was because the ayah had to pull out the dressings to be able to remove them and soon her frock would be covered with blood. This went on for one month before her parents took her to Christian Medical College and Hospital (CMC), Vellore.

#### **A pact with God**

She recounts, "I encountered hard times and a gruelling routine at Vellore as well. The doctors tried to intubate me thrice for surgery but to no avail as I had no neck now. My father would sob each time the doctors failed, but my mother remained strong. One day she went to the hospital chapel and prayed to God, to give me a second lease of life. She prayed promising that if I recovered, I would become a doctor and treat burn patients. Miraculously, the next time, the doctors could intubate me and I had to go through surgery for 12 hours."

Continuing her narration, she adds, "When I returned to the ward, I remember the first thing my mother told me: 'You have to be a doctor now.' Of course, nothing made sense to me back then."

She went through 14 surgeries over four months. "When we returned home, her mother gathered her three younger siblings around and told them that though I had been through a very difficult time, we were all the same in her eyes. She told me that I may not have the skin now but I still have my strength," remembers Dr Dhanraj.

## Facing herself

"Mirrors were removed from our house so that I could not see what I looked like. My cousins would look at me, scream and run away. My eight-year-old mind wondered why they were reacting like that. I had also lost my voice due to the laryngeal burns. When I answered the phone, people often mistook me for boy. Reluctantly, I gave up my dreams of becoming a singer," confesses Dr Dhanraj.

She adds, "After a year, I happened to find a mirror in the house and I looked into it for the first time after my accident. I was horrified and started to cry uncontrollably. My mother allowed me to cry and then she spoke very gently but clearly. She told me that this was my face and the sooner I accepted myself, the better it would be."

After three years, her mother convinced her to return to school. She was hesitant at first but her mother goaded her telling her that she needed to become independent.

Dr Dhanraj reminisces, "My younger brother would walk with me to the bus stop, always squeezing my hand if someone stared at me or said something inappropriate. At school, however, everything was fine as the children had been given prior instructions by the authorities that they had to be nice to me."

## The road to medicine

She passed the Xth and XII standard examinations but could not get through the medical entrance tests the first time. So she buried herself in her books and completed her BSc degree and then went on to study medicine in Hubli.

"I completed my internship and wrote to the director of CMC, Vellore, where I had been treated after my accident. It turned out that the director of the institute was Prof LBM Joseph, who

had operated on me. I remembered that he had promised me his hair when I had to have mine shaved off. It was only later that I found out that he was bald," she recalls with a laugh.

She went on to do her MS in general surgery at Vellore and then MCh in plastic surgery from Ludhiana. She returned to CMC, Vellore, in the late 1980s and fulfilled her mother's promise.

"I was able to work under the guidance of Dr Joseph and I became head of the department of plastic surgery at the hospital, which had given me a new lease of life so many years ago," points out Dr Dhanraj.

One day my mother went to the hospital chapel and prayed to God, praying for a second lease of life for me and promising that if I recovered, I would become a doctor who would treat burn patients

## The birth of Agni Raksha

In 1999, Dr Dhanraj won an award in USA and was given \$10,000. "It was such a huge sum for me and I did not know what to do with it. After discussing with my siblings, we decided to start an NGO to help burn survivors. I knew how much support these people need and recalled my own struggles more than three decades ago. Thus, Agni Raksha was born," explains Dr Dhanraj.

Since its inception, Agni Raksha has helped over 25,000 burn patients in their treatment and rehabilitation. They provide counselling, legal assistance and impart skills training.



Dr Prema Dhanraj with the staff at Agni Raksha



*Dr Prema Dhanraj receiving the Padma Shri from President Droupadi Murmu*

Their focus is to address the acute physical and psychological trauma experienced by burn victims.

The NGO's early efforts were concentrated on medical treatment to alleviate pain, minimise physical deformities, and enhance the overall well-being of survivors. Over the years, Agni Raksha has evolved to offer a holistic approach to rehabilitation, recognising the multi-layered challenges faced by burn survivors.

#### **No regrets**

Dr Dhanraj says, "Our nurses at Agni Raksha are burn survivors themselves. They treat patients very gently and with a lot of care and kindness. I recalled my own experience as an eight-year-old, crying every time my bandages were changed because the ayah would pull at them, causing so much pain. I don't want anybody to go through that."

She points out that other hospitals treat burn victims, but they think survivors don't have anything to look forward to and no purpose in their lives.

"I want to help people like my mother helped me. I have no regrets as everything ultimately fell into place for me. I want to convey this message to other burn survivors," asserts Dr Dhanraj.

"Our patients are all very poor and have limited income. Sometimes, the husbands are alcoholics. We try to help them with de-addiction efforts. We provide training so that the women can learn new skills such as baking, tailoring or beauty therapy. Many of our beneficiaries have embarked on their own entrepreneurial journeys and gained economic independence. We also conduct workshops in schools to encourage girls to upskill themselves," adds the doctor.

