

PINK CONNECTION

Volume 2 Issue 4 May - July '16



“I did not ask God,
why me?”

Multiple cancer survivor,
Pamela Chopra

The Church of Miracles

The lure of Vailankanni
for the sick and the poor

Mumbai architect
Abhishek Ray

on creating new age museums

BEHIND The Scenes

I was shaken when I recently read Dr Paul Kalanithi's book, *When Breath Becomes Air*. The book has become cult reading the world over for the poignancy of the tale: a brilliant neurosurgeon writing about what is remaining of his life even as his medical reports declare he has terminal cancer. It is lovely prose, incandescent and rhythmic as best writing should be but beneath it all, is the story of the cancer, how it strikes a 37-year-old doctor on the threshold of a grand career. Once Dr Kalanithi realises that the cancer, which is spreading to the liver and lungs is terminal, his mundane dilemmas disappear. No longer does he have to agonise about whether he should take up the coveted position at Stanford University, for which he was the prime candidate and work on his dream of doing cutting edge research on the brain. Rather it is about how best to hold on to every moment of a life that is evaporating. He even has to contemplate whether he should have a child since he will not be there to nurture her (they in fact do have a daughter to whom the book is dedicated).



Dr Kalanithi had everything going for him, in fact. A BA and MA from Stanford and a Master's in Philosophy from Cambridge before graduating from Yale University in Medicine! With a cardiologist father, Dr Kalanithi writes, he wanted to stay away from medicine and pursue literature until he realised it is with medicine that he will gain a better understanding of people, not unlike the Russian writer, Anton Chekov.

In an email to his friend, after he realises he has terminal cancer, he writes, "The good news is that I've already outlived two Brontës, Keats and Stephen Crane. The bad news is that I haven't written anything." But, he does write the story of his life, and how! It can compare with the best literature, and you can almost see the lights being switched off in his house when his 'breath becomes air'. The book has been published posthumously by his wife, Lucy Kalanithi, also a doctor.

I like to quote Dr Kalanithi on the courageous spirit of cancer victims. He says that when one is ill, you are no longer the person you were, and something of what is your core gets ruptured. Which is why, I am amazed with every survivor's story I read in our own magazine. Few speak of the horrors of fighting cancer: the chemo, the radiation and the surgeries. Most of them are like our woman on the cover, Pamela Chopra, the wife of Bollywood's King of Romance, Yash Chopra. She seems to literally do the dance with cancer to a Yash Chopra song!

Death will get all of us one day. But, how many of us will chronicle a death by celebrating the last few months we are alive?

Ratna Rao Shekar

Pamela Chopra

A happy ending like her husband's movies!



She is the wife of one of Bollywood's most successful and loved film directors – the late Yash Chopra. But, that is not all there is to her. Pamela Chopra is a feisty lady, charming, warm and vivacious. As she reveals her trysts with cancer of not just the breast but neck, chest and brain cancer, she comes across as a tough lady with nerves of steel. The best part about her is that she did not let the cancers squash her *joie de vivre*.

In a rare interview, the 68-year-old Pamela, who always sang one song in her husband's movies because she was his good luck charm, opens up to **Minal Khona** at the iconic Yash Raj studios in Mumbai

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Who brings along a scrumptious paneer and bell pepper wrap for a journalist to munch during an interview? Or, call the journalist before to ask about her food preferences? But, that is what the large-hearted Pamela Chopra did before she met me for an exclusive interview at the sprawling Yash Raj Studios. Not a whit cowed down by cancer, she comes across as a feisty, charming and chirpy woman, who has held her own in the famous Chopra household.

As we tuck into the delicious wraps, Pamela plunges into the subject of her multiple trysts with cancer. Not surprisingly, her memories of her bouts with cancer are always linked to the schedules of her husband Yash Chopra's movies. She recalls when she first felt something was wrong. "I was 47 at that time, and part of the production unit of *Darr*. We were going abroad for the shoot, and I used to handle the food, location and other infrastructure related issues," she narrates.

Having read a lot about how it is easier to treat breast cancer, if

discovered early, she used to regularly self-examine herself. She had felt a lump earlier on her breast but it had vanished. But, it reappeared again after 15 days. "I don't know if it was vanity or I was plain stupid but I ignored the lump. I was hoping it would disappear. When it reappeared, I consulted a close family friend," she remembers. The friend was a general surgeon, her husband had great faith in – Dr Hans Manchanda. He examined her and suggested a surgery immediately as the tumour had to be removed and sent for a biopsy.

