

PINK CONNECTION

Volume 2 Issue 3 Feb - Apr '16



Nipun Mehta
on his new model
of philanthropy

Stepwells of Gujarat
Water conservation in
ancient India



'I decided to accept the new me'

Cancer survivor
Namrata Singh Gujral

BEHIND The Scenes

We live in troubled times. Dissent and discussions are discouraged. There are hate mails and virulent protests when we speak our minds. We are no longer the democratic nation where we could express our views even if it was not in sync with popular opinion. That argumentative Indian, the Madrasi and Bengali, who sat in coffee houses or stood at street corners speaking out fearlessly, seem to be dead.

What is disheartening is that writers and artists are also being silenced. No longer can they write freely or paint themes they desire for fear of some hooligan vandalising their work or lynching them in their homes. I speak of Perumal Murugan, a middle-class writer from Tamil Nadu, who now lives in fear of his life, and had publicly declared that he and his writing are dead forever.

That is why literary fests and gatherings are important because they hold discussions on freedom of speech. I was taken aback at the Hyderabad Literary Festival this year, when a Marathi women writer confessed how her books were vandalised because she wrote about love, sex and her first night with her husband in her autobiography. But, the feisty, 80-year-old Nayantara Sehgal, the late Jawaharlal Nehru's grand-niece, who still has a sharp mind and a sharper tongue said in her talk that writers, filmmakers or artists must not remain silent in fear of police or governments. They must say what they want to, she said. If you disagreed with the film *Bajirao Mastani* do not burn a theatre, rather make the choice of not seeing it, she said.

Women are at the wrong end of this suppression. Recently, we've heard ridiculous statements that women should return home before sunset and they must be child bearers, or that menstruating women must not step out. This is not just retrograde but demeaning.

We must speak up. Our daughters should not remain silent. And, I am happy to say that at my daughter's wedding recently, I dispensed with the '*kanyadan*', believing that she is no one's property to be given away by one man to another; rather, she is a woman with her own voice.

In this issue, we have the voice of a cancer survivor, who has emerged a positive person after her ordeal and an NRI, who makes lives better by encouraging random acts of kindness, which can then spread goodwill. If only this goodwill and tolerance can prevail in our country!

Ratna Rao Shekar



'I am happy with who I am now after the cancer'

It is our instinctive, compulsive will to live which pushes us to tolerate unbearable pain, confesses the California based Namrata Singh Gujral, an Indian American actress and film producer. Well, she should know. Diagnosed with breast cancer at 32, and an aggressive form of blood cancer just four-and-a-half years later, she fought it all to emerge victorious. This gutsy survivor, who has been free of any form of cancer close to three years, bares her soul to talk about her incredible battle with **Minal Khona** over a phone conversation

Photographs: **Namrata Singh**



She was born to a Sikh father and a Tibetan-Portuguese mother in Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh. Namrata, who was the oldest of four sisters moved to the USA to get a degree in film and television from the University of West Florida. And soon after, she headed for the Mecca of movies, Hollywood in 2001.

A successful career in films and television in the USA, a happy marriage and a beautiful child meant her life was a picture-perfect one. Instead, life turned into a turbulent ride for Namrata. Since her maternal aunts were diagnosed with cancer, she would go for a check-up every year after she turned 25. At 32, she felt a lump in her breast and after an

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Namrata with her husband and her lifeline, Joe Cooper on their wedding day



A brave Namrata with her daughter Jasmine after her chemo



Close friend Olivia Newton-John helped Namrata to come to terms with her cancer

ultrasound was told she had stage one breast cancer.

Namrata was scared and in a state of shock. She recounts her feelings at that time, "I was petrified, I felt I was going to die young. Losing my hair and the fact I had to undergo a modified mastectomy was terrifying, but the thought that I might live after going through the treatments made it even more overwhelming."

During that time, Namrata could only think of her cancer. "I had a lot of fear and depression and I didn't want to do anything. All I did was to think about the cancer. That is when I decided to make this documentary called *1 a Minute*," says Namrata. This film chronicles the diagnosis and treatment of a breast cancer survivor, interspersed with personal tales from international celebrities like Olivia Newton-John, Melissa Etheridge, and actresses from India like Lisa Ray, Mumtaz and Barbara Mori.