At Agni Raksha, they believe that a life devastated by fire is not the end, but the start of a new beginning. They ensure

that no poor burn survivor is deprived of burns treatment due to poverty.

#### **Medic on a mission**

The 68-year-old Dr Dhanraj continues to chase her dreams.

She now wants to train doctors in remote areas and in single-room clinics to apply first aid and do dressings on burn patients. Another dream is to equip local doctors so that burn survivors will not be turned away without some treatment.

She retired from CMC, Vellore, in 2010 and is now entirely focussed on Agni Raksha.

"I only wish my mother could see all this. She passed away in 1995, the year before I became head of department of plastic surgery at Vellore and four years before we founded Agni Raksha," she reveals.

Dr Dhanraj is indeed a medic on a mission. A mission that came out of her own personal tragedy.

**Our nurses at Agni Raksha are burn survivors themselves. They treat patients very gently and with a lot of care and kindness. I recalled my own experience as an eight-year-old, crying every time my bandages were changed because the ayah would pull at them, causing so much pain. I don't want anybody to go through that**



Medical technology to treat burn victims has advanced a lot in the last five decades. The doctor's original surgery that took 12 hours to complete can now be completed in one and half hours, but the emotional fragility and trauma of burn survivors are challenges that remain.

However, Dr Dhanraj today stands as a beacon of hope for them, very much like her own mother had done for her all those years ago. ■

# The Pleasure

## of Doing Nothing

Yearning to reconnect with her late mother, Surabhi Yadav started an Instagram photography project, 'Basanti: Women at Leisure', in which she documented women in a relaxed mood, snatching some precious moments in life just enjoying being who they are.

**Nivedita Choudhuri** speaks to Surabhi about her photography project, which pays an ode to women and convinces her to lend some of her work from the project exclusively for *Pink*





Surabhi Yadav embarked on a journey to learn more about her late mother

There are women of leisure and then there are women who don't know what leisure feels like.

Yet, leisure can be good for mental health. But some women hold back due to religious beliefs, traditions and prevailing customs. In a fairly conventional set-up in India, women hardly take time out for themselves amid work, domestic chores and childcare duties.

This issue intrigued Surabhi Yadav, who also runs Sajhe Sapne, a social enterprise providing young rural women with career pathways. So, she decided to initiate a photography project capturing girls and women

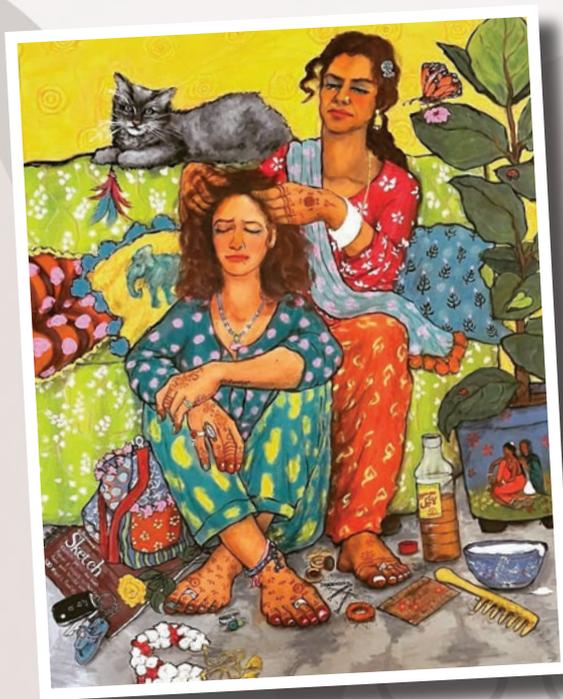


Illustration @hbushra.art

across the country in relaxed, uninhibited, happy-go-lucky moods. Women hanging upside down from trees, dancing with abandon, old friends enjoying a soul-stirring moment together, women having a cosy chat, applying henna and more. The results, not surprisingly, are vignettes of what can be described as pure bliss.

### Remembering Ma

The idea to embark on such a project came to Surabhi after her mother passed away in 2013 in her fifties. Surabhi, then only 23 years old, felt numb and bereft. Grief-stricken, she started to speak to friends and relatives about her mother as a way of keeping her memories alive. To her astonishment, the more she spoke to people, the more she found that she had not known her mother at all.

"I started by asking people what they remembered about Ma. I was amazed when someone said, 'Bhabhi bahut mazakiyan thi'. Others confirmed that Ma was goofy and fun to be around. I was bemused as I did not really remember my Ma as being merry or silly. She was this strict disciplinarian, who adroitly handled the household, with a husband who worked as a horticulturist for the

government and for her two sons and two daughters," recalls Surabhi.