Divine intervention or plain serendipity ensured that Pamela mentioned this development to a close friend, who had lost both her in-laws to cancer. Her friend insisted they visit an oncologist. Pamela recalls with a laugh, "I remember I had planned to go to an exhibition of designer clothing with Aligarh applique work organised by Dr Rahi Masoom Reza's wife and daughter-in-law."

Instead, her friend took her to Dr Sanjay Sharma, an oncologist at Lilavati Hospital. After a needle biopsy, the doctor told her that it did

not look good and he was quite sure it was a malignant tumour. When she asked him how he could tell, he told her that it did not feel like normal tissue.

Sure enough, the results revealed Pamela had breast cancer. Her first reaction was to treat her breast cancer with alternative therapies like homoeopathy or ayurveda. However, her older son, Aditya Chopra vetoed it saying she could not take an arbitrary decision like that on her own.

"My husband and my sons sat and talked about it and we decided to go with a conventional treatment. I was advised to go to the USA. But, I was not keen because my entire support system was here and I wanted to get treated here," points out Pamela. She had her surgery and chemo at Breach Candy Hospital and she was operated by oncologist Dr Sanjay Sharma. "Though, his speciality was not breast cancer, I had faith in him," she points out.

Pamela had to have a mastectomy and 21 lymph nodes and vessels removed. She was advised to keep her right arm elevated at all times to avoid any side-

effects. "That was almost impossible. Later, I realised there was a swelling in my right arm and now, I always wear a pressure sleeve designed to keep the swelling down. The swelling rarely shrinks and never disappears completely," she says.

The chemotherapy was also hard to handle. "It was horrible, it left me nauseated," she says with a grimace. It took her six months to recover from the treatment.

Pamela dealt with the cancer like she always does when she has a problem in her life – face it. "When the doctor first told me I had cancer, I had tears in my eyes. But, I am not a person who will cry and feel sad. I did not feel sorry for myself or fight with God asking, why me? I decided it was a problem I would deal with and move on from there," she says matter-of-factly.

This indomitable, practical spirit is what gave Pamela the courage and fortitude to subsequently survive three more recurrences. She had to undergo regular liver, bone and body scans for the first five years after being diagnosed with cancer.

The first recurrence came two years after her mastectomy during the making of her son's romantic cult film, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (DDLJ)*. The tumour was in the mediastinum (the space in the thoracic cavity between the lungs) and did not touch any organ. However, it impacted her throat and gullet and she was on a fruit juice and soft food diet for six months. And, what was worse is that she could not do what she loved most – singing. But, the bubbly Pamela improvised. "I could not sing during that time so I used to hum," she reveals.

After this surgery at Lilavati Hospital, she went to the Hammersmith Hospital in the UK and the oncologist put her on a course of radiation for five days a week for five weeks. Unfortunately, it was the wrong decision since the radiation failed to get rid of the cancer completely. This time it reappeared in her neck region when she found a lump there. This was after DDLJ had released.

After the neck cancer surgery, the chemotherapy recommended to her

was very harsh. So, she consulted Dr Suresh Advani, a well-known oncologist, who explained the various treatments available to her and their side-effects.

"I chose the one which had the least hair loss. My chemo was once in two weeks and I was determined not to let it control or alter my lifestyle," she says. Unfortunately, the cancer was relentless.

Pamela dealt with the cancer like she always does when she has a problem in her life – face it. "When the doctor first told me I had cancer, I had tears in my eyes. But, I am not a person who will cry and feel sad. I did not feel sorry for myself or fight with God asking, why me? I decided it was a problem I would deal with and move on from there," she says matter-of-factly

The third recurrence came in the form of three lesions in her brain. "It was the year *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* was to release and I remember, Karan Johar, who is like my son, waited for me to return from the USA after my treatment to release the film. He wanted me to be there for the premiere," she reminisces.

This time around, Pamela decided to go to the USA. Boney Kapoor, who had experienced the trauma associated with cancer because Sridevi's mother battled with cancer too, suggested Dr Dattatreya Nori (who hailed from Andhra Pradesh) in New York. He is a leading oncology and radiation expert. Pamela remembers, "We arrived on a Friday and he asked us to come directly to the New York Hospital, also known as the Weill Cornell Centre. They started treatment but I didn't have to stay in the hospital all the time. My husband, who never took a day off work, had accompanied me along with

my mother and a servant. We stayed at an apartment close to the hospital and whenever I felt better, we would go out for dinner too. Dr Nori protected my hair as much as he could during the treatment though it would break my heart to see my hair fall."