It highlights the fact that every 69 seconds one person dies of cancer somewhere in the world. This docudrama was made to raise funds to create awareness about cancer and for its cure and prevention. Making the film somehow helped an "extremely depressed" Namrata, who barely had any energy at that time, to keep going.

"I love making movies and the documentary was well received by the audience. I wanted to help people with this film and though there were times, when I could barely stand, and was scared, I went ahead to make this film," says Namrata.

Losing her hair and having a modified mastectomy were smaller challenges to deal with, Namrata learnt however. Something worse was waiting for her a few years down the line. Around four-and-a-half years later, the symptoms returned. She recalls, "Everyone thought it was breast cancer when I experienced similar symptoms. The fact that it was Burkitt's lymphoma— an aggressive form of blood cancer— was a shocker. The doctors told me I had three weeks to live. This happened in January of 2013. In this form of cancer, the cancerous cells double every 12 hours." She went to the City of Hope hospital on the outskirts of Los Angeles for treatment

since it only treats advanced forms of cancer.

This time too Namrata lost all her hair. She had been blessed with lovely, long black hair and had even modelled for hair products. Besides the chemo, Namrata also had to take steroids, which made her gain weight. She narrates, "I became three times the size I used to be, and I can't say I have managed to lose all of it even today. My hair grew back though I have been bald a couple of times."

Namrata asked her parents for sandalwood agarbattis and would do aarti for the god's idols she had in her hospital room. She created a spa like ambience and listened to Sikh kirtans – especially those by American Sikh singer Snatam Kaur. "They gave me a lot of peace and I was in a spiritual place. Even the hospital doctors would drop by at 10 o'clock at night and ask if they could relax in my room for five minutes, as they found it so peaceful," she says

In this hospital, Namrata not only summoned the strength to cope with the treatment and beat the disease but her six-month stay transformed her forever. She went through a paradigm shift in her attitude towards life, the disease and herself. And, today, she is able to laugh while saying that the breast cancer chemo sessions were a "walk in the park" compared to what she suffered during her treatment for lymphoma.

The treatment was extremely painful to put it mildly. She remembers, "For six months, I had to go through chemotherapy for 24 hours a day. The doctors drilled holes into my spine so the chemo could get to my brain. I was in pain all the time as the drill would

touch my nerves sometimes. But, I was determined to fight." Namrata asked her parents for sandalwood *agarbattis* and would do *aarti* for the god's idols she had in her hospital room. She created a spa like ambience and listened to Sikh *kirtans* – especially those by American Sikh singer Snatam Kaur. "They gave me a lot of peace and I was in a spiritual place. Even the hospital doctors would drop by at 10 o'clock at night and ask if they could relax in my room for five minutes, as they found it so peaceful," she says with a short laugh.

All through her ordeal, her husband, Joe Cooper, whom she describes as her lifeline, her family and her friends stood by her, supporting her at every step of the way. Namrata's daughter Jasmine, who was in middle school then was also a strong motivating factor. She points out, "My goal was to be present when Jasmine graduated from eighth grade to high school. My husband, who I have been married to for 18 years, is a great guy. My daughter has become mature because of my medical ordeal though I tried to protect her from my condition."

One of the reasons for Namrata's attitude of stoicism towards the changes her body underwent was largely due to her friendship with celebrated Hollywood actress Olivia Newton-John. They met when Namrata was making *1 a Minute* and have been friends since. Elaborating on their friendship Namrata says, "We used to meet for a coffee or a glass of wine occasionally. But, when I was at City of Hope, Olivia would visit me and we became really close. She was a leading lady and then cancer came along and threw her life out of gear. I could never go back to being who I was, she advised me. Because that is what I was desperately trying to do. I wanted to go back to my life the way it used to be, before I got cancer." Olivia Newton-John told her, "It will never be the same. You will never be the same so stop driving yourself crazy. Accept the new you and be happy you are alive." Namrata took her advice to heart and changed her attitude. "I no longer wish for things to go back to being the way they were. I am okay with who I am and the way my body is right now," she points out.