"To be honest, I saw the playful side of her – only once a year. After we had played with Holi colours to our heart's content, the ladies in our colony in Khargone, Madhya Pradesh, would congregate in somebody's verandah. My mother would then get up, unprompted, and launch into a series of rowdy role-plays," she recounts.

Her mother would enact many characters with elan that were far removed from her own: an alcoholic husband, cliched in-laws or a lover. The plays evoked much mirth and merriment, with her mother perhaps letting out the 'loudest of laughs'. The gaiety continued for a couple of hours before everyone headed home to resume their daily lives.

"My mother then went back to being an organised homemaker and mother. The raucous laughter stilled, the brief interlude was forgotten till next Holi," shares Surabhi.

### The other persona

Yet another memory cropped up when she was speaking to her mother's friends and neighbours. "We had gone to the Kumbh Mela



Photo courtesy @nishijaiswal\_

in Ujjain. It was 5 am on a freezing winter morning. My mother, dressed in a sari, jumped into the river and glided around adeptly to the shock of her family and passers-by. When she was asked, Ma said she learnt to swim while growing up near Jhansi. That was the only time I saw her swim in 23 years," remembers Surabhi.

Surabhi goes on to explain, "I was thus at a loss to understand her. She was a different person while doing her duty as a mother. Her rare moments of leisure brought another persona to the surface, that otherwise was deeply buried under societal constraints. I discovered that I did not even know what she did for recreation. She was always working, fulfilling an obligation. In fact, all the women of her generation around me seemed to be the same. Did they ever have a moment to themselves when they could be lively without a care in the world, I wondered?"

The urge to find answers led her to start her 'feminist' project *Basanti: Women at Leisure* in 2018. Her

mother's name was Basanti, which means spring.

"Spring is all about reawakening and re-energising ourselves – a period of reinvigoration and revival. It seemed an apt name for my project," says Surabhi with a smile.

### Forging a reconnection

For Surabhi, it was also a way to get to know more about her late mother and reconnect with her. Her mother had studied only up to class VIII, while Surabhi went to IIT, Delhi for her BTech and MTech degrees before joining University of California at Berkley to pursue an MA degree in development practices.

"With *Basanti*, I wanted to reconnect to my mother. I started by photographing my sister – a primary-school teacher and a busy mother of two – whose life is closer to my mother than mine. I also started taking photos and making videos of women and girls who did not have any time for themselves. The result was a multitude of photos that spoke a thousand words. Be it a

woman enjoying a siesta in her home garden in Haldwani, Nainital after a long day's work or two women who have been best friends from the third standard engaging in *fugdi* – a folk dance – performed by women in some Konkan communities, the results were an eye opener," adds Surabhi.

### Female bonding

Friendship seems to be the leitmotif in many of the photographs on the project's Instagram page. Be it a group of women warming their hearts and hands with stories around a *sigri* (stove), a group of ladies having their own picnic and party in Kokrajhar, Assam, or friends stealing a few moments under the shade of a tree at Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai, companionship and camaraderie are examined with a sharp eye in these evocative images.

Female bonding is a common thread that runs through many of the photos. For a mother-daughter duo in the fishing village of Kasaragod, leisure for the daughter means combing and tying her mother's hair.

The caption to that image reads: 'Amid the gentle lapping of waves and the salty tang of the sea air, the poignant moment between a retired fisherwoman and her devoted daughter is a joy to behold'.

Leisure activities for Surabhi is also capturing women playing *dhaayam*, a traditional game, in Somanathapuram, or women in Vambori, Maharashtra, who have 'little rituals of leisure for themselves' such as nurturing a garden together or a quick ride on a bike.

### Stealing precious moments

Not only women, the photographs also capture little girls at leisure doing diverse stuff like the one taken in Bahuarwa, Bihar, where the girl is doing her own make-up or another who seems deep in discussion with an adult by the sea. Another photograph features young ladies in Aamgachi village in Bihar engrossed in a game of cricket while yet another

has college students companionably snacking in their hostel room in Pune at midnight.

There's also an image of women spending an afternoon near Ahmedabad chatting and laughing over a hearty meal of biryani, while their children play badminton and kho kho nearby.

"I found that the activities the women indulged in depended on whether they lived in cities or villages. Class, caste, religious practices, and social standing were also determinants. Rural women were more mobile and closer to nature. Oiling and braiding a friend or relative's hair were common leisure activities of rural women. In cities such as Mumbai and Delhi, public spaces are limited. In Mumbai, people chill out on Marine Drive. Otherwise, it's balconies, courtyards or wherever women can manage to find a bit of space," explains Surabhi.

### The sweetness of doing nothing

Surabhi goes on to point out that leisure is an innate need of every single person on earth just as rest and sleep are.

She feels strongly that it's important to let your guard down, or else you lose the chance to know yourself.