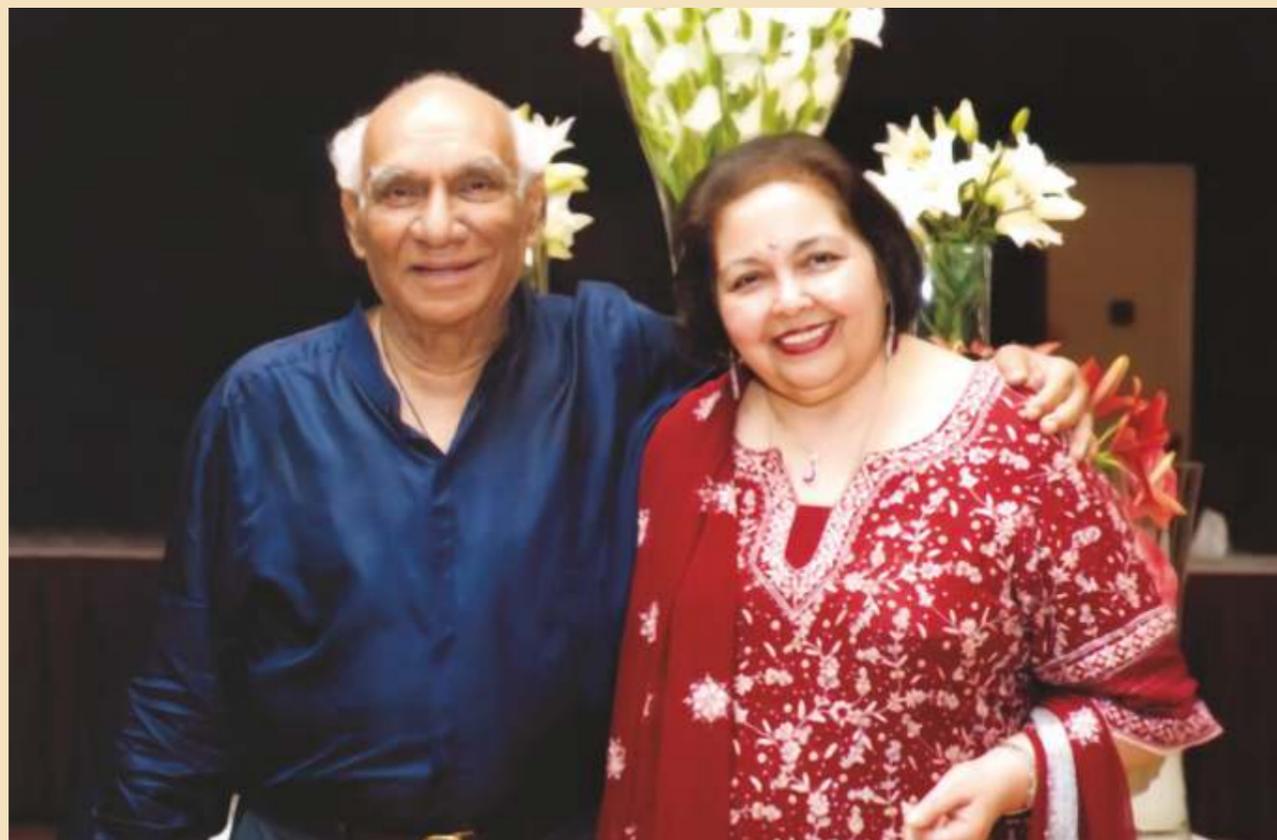
The not-so religious Pamela, who is a Sikh, however did believe in daily prayers. She says, "*Mainroz paath karti thi – Sukhmani ka* – which is the prayer book of the Sikhs. Later, I even started the *Chaupai*, which are the teachings of Guru Gobind Singh, our tenth guru. They gave me a lot of solace and changed me as a person. I was not expressive earlier but the cancer made me express my feelings more openly."

Pamela then goes on to give an insight into what cancer can do to a person's psyche. "You know, when you have cancer, you are not in control. The doctor, your family, the technicians, everyone takes charge. I decided to change that and wanted to be on top of the disease and questioned the doctors extensively about the different treatments etc," she says, giving a glimpse of her determined personality.

After the New York stint of treatment, Pamela went to Basel in Switzerland to a clinic that treated cancer with a medicine called Iscador (made from the extract of the mistletoe plant) and she takes the prescribed dose regularly.

Incidentally, there is no history of cancer in Pamela's family. It was after her own bout with the disease that her mother, who lived with her, passed away due to colon cancer. And, while her family was always very supportive, who was her biggest support system during her illness? She replies, "Honestly, it was my son Aditya's ex-wife Payal, who looked after me. She was always with me and anything I needed, she got it done. She looked after me well, I must say."