Actor Hrithik Roshan, Namrata, Sussanne Khan, Waheeda Rehman and Kintaro Mori at the Bollywood premiere of the docudrama '1 a Minute'

“Olivia Newton-John advised her, 'It will never be the same. You will never be the same so stop driving yourself crazy. Accept the new you and be happy you are alive.' Namrata took her advice to heart and changed her attitude. "I no longer wish for things to go back to being the way they were. I am okay with who I am and the way my body is right now," she points out



She has been cancer free for close to three years. It is her spiritual side which keeps her going. She reveals, "I listen to *kirtans*, light candles and incense sticks everyday. I also make it a point to speak to my parents and at

least, to one of my sisters daily. I never stop telling my family that I love them because when you face death, you realise what really matters."

And, because she is possessed of an independent spirit, she insists on driving herself, doing things she used to, and living life as normally as possible. This also reassures her family that she has recovered. Workwise too, she is back on the saddle, having launched the Thrive Channel - a cancer survivors' guide on moving on from cancer with the five stages of coping. Her love for films thrives as she is also producing a comedy titled *5 Weddings*.

Today, a transformed Namrata believes in "living in the moment" and does not easily give in to despair. She tried to convey this very hope through her film. And, with her work continues to infuse this positive emotion into others like her, who have bravely faced the "cancer demon" and emerged stronger. ■



Nipun Mehta and his wife Guri on a recent trip to India

'I want to live in a space greater than our ego'

An Indian American, he refused to live the American dream and decided to sacrifice a cushy, well-paid job to work for the larger good of society. Today, a decade later, Nipun Mehta's "model of philanthropy" has led to an ecosystem of generosity driven projects that touch lives all over the world, writes **Minal Khona** in a chat with him during his visit to Hyderabad

Photographs: **Nipun Mehta**

Nipun Mehta could have easily lived the American dream. While studying for a degree in Computer Science and Philosophy at the University of Berkeley in California, he bagged a job at Sun Microsystems (now merged with Oracle), which gave him more money than he needed. Dissatisfied by what he saw as the "dotcom greed" of the late 90s, Nipun visited a homeless shelter one day with three friends to "give with absolutely no strings attached." That day changed his life. They ended up creating a website, and also an organisation named ServiceSpace. Over the years, through ServiceSpace they have built thousands of websites for non-profit organisations and have incubated a diverse set of projects focussed on "giving" without an agenda.

On a visit to India, the Berkeley based Nipun provides an insight into his unusual beliefs. He says, "As I gave more, I had more to give. At first it was money, then it was time and then it was myself. It went beyond the material and

I believe, if you connect through your heart, you will be taken care of. People have lost faith in gratitude – the pure kind – that monks and nuns have. If you do random acts of kindness, where you have nothing to gain, the relationship will grow organically and gratitude will overflow."

Powered by these beliefs, a newly-married Nipun and his wife of six months Guri, undertook a 1,000 km open-ended walk across some parts of India. Narrating his experiences during that memorable walk, he recalls, "We did random acts of kindness, collected trash, cleaned the area outside a temple, did odd jobs for people and along the way, met so many inspiring people. We ate food from people you might call 'beggars', washed our own clothes (by hand) everyday, lived places without a phone or electricity, walked into places where we knew absolutely nobody, lived on less than 25 rupees (50 cents) a day and we witnessed good in the most unassuming of places. None of which I thought was possible. We used no currency other than love. After 1,000



Nipun at a recent annual 'Laddership' retreat of global ServiceSpace coordinators



Guri with village women during their pilgrimage to India

kilometres, we ended up at a monastery in Igatpuri where we mostly meditated for the next three months. It was an unscripted spiritual pilgrimage to greet life in the farthest corners of our own consciousness. As we walked, we learned much about India, a lot about humanity and most about the stranger we call 'I.'

Today, Nipun has several projects run on the foundation of random acts of kindness under the umbrella of ServiceSpace. It is an incubator of projects that works at the intersection of volunteerism, technology and the concept of a gift economy. What started as an experiment has now grown to a global ecosystem of over 500,000 members that has delivered millions of dollars in service for free.