"We need to set aside time when we are not performing a role. Unfortunately, in a capitalistic society, we are only valued by how much we earn, and we are expected to work constantly. For many women, especially homemakers, leisure opportunities are rare. The value of labour is measured in economic terms and managing homes goes unacknowledged and unappreciated. Homemakers feel they have to work constantly as being idle is practically equal to being worthless," adds Surabhi.

A particular photograph that perfectly encapsulates what Surabhi is trying to achieve in the project is the one with three friends and the words 'dolce far niente' tattooed on their wrists. This Italian idiom – which literally means the sweetness of doing nothing – became popular from the film *Eat, Pray, Love*. The idiom is a reminder that once a while, you need to kick off those shoes, sit back and allow life to just swish by. ■



Illustration @a.n.n\_a.l.e.x

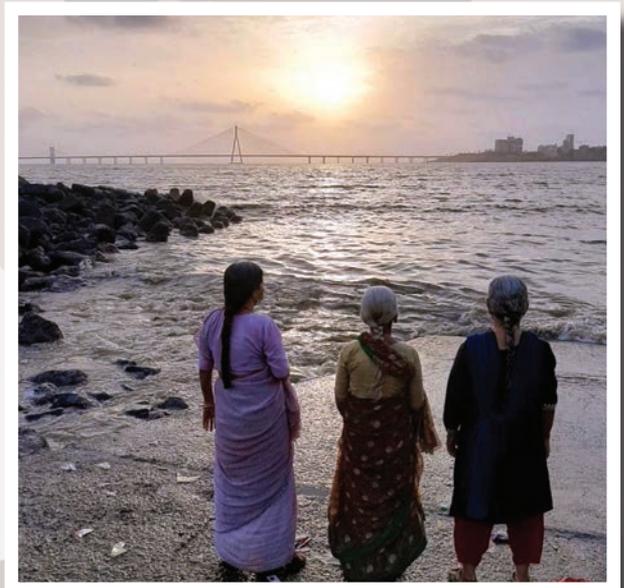


Photo @gurudas\_clicks



Photo @bhavya.vatrapu

# Cancer ‘tsunami’ in India

## – a wake-up call!

As cancer cases are on the rise and cancer care still inadequate in India, **Dr Raghu Ram** in his column provides solutions on how to improve access to prevention, early detection, treatment and control the cancer burden in India



**W**ith over 14,00,000 new cancers being diagnosed and over 8,50,000 deaths every year, the cancer ‘tsunami’ that is hitting India is a matter of a major public health concern.

Due to lack of awareness, the absence of a robust nation-wide screening programme, inadequate infrastructure, limited affordability, and most importantly, inequitable and poor access to care, over 70 per cent of cancer patients in India present in advanced stages, with significantly higher mortality when compared to high-income countries.

The diagnosis of cancer causes severe social, financial, physical, emotional, and psychological distress which impacts not just an individual but the entire family. Cancer prevention, screening and early diagnosis are the most cost-effective and efficacious measures to prevent and control the cancer burden in India.

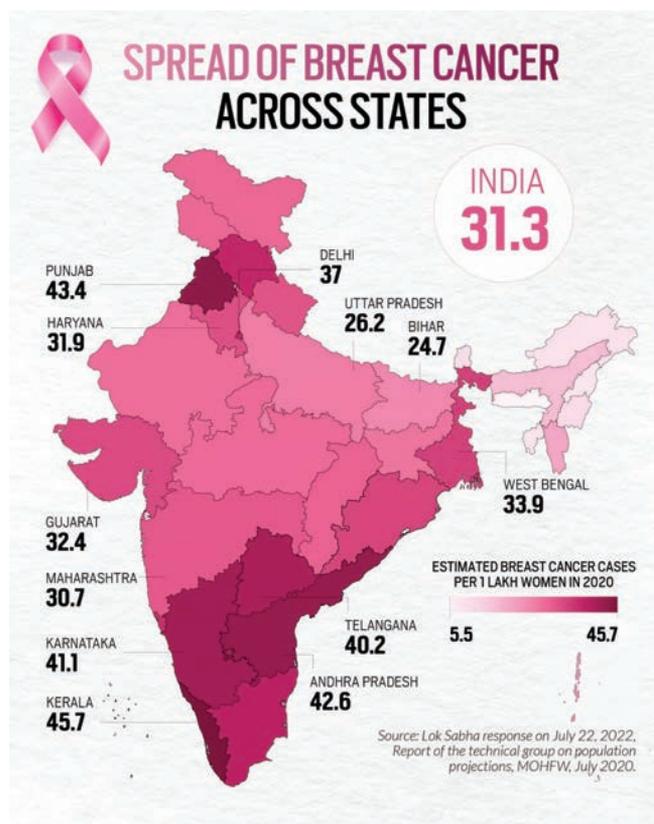
**Cancer prevention should be made an integral part of the cancer care, with active involvement of primary healthcare services and facilities**

As per the most recent WHO report on cancer, approximately one-third to one-half of all cancers are preventable.