Pamela Chopra has also been a keen supporter of the Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation. Quizzing her about her association with breast cancer surgeon Dr P Raghuram, she recalls, "I met Dr Raghuram in London the first time. I was attending a charity function in aid of cancer patients and doctors from all over had been invited. Raghu was one of them and he told me



The ever-smiling Pamela with her late husband, Yash Chopra



Kabhi kabhi mere dil mein khayal aata hai... Yash Chopra took off time from making movies to be with Pamela

that he was planning to return to India to treat patients here. I was impressed with his zeal because he had a lucrative practice in the UK and yet, he was motivated enough to head back. He also told me that he was moved by my rendition of the song *Tere Liye* from the film, *Veer Zaara*."

So when he invited her to address an audience of breast cancer survivors, she agreed immediately. "I admire anyone who has had the courage to beat the disease and carry on with their lives. I support his cause because he is doing such a good thing," she affirms.

"I always ate healthy food. I have reduced my animal protein intake now. In fact, my son Aditya and his wife Rani are followers of this naturopath in Austria called Dr Hans Stoisser. His spa is called Viva Mayr and from a blood sample, they can tell you what you should eat and what not to eat. So, I have included that advice in my diet as well"

Today, Pamela lives a busy life carrying on with her usual routine. Her diet has not changed drastically either. Elaborating on her diet, she says, "I always ate healthy food. I have reduced my animal protein intake now. I have a lot of yoghurt and have cut out cereals. There have been no radical changes. In fact, my son Aditya and his wife Rani are followers of this naturopath in Austria called Dr Hans Stoisser. His spa is called Viva Mayr and from a blood sample, they can tell you what you should eat and what not to eat. So, I have included that advice in my diet as well. They suggested I avoid gluten and yeast. I had realised, I am allergic to it 20 years ago and have stayed away from it."

Chatting with Pamela, it is difficult to believe she has battled the Big C four times. It is kudos to her inner strength and fun-loving, bubbly nature that her story has a happy ending – much like her husband's movies! ■



Reinventing Museums

The concept of a museum in India conjures up images of musty corners with sleepy attendants and sculptures, objets d'art and artefacts displayed in unimaginative rows. But, that is in the past. Abhishek Ray, an enterprising architect from Mumbai, who calls himself a design entrepreneur, has developed exciting museums in different parts of India making them interactive, fun and also accessible for people with disabilities. **Minal Khona** finds out more

Photo credit: **Abhishek Ray**

Imaginative, expressive and keen on art as a child, Abhishek Ray was naturally drawn towards a creative field like architecture. As a kid, he remembers being a "science geek" along with his brother, breaking up toys and putting them together, conducting scientific experiments and photographing the world around them. It was his mother, Dr Manideepa Ray, a retired medical practitioner, the "biggest influence" in his life, who gave him his first independent assignment to refurbish her medical clinic.

While his colleagues and friends were happy to work in commercial offices, Ray drifted for a long time before he found his niche in the world of design and architecture. He knew he wanted to be a social and design entrepreneur, an innovator, a graphic artist and tried myriad methods and formats to work as an architect. It was when he bagged a project for the Prince of Wales Museum in Mumbai, now known as the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS), he realised that museum design – creating interactive, technology driven museums is his true calling.

The project involved designing an exhibition on Mumbai's history for the past 300 years. Ray boldly combined design,

historical research and technology to set up this exhibition. This was the "turning point", as Ray realised he had hit upon a "participatory design" to create solutions for museums. The exhibition was highly appreciated, and attracted an unprecedented number of visitors. Based on the success of this exhibition, his company Matrika Design Collaborative was awarded more projects by CSMVS.

For instance, he worked on the museum's Karl and Meherbai Khandalavala Gallery, which showcases the bronzes, miniature paintings, ivory, wooden objects, and ceramics from the collections of the late Karl Khandalawala, an eminent Mumbai lawyer. He also won their outreach project along with the Ministry of Culture – the Museum on Wheels. "The idea of a mobile museum is unique and allows people to appreciate culture in regions without museums or cultural institutions," he says.

The museum bus designed by Ray's company Matrika Design Collaborative, is a self-sustaining unit carrying replicas of exhibits at the Prince of Wales Museum, Mumbai. The bus boasts of a host of technologies to help the curators play video presentations. It can also be converted into an outdoor exhibition in school complexes and has a disabled



Abhishek Ray with his unique 'Museum on Wheels'

friendly elevator for the physically disabled. Today, the momentum created by these museum projects has made Ray a specialist in this area. For he says, "We have become one of the few offices in India, which can provide comprehensive solutions for museums and exhibitions."