Three websites managed by them – KarmaTube (a collection of inspiring videos), Daily Good (a site about good and uplifting news) and Awakin (a site to deepen self-awareness) provide inspirational content. Their gift economy concept projects include a magazine *Conversations* and *KindSpring.org* (a site set up to do kind acts). To encourage anonymous acts of kindness, Nipun and his team started a game of tag – do a selfless act for someone and leave a Smile card behind telling them to pay it forward. Over 957,308 smile cards have been shipped anonymously without any charge.

The third project under the gift economy is called Karma Kitchen: A unique concept based on the pay-it-

forward model run by a team of volunteers each week. In addition to Berkeley, these karma kitchens are located in Washington DC and Chicago; and in Ahmedabad, Pune, Mumbai and Bengaluru in India as well. According to the servicespace.org website, Karma Kitchen is a pay-it-forward restaurant, one where there are no prices on the menu; where everyone from the waiter to the dishwasher is a volunteer, and the check at the end of your meal reads Rs 0.00. By serving meals in the spirit of a gift, and inviting guests to contribute from the heart, not for their own meal but for those who come after, creates a chain of generosity.

His volunteer and non-profit support projects include: Pledge Page, aimed at volunteers who run marathons for noble causes to raise funds (this project has raised over three million US dollars so far); Charity Focus Sites, which helps non-profit organisations

host their websites for free [7,920 websites hosted for free and counting]; and Pro Poor: a portal for the south Asian development community with a database of 14,576 non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Nipun has based his projects on three guiding principles: to be run entirely by volunteers, not to chase after funds and to think small. The focus is on doing small things which may not bag public recognition but which will have a ripple effect and trigger good and spread it at large. Something like, what goes around, comes around.

The 40-year-old Nipun channels all these activities towards a higher goal – spiritual growth. "I leverage the Internet to connect with the inner net. We use technology to encourage everyday people around the world to do small acts of service. Our aim is to ignite the fundamental generosity in ourselves and others, creating both inner and outer transformation."



A group of smiling volunteers for a Sunday 'Karma Kitchen' in Berkeley

Nipun also regularly delivers talks about his concept of gifting and giving to different audiences ranging from inner city youth in Memphis to academicians in London to international dignitaries at the United Nations. He serves on the advisory boards of the Seva Foundation, the Dalai Lama Foundation, and the Greater Good Science Center. Recently, he was appointed by President Barack Obama to a council which addresses poverty and inequality. He brushes away the honour lightly saying, "Basically, I am just a volunteer."

To a layman, what Nipun does might come across as philanthropy or social service. How is gift economy different from other forms of charity people practise? He replies, "In a gift economy, goods and services are given without any strings attached; it is an economic system where the circulation of the gifts within the community leads to an increase in connections, and in strengthening relationships. And, in this context, hoarding actually decreases wealth. At its core, gift economy is a shift from consumption to contribution, transaction to trust, scarcity to abundance, and isolation to community. How it differs, is that gift economy is an ecosystem of sustenance where you are taken care of, not by earning your keep but by doing small acts of kindness and trusting that what goes around will eventually come around. Philanthropy, kindness and compassion are some values of that ecosystem."

I met the jean and kurta clad Nipun, after he had delivered a talk at the Life Research Academy run by Dr Newton Kondaveti in Hyderabad. Unlike the usual American NRIs one meets, who talk only about how great their lives are 'back in the US', Nipun only talks about his life's mission – that of performing random acts of kindness. The American accent is all that is foreign about him as his love for India and his vivid and passionate description about his *padyatra* with his wife gets one warming up to him

"People have lost faith in gratitude – the pure kind – that monks and nuns have. If you do random acts of kindness, where you have nothing to gain from the giving, the relationship will grow organically and gratitude will overflow"

instantly. Tall and approachable, he is friendly and quite at home talking to people at Dr Newton's Life Research Academy. His boundless energy is evident in the warm hug he gives every person he meets. He listened to each one attentively. Does that kind of giving – of one's time and attention – to constantly listen to other people's problems or help them unburden their pain cause compassion fatigue? Does he ever feel drained with all the giving



Nipun Mehta receiving the 'Unsung Hero of Compassion' award from His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 2014

he does, I ask? He acknowledges compassion fatigue is possible and happens to other people. "Not to him," he says. "When you are giving with an agenda, it tires you out. I practise giving as a daily habit and that in turn is my motivation. So no, I never tire of talking to people or being kind to everyone I meet," he adds.