Cancer prevention should be made an integral part of the cancer care, with active involvement of primary healthcare services and facilities. The Ayushman Bharat programme, which was launched by the government of India, should be actively leveraged in this endeavour.

### Ensuring early detection

Creating awareness and empowering people is fundamental to ensure early detection, which is the key to saving more lives. For example, The Pink Ribbon



Campaign launched by Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation, a not-for-profit breast cancer charity in 2007 created the much-needed awareness about the importance of early detection in the Telugu States and has successfully addressed the taboo associated with ‘breast cancer’ through a number of innovative initiatives over the past 17 years.

This has resulted in transformative change to the mindsets, with increasing number of women over 40 years of age in the region presenting themselves for annual screening mammograms.

Some cancers can be detected early by way of screening, which has a potential to save scores of

lives (For example: pap smear for cervical cancer, mammography for breast cancer, colonoscopy for colon cancer). The pan India screening programme that was launched by the government of India under the auspices of National Health Mission in 2016 aims to comprehensively screen for oral, cervical and breast cancers.

**Making cancer a “notifiable disease” will not only ensure a robust database of cancer deaths, but will also help in accurately determining the incidence and prevalence of the disease in the country**

### Low screening figures

However, the latest figures released by National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) reveal that only 1.1 per cent of the population have been screened for cervical cancer and less than 1 per cent for breast and oral cancer. These dismal figures must be addressed with urgency by the government under the auspices of National Programme for Prevention and Control of Cardiovascular Disease, Diabetes, Cancer and Stroke (NPCDCS).

### Cancer registries

Having robust cancer registries is fundamental to improving cancer outcomes. Comparing the socio-

demographic data of the patients, geographic trends in cancer incidence and cancer types helps to assess the risk factors, identify high-risk groups, and plan interventions for cancer prevention and screening.

There are currently only 38 Population Based Cancer Registries (PBCRs) that cover only 10 per cent of the Indian population. The irony is that most of them are located in urban areas with only two PBCRs solely dedicated to rural areas, where 70 per cent of India’s population reside.

There is a pressing need for more PBCRs to be made available and functional, particularly in rural areas.

### Classify cancer as a ‘notifiable disease’

The Parliamentary Standing Committee for Health & Family Welfare recommended that cancer should be classified as a “notifiable disease” in 2022. However, this has not translated to reality.

Making cancer a “notifiable disease” will not only ensure a robust database of cancer deaths, but will also help in accurately determining the incidence and prevalence of the disease in the country. The government must seriously consider making cancer a “notifiable disease”.

To conclude, it is my wish and desire that the government will take time-bound concrete short and long term implementable steps to strengthen actions, which improve access to prevention, early detection and treatment, all of which are essential to transform the delivery of cancer care in Bharat. ■

**Breast Cancer**

USHALAKSHMI BREAST CANCER FOUNDATION

**Worrying Facts**

**'Closet Issue' - a topic that is hushed up due to**

- Lack of awareness
- Absence of a population-based Screening Programme
- >60% of breast cancers - advanced stage

USHALAKSHMI BREAST CANCER FOUNDATION

**Worrying Facts**

**Incidence**

- 200,000 new cases per annum
- A woman is diagnosed with breast cancer every 4 minutes
- Most common cancer affecting women

USHALAKSHMI BREAST CANCER FOUNDATION

**Worrying Facts**

**Mortality**

- 100,000 deaths per annum
- A woman succumbs to breast cancer every 8 minutes

# UBF Diary

February 2024

## Guest of Honour at Telangana Bengali Film festival



Dr Raghu Ram felicitating Ramesh Prasad



Dr Raghu Ram was invited as a guest of honour at the 6th edition of the Telangana Bengali Film festival (TBFF-2024) on February 12. The vibrant film festival, which was held at Prasad Preview theatre was organised by Hyderabad Bangalee Samity, which is an 83-year-old organisation representing more than 10 lakh Bengalis in Hyderabad.

At the festival, Dr Raghu Ram felicitated the legendary Ramesh Prasad (film producer, chairman and head of Prasad Studios, Prasad's IMAX and LV Prasad Eye Institute) and Harikrishna Mamidi (director, department of culture, Telangana).

Eleven acclaimed films, including several international and national award-winning films in Bengali, were screened. The festival also paid tribute to legendary film maestro Mrinal Sen on his birth centenary with the screening of his 1976 national award-winning Hindi film *Mrigayaa* (The Royal Hunt) on the opening day along with his other films.