Ray's other projects include the textile museum in Bhuj, Kutch. Known as The Living and Learning Design Centre or LLDC, it was started by Shrujan Trust to promote the region's artisan communities. This textile museum houses the extraordinary embroideries from the region. Ray points out, "We needed people to realise the ingenuity and skill of the craftswoman lies in the way she embroiders the piece. This can only be appreciated by allowing people to touch the work. So, we created their embroidery samples on A3 sized swatches and placed them next to interactive Tablets. People with low vision, disabilities and others can access the information on a corresponding embroidered panel placed outside. This tactile method along with new age interactive screens has been appreciated a lot."

His company is also developing new age software for two new museums, Toshakhana and the Shastra Ghar, for

the Punjab Heritage and Tourism Promotion Board and the state department of culture. The Shastra Ghar is being developed at General Dyers' Bungalow, the infamous general behind the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. The colonial additions to the building were removed revealing the structure of an earlier building of great Sikh kings, says Ray. The bungalow in

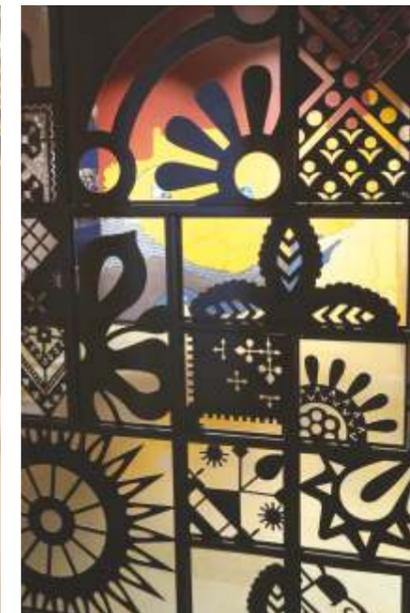
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fact belonged to Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who led the last battle against the British rule in India. The Shastra Ghar documents and showcases the military tradition, the Indian weapons and firearms introduced by Ranjit Singh. The Toshakhana meanwhile is the royal treasury, where once

Maharaja Ranjit Singh stored the Kohinoor diamond. This building, which will feature strong rooms displaying arms, ammunition and jewels, is being built with references from buildings of that age in Europe, he reveals.

Ray always tries to include attractions for children in museums because he believes they will carry the country's heritage forward. "The museum development plan in Jammu and Kashmir did not specify a children's gallery as part of the brief. But, as the principal designers we decided to include it. Children comprehend a museum very differently from the way adults do. They seek engagement, interactivity, reward and other experiences. So, we designed a space for storytelling activity inside the museum. There are activities such as pottery, wood craft, reading and gaming (historical themes) designed in the space. This new approach will change the way children visit museums in the future," he says.

Ray's zeal for social change and inclusion of people across all levels of society (for his work in the disability sector he was conferred the Ashoka Lemelson fellowship in 2006) is reflected in all his work. He worked along with different disability groups



Abhishek Ray has taken museum design to another level in India

to create awareness about the concept of "inclusion" while designing public spaces and utilities in Indian cities.

He has also worked with Moksh Yug Foundation in rural Karnataka. This project involves developing rural healthcare centres and dairy sheds to support a micro finance initiative in the region. Ray is also currently developing amenities like libraries, science labs, computer training centres, and activity centres for municipal schools in Pune under the CSR programme of Zensar Foundation. Besides this, he is also in the process of designing a rural school in Nizamabad district, rural Telangana with Kalidasu Vamsidhar, an associate in Hyderabad.

Luckily for Ray, he has a supportive wife and family. He says, "My wife Sudatta is one of my greatest pillars of support. She supports me through the leaner aspects of being a design entrepreneur. We have recently started a new initiative bringing in lifestyle items from rural artisans and craftspeople. This direct to artisan concept is an ethical way to sustain their heritage."

On museum design, this expert says, "It is a research oriented approach to develop a space where equity is created between the visitor experience and the collection." It involves many things from designing micro controlled environments within the

gallery and exhibition cases; balanced lighting; figuring out how to provide information on exhibits either through panels or through an experience; and developing hi-tech simulations and interactive systems, he points out.

According to Ray, India is new to museum redevelopment, the last time museums were really developed were immediately after Independence. "We are way behind in understanding what museums can do to shape the future of our societies. And, with a country as diverse as India, our culture needs to be preserved and showcased in a fast-paced modernised world," he concludes. And, we cannot help but agree. ■

UBF Diary

February 2016

Live on UK Radio!