And, for the more practical among us, the question hangs in the air between us during the interaction. How does he sustain himself financially and pay his bills? Nipun has been asked this question a million times before, so he smiles and answers, "I agree, we need material capital, and we all have bills to pay but that's not enough to sustain ourselves. We need social capital too and importantly, spiritual capital. There are ways of broadening one's life without worrying about the outcome." And, he goes on to quote the philosopher Rumi, 'There are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground'.

He continues, "I give because I want to and I don't worry about myself. Compare what I do, to a tree. If a tree stands tall, gives shade, provides fruits, someone in the community will water it and take care of it. I believe that when you serve others with sincerity and genuine love, you create affinities that sustain you over a period of time. More than the material aspect, I focus more on the spiritual capital I build. My material capital exists because of the kindness of others, my family, friends and well-wishers."

So though Nipun may not be wealthy in the conventional 'successful Indian-American' sense of the term, his life is vastly enriched with his daily acts of kindness and generosity. He sums up his life's mission by saying, "We can all practise being kind in small ways. Whether it is a stranger or a friend or a family member, once you start doing acts of kindness, you will be part of the gift economy of the universe. The path may be unpredictable but it is beautiful. And, it creates a sense of spiritual well-being that no material wealth can ever give you." Now, that is a thought to ponder on in our deeply materialistic world. ■

UBF Diary

November 2015

Time for Change

Dr P Raghuram delivered the "Anniversary Oration" instituted by the Bezawada Medical Association on 'Breast healthcare in India – time for a paradigm change' on November 1 at IMA House Vijayawada.

Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw heaps praise

On November 14, Dr P Raghuram was invited to deliver a guest lecture on the innovative initiatives championed by the UBF at the Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw Cancer Centre in Bengaluru. Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw paid rich compliments to Dr Raghuram for the pioneering work done by the foundation.



Empowering Young Doctors and Women



Dr P Raghuram imparted the importance of medical ethics to students and staff of the Pinnamineni Siddhartha Medical College at Vijayawada on November 2. On the same day, the doctor spoke to students of Vijayawada's largest women's college – Maris Stella College - on the value of early detection of breast cancer.



On NDTV

Invited by NDTV to participate in a thought-provoking panel discussion on improving breast cancer care strategies in India, Dr P Raghuram aired his views on prime time television.

A Rare Global Honour



Dr P Raghuram was bestowed with the coveted 'Edward Kennedy Memorial Award' by the Governor of Karnataka, Shri Vajubhai Rudabhai Vala at the inaugural function of the Global Oncology Summit in Bangalore on November 18, in recognition of his outstanding contribution towards improving breast cancer care in India. This global honour, awarded to select few doctors from across the world, has been instituted as a tribute to the late Edward Moore "Ted" Kennedy, the youngest brother of the late John F Kennedy, for his tireless fight against cancer.

Breaking Down Breast Cancer

Dr P Raghuram spoke to army officer's wives on different breast health issues in a simple format at MCEME, Trimulgherry. Mrs Paramjeet Kaur, the Lt General's wife, who heads the MCEME in this region and other senior officers' spouses were present at the event held on November 27.



December 2015



Standing by Support Groups for Cancer

Dr P Raghuram addressed delegates at Cancer Care India's National Congress 2015 held at the Indo-American Cancer Centre at Hyderabad on December 1. Cancer Care India is an organisation that represents cancer support groups across India. In his speech, Dr Raghuram highlighted the innovative initiatives implemented by Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation and KIMS-USHALAKSHMI Centre for Breast Diseases over the past eight years.