## Chief guest at ABSI Conference, Puducherry



L to R: Drs Rohit Kumar, Dr SVS Deo, Raghu Ram, Kadambari and Rakesh Aggarwal



Dr Raghu Ram with the legendary Prof N Ananthakrishnan

Dr P Raghu Ram, a former president of The Association of Surgeons of India and The Association of Breast Surgeons of India (ABSI), inaugurated the ABSI's mid-term conference organised by Dr Kadambari D, professor of surgery at the department of surgery at Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research (JIPMER) in Puducherry on February 16.

Dr Rakesh Aggarwal, director of JIPMER; Dr SVS Deo, president ABSI; Dr D G Vijay, president-elect ABSI; Dr Rohit Kumar, honorary secretary, ABSI and several other prominent surgeons from Puducherry and beyond participated in the event.

Having played a pivotal role in the genesis and formation of ABSI and having served as founder honorary secretary and president of the association, Dr Raghu Ram reflected upon ABSI's journey – from the inspiration, the genesis, the resistance against its formation, the teamwork – and ended with expressing his desire that the newest and one of the most vibrant sections of ASI will celebrate 20 positively eventful years in 2031!

He paid rich tributes to the ABSI leadership for ensuring that ABSI – which is the newest section of the Association of Surgeons of India – has been adjudged the 'Best Section of ASI' for the past three consecutive years (2021, 2022 and 2023). This speaks volumes of what has been achieved in a short span of time.

The essence of Dr Raghu Ram's message was also published as an editorial in the Indian Journal of Surgery (IJS) in 2021, when ABSI celebrated 10 positively eventful years, and it was one of the highest accesses for an editorial published in the IJS (1900 ).

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12262-021-03099-0>

## Dr Raghu Ram gets prestigious India-UK Achievers Award



Dr Raghu Ram with other speakers at India UK Education Conference



Dr Raghu Ram with Lord Karan Bilimoria and Virendra Sharma at the reception held in the UK Parliament

Dr Raghu Ram was conferred the prestigious 'INDIA-UK Achievers Award' in the category of education, science and innovation by Professor Luis Gabriel Franceschi, assistant secretary general of the Commonwealth, at a glittering awards ceremony at De Vere Grand Connaught Rooms in London on February 28, 2024.

The award was presented in recognition of Dr Raghu Ram's extraordinary achievements and exemplary body of work towards transforming the delivery of breast cancer care in India.

Instituted by National Indian Students and Alumni Union (NISAU) in partnership with the British Council and the UK Government, the 'India-UK Achievers Annual Awards' celebrates the exceptional work of achievers of Indian origin, who have completed their higher education in the UK and whose contributions have shaped the India-UK bilateral relationship.

There were over 1,000 nominations in various categories for this year's awards and the 'Class of 2024 Achievers' were selected by a high-profile jury, which included Professor Luis Gabriel Franceschi; Alison Barrett, director, British Council (India); Dr Diana Beech, CEO of London Higher, the umbrella organisation representing over 50 London universities and higher education colleges; Subhash Ghai, well-known Indian filmmaker and Anne Marie Graham, chief executive, UK Council for International Student Affairs and others.

A day earlier, on February 27, a grand reception was held in the UK Parliament premises by Virendra Sharma, Member of Parliament; Gareth Thomas, Member of Parliament and Lord Karan Bilimoria, Cross Bench Peer at the House of Lords to celebrate the exceptional achievements of the 'India-UK Achievers Finalists'.



Dr Raghu Ram receiving the award from Prof Luis Gabriel Franceschi, The Commonwealth Asst. Secretary General

### Glittering award ceremony

The final winners in various categories were declared formally during the glittering awards night on the following day, February 28, 2024 at De Vere Grand Connaught Rooms in London.

### India UK Education Conference

Dr Raghu Ram was also a speaker and panelist at the 'India UK Education Conference', held at the London venue earlier on the same day, where he highlighted the challenges he faced, and equally, the tremendous joy that he experienced through focused actions implementing various innovative initiatives, that have paved the path towards improving breast cancer care in India.

He urged prospective surgical trainees intending to pursue higher specialist training in the UK to complete their basic surgical training and obtain MRCS in India itself. He also outlined the career pathways for international medical graduates in the UK and highlighted the educational collaborations between Association of Surgeons of India and the Surgical Royal Colleges in the British Isles.

## Empowering women, impacting lives

On March 12, Dr P Raghu Ram was invited as guest of honour along with Jennifer Larson, US Consul General in Hyderabad by K Rama Devi, chairperson of The Association of Lady Entrepreneurs of India (ALEAP).

ALEAP is India's premier organisation and a beacon of empowerment for women entrepreneurs across the country and beyond.

Whilst empowering women about various aspects of breast health, Dr Raghu Ram said, "A woman is the nerve centre of the family. If she is well, the family will be well." He was felicitated for his outstanding contribution towards transforming breast healthcare in the country.