The listeners of UK Radio in Chester got a glimpse into Dr Raghuram's inspiring life journey for the past eight years, such as his toughest decision to relocate to India despite lucrative career opportunities in the UK and the uphill task of establishing a new concept of breast health in India. The UK live radio show hosted by Flipside Radio Station in Chester, was conducted by Dr Nikhil Kaushik, a renowned ophthalmologist from north Wales. The programme was interspersed with Dr Raghuram's pick of Bollywood music numbers!



Empowering Speech in Gujarat

Dr Raghuram, President, The Association of Breast Surgeons of India (ABSI) delivered the presidential address at their west zone regional meeting at Ahmedabad. A large number of surgeons from Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan attended the meet and heard his talk.



Bangladesh Calling

Dr Raghuram spoke eloquently on his initiatives to improve breast healthcare in India at the First International Congress organised by the Association of Breast Surgeons of Bangladesh in Dhaka. He impressed upon Dr Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, the Honourable Speaker, Bangladesh Parliament and Zahed Makek, Bangladesh's Health Minister of the urgent need to implement a population based breast cancer screening programme in Bangladesh, like the model deployed in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.



March 2016

Impacting Lives

On International Women's Day, journalists in Hyderabad listened attentively to Dr Raghuram's simple but effective talk on the different aspects of breast health.



Empowering Bank Employees



The women employees of the State Bank of India (SBI) were another target group for a lecture on the importance of the early detection of breast cancer. Hardayal Prasad, SBI, chief general manager for Telangana and AP and his wife Shraddha Prasad paid rich tributes and felicitated Dr Raghuram for his exemplary work.



April 2016

UBF's Path-Breaking Initiative With Telugu States

In a laudable initiative to save scores of lives, the Andhra Pradesh government has welcomed Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation's proposal to implement a population based breast cancer screening programme to train health care workers and doctors at performing the Clinical Breast Examination (CBE) – a screening method to detect breast cancer early. In March, Dr Raghuram had already trained core healthcare staff in 13 districts of Andhra Pradesh at Rajahmundry and Tirupati.

Some 6,000 health care workers and 1,000 doctors across the state will be trained by June/July 2016. These trained medical personnel will then screen all underprivileged women between the ages of 35 – 65 years across the state. A similar programme is on the anvil with Telangana. This initiative in the Telugu states is all set to become the largest population based screening programme and a benchmark for the nation. To be given this huge responsibility by the government, is indeed a big honour for the Foundation.



The Healing Mother of Vailankanni

It is one of the most visited Christian shrines in south Asia. The soaring white spires of the Vailankanni shrine are like beacons of hope for devotees on a pilgrimage to the Basilica of the Lady of Good Health. The faith in the Mother shines in the eyes of the devotees, as some inch their way towards the shrine on their knees, some in wheelchairs and some bring their loved ones with them, hoping to be healed by the benign Holy Virgin Mary. The main church of the Basilica of the Lady of Health in Vailankanni is being currently restored by a Mysore architect to preserve its pristine, ancient structure and beauty.

Anil Mulchandani and **Dinesh Shukla** visit this famous pilgrimage site in Tamil Nadu which attracts 20 million pilgrims each year



Miracles tend to happen when you visit the Mother in Vailankanni. Carrying this belief close to their hearts, thousands of devotees throng the holy shrine of Vailankanni every year. It is one of the important holy places of pilgrimage people visit, if not once in a year, at least once in their lifetime. The power of this holy shrine is legendary probably because it has been sanctified by apparitions of Mary, much like the shrines of Our Lady of Lourdes in France and Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal, key places of pilgrimages for Catholics, after the Holy Land and Rome.

Tours to Vailankanni are regularly organised from all over India and from the Christian pockets of neighbouring



The Gothic style of the church inspires awe among the pilgrims

SAARC countries. This shrine falls in Nagapattinam district, which is Tamil Nadu's district of churches, and the pilgrimage tours often include visiting more than one church or shrine together with Vailankanni. Besides Christians, believers of other faiths like Hinduism, regularly visit the shrine for blessings.

The first Marian apparition in this part of the world is said to have occurred about 400 years ago. A shepherd boy from Vailankanni, who used to deliver milk for a rich man 12 km away at Nagapattinam, was blessed with this vision. Legend goes that one hot day, on his regular sojourn to the rich man's house, the thirsty boy drank water

from a pond and fell asleep under the shade of a nearby banyan tree. Suddenly, he was startled by the vision of a lady of celestial beauty carrying a beautiful child in her arms. The boy could not take his eyes of the Lady's unmatched beauty. The Lady greeted him with a motherly smile and asked him for some milk for her child.