A Royal Visit

Mike Lavelle-Jones, president of RCSEd, the oldest college in the world, visited the KIMS-USHALAKSHMI Centre for Breast Diseases on December 2 and paid rich tributes to Dr P Raghuram for his vision, passion and the benchmarks established by the Centre. Here is his testimonial:

'The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh is indebted to Dr Raghuram. He has convened four very successful Intercollegiate MRCS examinations in Hyderabad (2008, 2010, 2012 and 2015). It is directly as a result of his efforts, of Himalayan proportions, that Hyderabad, the capital of the state of Andhra Pradesh, has become such an important centre for our College's activities in the Indian sub-continent. To accomplish such a task, one needs the patience of a saint, the perseverance of Robert the Bruce and the thick skin of a rhinoceros. Raghu has been blessed with all of these virtues in abundance.'



Sowing Seeds for the Future



Dr P Raghuram was the chief guest at the 'Plant a Sapling' initiative of the Open Minds School (Birla group) at KBR Park, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad on December 6.



January 2016

Male Breast Cancer at Screening Camp

In a simple, easy-to-understand format, awareness about the significance of the early detection of breast cancer was created among 185 under-privileged people at Swarnabharat Trust in Nellore on January 3. Breast cancer in a male was detected at the free screening camp for under-privileged women that followed the awareness drive. Dr P Raghuram released a cancer awareness brochure at the camp.



Shrines to Water

The Hidden Temples of Gujarat

Gujarat is famous for their richly ornamented stepwells, an architectural marvel, reflective of the ingenuity of the human mind. The state has more than 120 stepwells, and these ancient water-storage systems which are both functional and aesthetic, are accessible through elaborate passages and lengthy steps leading to them. Some of these stepwells are like inverted temples, dedicated to deities and worshipped as providers of life sustaining water. It is time we protect these memorials writes **Anil Mulchandani** as he visits two of the most impressive stepwells in the state, one of which is a World Heritage Site

Photographs: **Dinesh Shukla**



A World Heritage Site, the seven storey Rani-ki-Vav is among the largest of all stepwells

In 2014, an intricately built 11th century stepwell at Patan in Gujarat called Rani-ki-Vav (literally translated as the Queen's Stepwell) was approved by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. The stepwell – an architectural marvel – built as an ingenious answer to the water scarcity in Gujarat, Rajasthan and other arid regions of northern India and the Deccan, shot into the public eye once again.

So what is a stepwell? The UNESCO site describes a stepwell as 'a distinctive form of subterranean water resource and storage systems on the Indian sub-continent, and constructed since the 3rd millennium BC. They evolved over time from what was basically a pit in sandy soil towards elaborate multi-storey works of art and architecture.'

Stepwells typically comprise the vertical shaft of a well and an adjacent trench, which is provided with subterranean passageways, chambers and steps making it easy for people to reach the low-water level. They are often covered to protect people from the hot sun and rain.

The most richly ornamented stepwells are found in Gujarat, adorned with magnificently carved images of Hindu deities making them look almost like subterranean temples. Dedicating stepwells to deities signified the sanctity of life-sustaining water, gratefully acknowledging the benign hands of gods and goddesses in providing this much-needed resource. More than 120 stepwells have been documented in Gujarat, from the primitive ones found in the 5th and 6th century Buddhist sites to the early-20th century marble stepwell at Wankaner, incidentally imbued with western architectural influences.

Many stepwells were built during the 11th and 12th centuries when Gujarat was ruled by the Solanki Rajputs. The Solankis ushered in a golden period of architecture in Gujarat not just by building forts with ostentatious gateways and exquisitely designed temples covered with intricate stone carvings. But these rulers also commissioned the water retaining structures or stepwells called Vav in Gujarat (Baoli, Bauri, Bawdi in other regions like Rajasthan and Haryana),

manmade lakes called Talao and tanks called Kunds.

Designed to serve as water storage systems that guaranteed water supply for drinking, bathing and farming, these water retaining structures, the stepwells were dedicated to deities. The Sahasralingam Talao at Patan and the Munsar Tank at Viramgam are surrounded by finely carved Shiva shrines. While, the stepwells built in large numbers and often on a majestic scale were decorated with beautiful statues of deities from the Hindu pantheon.