Dr Raghu Ram being felicitated by Rama Devi and Jennifer Larson



Creating awareness about breast cancer



## Exploring avenues to improve breast cancer care



Dr Raghu Ram with Apurva Chandra (left) and Prof Vinod Paul (right)



On March 14, Dr P Raghu Ram met Apurva Chandra, Union health secretary at Nirman Bhavan and Prof Vinod Paul, member of NITI AYOJ, a globally recognised paediatrician, scientist and public health exponent, to explore ways to improve breast cancer care in the country.

Dr Raghu Ram outlined all the breast cancer advocacy initiatives spearheaded by the Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation over the past 17 years, which impressed them. Also, he presented a copy of the most recent issue of *Pink Connexion* (Feb-April 2024) to them.

## Dr Raghu Ram features on 'Wall of Fame' at Royal College of Surgeons



Dr Raghu Ram was “pleasantly surprised and thrilled” when a friend from the Royal College of Surgeons of England sent him a photograph, which showed that he featured on the “Wall of Fame” at the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

For Dr Raghu Ram, it is an “incredible honour and privilege” to be part of this massive collage of pictures so beautifully put together as a scalpel in the newly-refurbished Royal College premises.

This photograph of Dr Raghu Ram in the collage was taken just before the Convocation Ceremony, when he was conferred the Honorary Fellowship of The Royal College of Surgeons of England in 2022. He is the youngest surgeon of Indian origin in 484 years to have been bestowed the highest recognition by one of the oldest and world-renowned surgical colleges.

Recalling that time, Dr Raghu Ram said, “Proud to have represented Bharat in a traditional Indian attire. It was a memorable and unforgettable experience.”

## Non Technical Skills Masterclass for Surgeons (NOTSS), Hyderabad



Dr B Bhaskar Rao, chairman, KIMS Hospitals inaugurated the Masterclass. Also seen (L-R) Drs Probal Neogi, Yeap Chee Loong, Andre Das and Raghu Ram



The faculty with participants

Dr P Raghu Ram, a former president and current convener – International Affairs of The Association of Surgeons of India (ASI) – hosted the landmark first Non Technical Skills Masterclass for Surgeons (NOTSS) on March 22 and 23, 2024, under the auspices of The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. This course was held in partnership with Association of Surgeons of India at KIMS Hospitals in Hyderabad.

It is a follow up to the NOTSS introductory course that he had organised at the same place in September 2023.



Some of the faculty members at KIMS-USHALAKSHMI Centre for Breast Diseases

Speaking on the occasion, Dr Raghu Ram said, "Technical skills alone are not enough to ensure best outcomes after surgery. Poor communication is a common yet much ignored factor that accounts for errors made during surgery. This course addressed these specific issues. It is my wish and desire that this innovative and extremely useful masterclass should become part and parcel of the Association of Surgeons of India's annual academic calendar and be held across the length and breadth of Bharat."

Having participated in this unique masterclass at RCS in Edinburgh in 2005, long before relocating to India, it was Dr Raghu Ram's dream to ensure that the surgical fraternity in the country benefits from it. Some 19 years later, his dream has come true.

Several practising surgeons and trainees from across India participated in this masterclass that was held over two days on March 22 and 23, 2024.

Dr Probal Neogi (president ASI); Dr Pratap Varute (honorary secretary ASI); Dr Shivakant Misra, Dr G Siddesh, Dr Arvind Kumar and Dr Santhosh John Abraham (past presidents ASI); Dr Diptendra Sarkar (chairman, West Bengal Chapter ASI); Dr Jishan Ahmed (member, National Executive Committee ASI); Dr K Lakshman and several other surgeons and trainees participated in the masterclass.

The masterclass was conducted by Dr Yeap Chee Loong and Dr Andre Das from Malaysia.

April 2024

## Talk on breast cancer awareness at Embassy of India in Washington



*Air Commodore YPS Negi (Air attaché) and Brigadier Gaurav Sharma (military attaché) present a memento to Drs Raghu Ram and Vyjayanthi*



*Drs Raghu Ram and Vyjayanthi with Indian ambassador Sripriya Ranganathan*

Sripriya Ranganathan, India's Ambassador to the USA, invited Dr Raghu Ram on April 5 to empower the Indian Embassy staff in Washington DC about breast cancer awareness. With considerable foresight, she ensured that the awareness session was relayed live to all the other six diplomatic Indian Consulate offices in America – Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, New York, Seattle and San Francisco.

More than 200 embassy and consulate staff across America attended and actively participated in the session, which was meant to empower women about every aspect of breast health issues in an easy-to-understand format.

Dr Raghu Ram said, "Heartfelt gratitude to Ambassador Sripriya Ranganathan. Received such a warm and affectionate reception by the embassy staff. Was given a guided tour and valuable inside information, with the unique opportunity to meet and interact with the chief representatives of Bharat's army, airforce, navy and DRDO in the US. These interactions gave me insightful, first-hand knowledge about what it takes to run a hugely impactful and successful diplomatic mission in the most powerful nation in the world."