Joyfully, he gave her some milk and the boy felt a deep sense of satisfaction when a bewitching smile spread over the face of the heavenly baby. When he recounted the story to the rich man, they were amazed to see that the jug instead of being half empty was brimming over with fresh, cool milk. The rich man was convinced that the boy was indeed blessed with a vision of Virgin Mary and Child Jesus.

honour at Vailankanni. The boy was unsure if he was equal to the task since he was lame. But, he quickly realized that when he stood up he could walk and even run. The rich gentleman, who had a similar vision the night before, believed the boy was miraculously cured of his disability. A small thatched chapel of Virgin Mary carrying Infant Jesus in her arms was built by the gentleman, and it was called "Arokia Matha" in Tamil. This was the humble beginnings of the shrine of Our Lady of Vailankanni.

The third incident occurred when a Portuguese ship sailing from Macao to Sri Lanka was caught in a violent storm in the Bay of Bengal. The Portuguese, who were devout Catholics, invoked the help of the



A small shrine called 'Matha Kulam', which means Our Lady's Lake, was built by the pond.

Another Marian apparition in Vailankanni occurred at the close of the 16th century. This apparition was accompanied with a miracle. A disabled boy was selling buttermilk for weary travellers by a banyan tree, when a lovely lady with a baby in her arms appeared before him. They were both clothed in white. The lady asked him for some buttermilk for the baby, and the boy quickly gave it eager to please his ethereal visitors. The lady then requested him to visit a rich Christian gentleman in the next town and tell him to build a chapel in her

Blessed Virgin, the "Star of the Sea". They fell on their knees on the water drenched deck praying and vowed to build a chapel in her name, wherever she helped them to land safely. The storm subsided and the 150 men on board were saved. It was September 8, the Feast of the Nativity of Mary. True to their word, as a way of thanksgiving, the sailors rebuilt the Shrine to Our Lady of Good Health, and continued to enhance and beautify it whenever their voyages brought them to the area. The sailors donated many objects to the church, the rare porcelain plates in the Basilica are said to have been donated by the sailors.

The shrine became an independent Parish Church in 1771. Later, in 1962, it



This holy shrine has withstood the ravages of time including the tsunami in 2004



Pilgrims taking a stroll by the sea

was granted a special status of a Minor Basilica by Pope John XXIII, and merged with the Major Basilica of Mary (Mary majore) in Rome. As the number of visitors to the Basilica grew, the church was expanded in many phases even as the sanctuary and the altar was kept intact, with extensions made from the nave of the shrine. In addition, two gothic domes of 82 feet were constructed on either side of the church entrance facing the sea. A two-storied Parochial building with a facility for pilgrims was also built in the complex.

The architectural style of the church is largely Gothic – the façade is adorned with Gothic arches and Gothic domes on the seaward side and looks very picturesque. It is white in colour with red roofs. The complex contains three chapels, Our Lady's Tank, Church Museum, Priests' Residence, Offering Centre, Stations of the Cross, Stations of the Rosary and the Shrine Mega Mahal. One of the early extensions from the nave, leaving the shrine intact, was done by the Franciscans. During the early 20th century, the sharp rivalry between the Jesuits and Franciscans was solved by moving the statues from a Jesuit church to the Shrine of Our Lady of Good Health, which was expanded in 1933 with two new wings, meeting at the nave.

A spacious vestry was provided immediately behind the altar giving the shrine the shape of a Latin Cross, with the miraculous image of Our Lady of Good Health at the centre of the altar. In 1956, a new welcome arch was blessed and opened by Bishop

Sundaram. In January 1961, a new central white marble altar replaced the older one. In 1974-75, an extension of the basilica was built behind the existing central altar to accommodate the multi-lingual pilgrims, with a high dome and gothic spirals inspired by the Basilica in Lourdes, seemingly appropriate for a shrine famously called the "Lourdes of the East". The Holy Mother is draped in a traditional sari, with the infant Jesus in her arms, crowned in gold.

The power of this holy shrine is legendary probably because it has been sanctified by apparitions of Mary, much like the shrines of Our Lady of Lourdes in France and Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal, key places of pilgrimages for Catholics, after the Holy Land and Rome

This historic Basilica of our Lady of Good Health in Velankanni is presently undergoing a renovation to protect it from the effects of the sea. The work is being executed by Gundu Rao, an architect from Mysore using the same materials used hundreds of years ago. It is amazing that the shrine has withstood the ravages of time, including the devastating effects of the tsunami in 2004.