Besides conserving water, the stepwells also provided a pleasant ambience and cool shelter for travellers and locals. The covered pavilions were suitable for people seeking shade and became centres of social interaction for villagers and resting places for travelers. The pavilions were accessed by ledges usable even when the water level rose to cover the steps. However, these stepwells were made redundant when alternative water supplies became available by the 20th century.



◀ One of India's finest stepwell, the Ruda Vav in Adalaj is covered with fine carvings



Rani-ki-Vav is supported by finely carved columns

Subsequently, some of these abandoned wells were shut down for hygienic reasons during the British period.

The association with religion and God helped some stepwells to survive. A good example is the Ahmedabad's Mata Bhavani ni Vav now used as a shrine and believed to date back to the 11th century. After Gujarat fell to Islamic rule, the state's rulers called Sultans continued to build stepwells deploying the same structural and sculptural traditions but sans the statues. A good example is the famous Dada Harir Vav, a stepwell which includes a mosque and the mausoleum of the queen, Bai Harir Sultani. The stepwell follows the classic construction pattern of a long staircase which leads to the deep cylinder carrying the water. The stairway is provided with ledges for direct access to pavilions and intermittent columns that together also buttress the walls from the intense earth pressure. These columns produce a marvelous effect of light and shadow. In Surendranagar district, northwest of Ahmedabad, there are many stepwells – a couple of the well-known ones being Ganga Vav and Madha Vav in the historical town of Wadhwan.

One of the stepwells is called Choronka-Vav. It is widely believed that after the wells were abandoned, they were used by thieves to conceal themselves in the shadows inside the stepwell!



Exquisitely detailed sculptures of Vishnu avatars and other Hindu deities line the walls of the Rani-ki-Vav at Patan

One of India's finest stepwells however is Ruda Vav in Adalaj village, a few kilometres from Gandhinagar and north of Ahmedabad. Though it was built in 1499 when Ahmedabad was the headquarters of the Gujarat

The most richly ornamented stepwells are found in Gujarat, adorned with magnificently carved images of Hindu deities making them look almost like subterranean temples. Dedicating stepwells to deities signified the sanctity of life-sustaining water, gratefully acknowledging the benign hands of gods and goddesses in providing this much-needed resource

Sultanate, this stepwell was commissioned by Rani Ruda, wife of a Hindu feudal lord, and is therefore intricately sculpted. The stepwell has stairways from three sides that meet on a wide landing with windows, doors, shrines and covered balconies covered with carvings. From the

landing, the stairway gently continues down five storeys, passing covered landings, pavilions and galleries, with walls, columns and niches bearing rich sculptures of dancing maidens, musicians, birds, animals, erotic figures, deities and motifs of plants, flowers, horses and ports.

The diffused light in the columned pavilions make it easy to understand why they were used as resting places. The first well has a tank surrounded by steps and platforms probably used by ritual bathers. The main well, though disused, retains the ramp used for drawing water. The octagonal shafts are also richly ornamented with floral or geometric carvings and figurines.

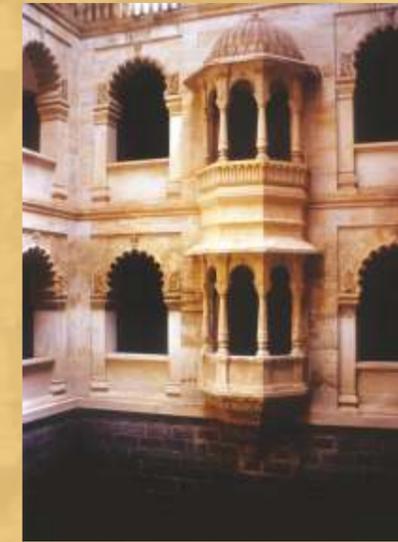
From Adalaj, take the road north to Patan, once the capital of Gujarat, historically called Anhilwada Patan, before Sultan Ahmed Shah founded Ahmedabad in 1411. The Rani-ki-Vav, amid the ruins of the old city is one of the largest and most impressive stepwell in Gujarat. Just as in Adalaj, you find carvings here which are splendid in both quantity and quality. This temple-like stepwell gets its name from Rani Udaymati, who constructed it in the 11th century in memory of her husband, the Solanki ruler, Bhimdeva.