## Visiting Professor at MD Anderson Cancer Centre, Houston

Dr P Raghu Ram had the honour of being invited as a “Visiting Professor” to the Breast Surgical Oncology department at the world-renowned MD Anderson Cancer Centre in Houston from April 9 to 11, 2024.

The subject, ‘How best to improve breast cancer care in the USA and India’, figured predominantly in his discussions with the world-famous breast surgeons, breast radiologists, breast pathologists and breast medical/radiation oncologists he met and interacted within the two days he was at the Centre. He visited the operating rooms, Outpatient Clinics and was part of the multi-disciplinary meetings at America’s best known cancer centre.

There was an overwhelming response to his one-hour ‘Visiting Professor Lecture’, which was transmitted live to 13 MD Anderson Cancer Centers across America. The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Centre designated his guest lecture with American Medical Association’s PRA Category 1 Credits.

Reflecting on his experience, Dr Raghu Ram said, “It was well and truly an incredible honour, privilege and opportunity to interact, share and showcase my dreams at one of the world’s best centres of excellence in cancer care. It was a memorable experience, which I cannot describe in words. My heartfelt gratitude to professor Kelly Hunt, chairman, department of breast surgical oncology and her brilliant colleagues at the Anderson for ensuring my visit to this Institute steeped in history and greatness, truly unforgettable.”

### LINK

Introduction of Dr Raghu Ram – the Visiting Professor @ The MD Anderson Cancer Centre

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4p2b8M4xe5E&t=82s>



Prof Kelly Hunt felicitated with a traditional handwoven Kashmiri shawl



Dr Raghu Ram with Dr Taiwo Adesoye and Prof Henry Keurer prior to the lecture

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS  
**MD Anderson**  
Cancer Center  
Making Cancer History



**DR. RAGHU RAM  
PILLARISETTI OBE**  
Founding Director  
KIMS-USHALAKSHMI  
Centre for Breast Diseases  
KIMS Hospitals  
Hyderabad, India

DEPARTMENT OF BREAST SURGICAL ONCOLOGY  
VISITING PROFESSOR LECTURE

**DISRUPTING BREAST  
CANCER CARE IN INDIA**

TUESDAY, APRIL 9, 2024 AT 5:00PM-6:00PM (CST)  
IN-PERSON LOCATION: [ECT3.5001](#)

The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center designates this live activity for a maximum of 1.0 ASBA PRA Category 1 Credit™. In support of improving patient care, The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center is jointly accredited by the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education (ACCM), the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE), and the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC), to provide continuing education for the healthcare team.



Dr Raghu Ram with Prof Henry Keurer in the OR



At a dinner hosted in honour of Dr Raghu Ram: L to R: Prof Kelly Hunt, Dr Taiwo Adesoye, Prof Rosa Hwang and Dr Carrie Chu



Dr Raghu Ram at the MD Anderson Lecture Theatre



Dr Raghu Ram with Dr Jessica Suarez



**Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation**

Hyderabad, India

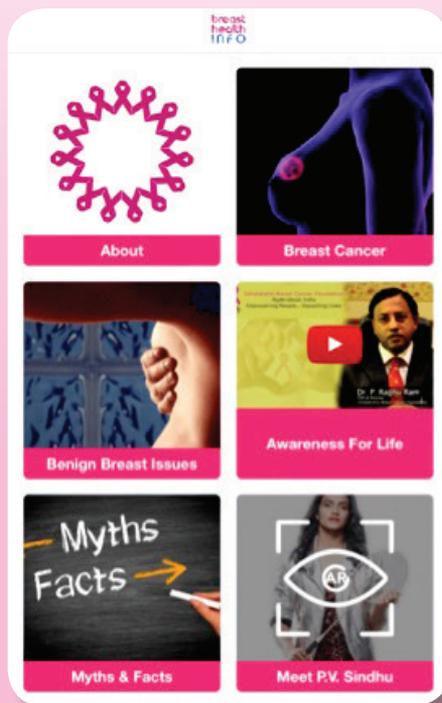
*Empowering people...impacting lives*

[www.ubf.org.in](http://www.ubf.org.in)

**World's first mobile app on breast health in 12 languages**

(English, Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Gujarati, Punjabi, Bengali, Marathi, Oriya & Assamese).

## 'ABCs OF BREAST HEALTH'



Launched by Mr Amitabh Bachchan (2017)

**An initiative of the Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation**

### LINKS FOR FREE DOWNLOAD

**App store**

<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/abcs-of-breast-health/id1482487468>

**Google play store**

[https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=org.avantari.breasthealth&pcampaignid=web\\_share](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=org.avantari.breasthealth&pcampaignid=web_share)