The shrine is visited by about 20 million people every year. The largest number visit during the 11-day annual church festival that concludes with the celebration of the Feast of the Nativity of Mary on September 8, the Lent season and in the month of May. Most often, a devotee undertakes this special pilgrimage with a fervent prayer in their hearts either to cure a disorder, to get relief from a disability, to be blessed with a child or a suitable life partner, and these prayers are mostly accompanied by vows like the promise of a return pilgrimage or a votive offering. Pilgrims usually take a bath or a dip in the sea before approaching the shrine, where they offer candles, flowers, garlands and votive offerings (like the replica of a body part that needs to be cured or a cradle to symbolise the birth of a child) at the altar.

The path called the 'Holy Way' leading to the sacred tank from the shrine is marked by stations portraying scenes from the life of Mother Mary and Jesus Christ. It is on this path that pilgrims tread barefoot or walk on their knees to the tank and its neighbouring chapel. Saffron threads and penned wishes and fervent outpourings in pieces of paper are tied to a grill at the site. Devotees leave behind their most heartfelt desires and pray that the Holy Mother will hear them, and answer their prayers. Yes, miracles can happen if you pay a visit to this holy shrine, it is believed. And, it is this staunch belief that brings people in millions to Vailankanni. ■

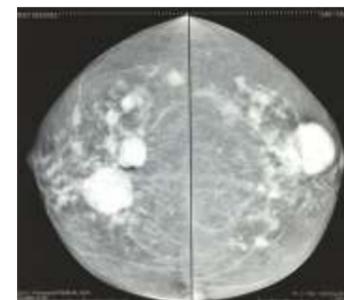
Breast Cysts

A Benign Issue

A 40-year-old woman noticed a lump in her left breast, which was diagnosed as a non-cancerous cyst. In his column this quarter, **Dr P Raghuram** tells women not to be anxious about breast cysts



Dr P Raghuram



sacs develop in the breast tissue and are known as breast cysts. It is one of the most common benign (non-cancerous lumps) in the breast.

What is a breast cyst?

The breasts are made up of ducts (tubes that carry milk to the nipple) and lobules (milk-producing glands), which are surrounded by fatty tissue and supportive tissue. Sometimes, fluid-filled

How does it occur, and at what age is it common?

It is believed cysts develop naturally as the breast ages and changes. Although, one can develop breast cysts at any age, they are most common in women over 35 years, who have not reached menopause. They occur more frequently as women approach menopause and usually stop or are not as frequent after it. However, women who take Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) after menopause, may develop cysts.

Cysts can feel soft, if they're near the skin surface or like a hard lump if they're deeper in the breast tissue. They can develop anywhere in the breast but are more commonly found in the upper half. For some women, cysts can feel uncomfortable and even painful, and before a period, cysts may become larger, feel sore and tender.

It's quite common to develop one or more cysts – either in one breast or in both breasts – and this is nothing to worry about. There are many women who have cysts without knowing about them.

How are they found?

Typically, a lady would notice a lump in her breast overnight. Cysts usually become noticeable as a lump in the breast, or are sometimes found by chance during a breast examination or routine breast screening.

A specialist consultation is essential and it is important to undergo three different tests, often referred to as Triple

Assessment, so that a definite diagnosis can be made. Triple Assessment, which involves a clinical breast examination, a mammogram (breast x-ray), ultrasound scan (which creates a picture of the breast using high-frequency sound waves) and if necessary, (for example: a painful cyst) an ultrasound guided aspiration of the cyst fluid. The fluid may be sent to the laboratory for testing particularly if it is bloodstained, as bloody fluid in the aspirate indicates a small risk of being a sign of breast cancer.

Is a cyst always considered as benign (non-malignant)?

Most cysts are benign (non-cancerous) with no additional risk of developing breast cancer. However, rarely, some cysts can harbour a cancer (intracystic cancer). Blood stained aspirate from the cyst must be carefully assessed to make sure there is nothing sinister.

How are breast cysts managed?

If the Triple Assessment has confirmed the presence of a simple cyst, the lady can be reassured that the lump is not a cancer and will not lead to a cancer. Many cysts disappear by themselves and are nothing to worry about. If the cyst is large and causing discomfort or pain, or doesn't go away on its own, the fluid can be drained using a fine needle and syringe with or without ultrasound guidance.

Once the fluid is removed, the cyst usually disappears. The fluid drawn from the cyst can vary in appearance, from clear to very dark.

Can the cyst come back after aspiration?

Cysts can return or one may develop new cysts. It is important not to presume it is a recurrent cyst. A specialist consultation is essential for assessment and confirmation. The treatment for cysts is the same each time.

Is a follow-up required after diagnosis of cysts?

If the cyst has been drained, it is important for the specialist to see the patient in a few weeks to see if it has refilled. A breast ultrasound scan should be done during the follow-up visit.



Happiness is a choice, with or without cancer.

Karvy salutes the survivors and a million other battling with breast cancer.