Much of this stepwell had been silted up for centuries before excavations by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) led to the revival of this



The octagonal well shaft of Dada Harir Vav at Asarva in Ahmedabad

While a few exceptional stepwells are protected as monuments by the Archaeological Survey of India, many are still lying neglected. These subterranean structures need to be protected as memorials of an architectural form that is still relevant in areas suffering scarcity of rain and water



European influences can be seen on the marble stepwell at the princely estate of Wankaner, which was probably built in the late 1800s or early 1900s

astonishing stepwell. The debris was cleared and fragments were pieced together to recreate the glory of this stepwell from the Solanki period.

Since there is little construction above ground, the first view of the enormous stepwell with its series of pavilions spanning the seven storey stairway is

awe-inspiring. Along the stairway, the wall is replete with about 500 major sculptures and even smaller ones, including finely carved statues of gods. Some fine ones depict the avatars of Lord Vishnu. The pillars which protect the well against the earth's pressure are also intricately carved. At the base, Lord Ganesha idols nestle inside the niches. Like most stepwells, the air is much cooler as you go closer to the bottom of the well. Chambers near the water are believed to have been resting rooms for royals in the hot months.

While a few exceptional stepwells like Rani-ki-Vav are protected as monuments by the ASI, many are still lying neglected. These subterranean structures need to be protected as memorials of an architectural form still relevant in areas suffering scarcity of rain and water. Stepwells have withstood massive earthquakes and other natural calamities underscoring the excellence of the design, ingenuity and quality of constructions in ancient India. Truly, it is time to value, cherish and preserve these timeless, magnificent treasures. ■

Can Breast Cancer be Prevented?

We know for some time now that our lifestyles can affect our chances of getting breast cancer. In his column, **Dr P Raghuram** gives beneficial and valuable suggestions on healthy living to reduce the risk of breast cancer



Dr P Raghuram

Strictly speaking, one cannot prevent breast cancer. However, studies have revealed that lifestyle changes decrease breast cancer risk, even in women who are at a high risk. The following steps can be taken to lower the risk:

Weight Control

Being overweight or obese increases the risk of breast cancer. This is true especially if obesity occurs later in life, particularly after menopause.

Physical Activity

Physical activity can help you maintain a healthy weight, which in turn, helps prevent breast cancer. For most healthy adults, at least 150 minutes of aerobic activity per week is essential (30 mts / day five days a week at least). Brisk walking / swimming are the best exercises.

Breast-feeding

Breast-feeding reduces the risk of developing breast cancer and evidence is mounting to suggest breast-feeding helps reduce the risk of developing uterine and ovarian cancer. The longer you breast-feed, the greater the protective effect.

Limit the Dose and Duration of Hormone Therapy

Taking Combination Hormone Therapy for more than three to

five years increases the risk of breast cancer. If a woman is taking hormone therapy for menopausal symptoms, it is important to ask the doctor about other options. One may manage post-menopausal symptoms with non-hormonal therapies, such as physical activity. If you decide the benefits of short-term hormone therapy outweigh the risks, you should use the lowest dose which works for a short period of time.

Avoid Exposure to Radiation

Medical-imaging methods, such as computerised tomography and high doses of radiation are harmful and linked to breast cancer risks. It is important to reduce the exposure by doing the tests only when it is absolutely necessary.

Limit Alcohol

The more alcohol one drinks, the greater the risk of developing breast cancer. If one chooses to drink alcohol — it is important to limit to no more than one drink a day.

Don't Smoke

Accumulating evidence suggests a link between smoking and breast cancer risk, particularly in premenopausal women. In addition, not smoking is one of the best things one can do for the sake of overall health.

Hints for a Healthy Diet

Eat a variety of different foods and the right amount for a healthy weight

Limit sugary food and drinks and lower salt intake

Limit foods which contain a lot of fat, especially animal (saturated) fat



Eat plenty of foods rich in fibre and at least, five portions of fruit and vegetables a day

Drink around two litres of fluids a day (such as water, herbal tea, tea, coffee or low calorie drinks)