

PINK CONNECTION

UBF Vol 9 Issue 2: Nov '22- Jan '23

**'One must
expect the
unexpected
from life'**

Swगतिका
Acharya



**Tanisa
Foundation:**
A beloved
daughter's legacy
lives on

**On a heritage
trail in Calcutta**

BEHIND The Scenes

I've been moved by almost every article in this issue, since each one of them demonstrates the resilience of human beings. There's the optimistic Swagatika Acharya, who at 19 years old, not just successfully fought her cancer with fortitude but also pacified her inconsolable parents telling them 'in life, we have to expect the unexpected'. It is adversity, especially sickness, that tests everything we believe in. Swagatika, 24 years now, is a practising lawyer, and an Odissi dancer to boot.

Young Tanisa, of course, is no more. But her vivacious spirit urging cancer patients to wear red lipstick and red bandanas to cheer themselves before chemotherapy, is what keeps her parents Neeraj and Meenakshi Dhingra going today. She lived every moment of her young life, and when the family went to America for her treatment, she planned their outings, always cheering her parents on. Tanisa's life truly should inspire youngsters who get dispirited with every failure, big or small.

Indeed, when we read about these cancer fighters, you realise how our daily mundane worries over clothes and cars seem so trivial.

I'm even more taken up with the donation of Radha Kantipudi, a cancer survivor herself that was matched by a Rs 5 crore donation from the KIMS hospital, all of which will go towards treating underprivileged women for breast cancer. Importantly, Dr P Raghu Ram will waive his fee while treating these 150 underprivileged women; in this generosity of so many people, we have the true meaning of what our life should be about: helping others less privileged than us!

Ratna Rao Shekar



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“I was confident I would recover”



At 19, she was suddenly diagnosed with Stage 2 nasopharyngeal cancer. But Swagatika Acharya, now a 24-year-old practising lawyer in the Odisha high court in Cuttack, courageously and confidently fought her cancer and recovered. To dispel fears and myths about the disease, she now runs a Trust that helps other cancer fighters spread awareness; conducts screening camps and helps the underprivileged with funds for cancer treatment

Minal Khona talks to the young cancer survivor

The first thing that strikes me about Swagatika when I talk to her on the phone is the confidence in her voice. She shares at the outset that she has always been confident even as a child. And says, “In fact, when I knew I had cancer, and my parents were upset, I was consoling them telling them not to cry because I was confident I would recover.”

No one in Swagatika’s family has had cancer, and it took a while for the doctors to diagnose it. As an active 19-year-old, Swagatika was studying law at the Siksha ‘O’ Anusandhan (SOA), a deemed university in Bhubhaneshwar. She was also an accomplished Odissi dancer who gave stage performances and participated in festivals, and played cricket for the college team.

“In October 2017, I felt some pain in my neck one morning. The doctor presumed I had a cold because I used to go to the grounds at five and six in the morning to practise cricket. Winter was approaching so he gave me some antibiotics. But, the pain got worse. He changed the medicines and gave me a stronger dose of antibiotics. But, by



Ms Positivity: Swagatika with young cancer fighters

November end, I felt a lump on my neck below my left ear. I was asked to get myself tested for tuberculosis. All the reports were negative,” recalls Swagatika.

The pain kept increasing and the lump started growing. None of the doctors suspected cancer; instead, they gave her medicines for TB, as the lump kept growing and getting bigger. This continued till February 2018, when Swagatika contracted high fever, came home from college and fainted. That is when she was hospitalised and her blood reports showed a white blood cell count of 45,000. Luckily, her father’s friend, who was a paediatric specialist, came to see her and suggested she get tested for cancer. “We went to Cuttack where the oncologists conducted a biopsy. This was in March of 2018. The PET scan and blood tests showed that it was nasopharyngeal carcinoma, Stage 2. We went to Mumbai to the Tata Memorial Hospital for further intervention,” she narrates.

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Swagatika had opened the reports first and when she saw it was cancer, she remained unfazed. “My younger sister, Swayam Pragyan, and I have been confident and positive from childhood. I have never had the fear of death either. When I saw the reports, I thought to myself, I will get treated and I will be fine. One has to expect the unexpected from life. My parents were crying but I told them not to, and that treatment was the only option. Cancer was not going to stop me from living my life and crying was not the solution,” she says.

Swagatika and her family took the protocol prescribed by the oncologists at Tata Memorial and returned to Bhubhaneshwar for treatment. “I needed three rounds of chemotherapy and 37 rounds of radiation therapy. I didn’t even question the doctors about the side effects or after effects of the treatment I was going to take,” she says.

Swagatika had long hair and when she was told it was going to fall off with the treatment, she decided to go bald rather than go through the trauma of seeing it fall in clumps. With her trademark positivity she says, “I went bald and when I looked at myself in the mirror, I thought I looked cuter. And if the cancer had not come into my life, I would not have known how I must have looked like when I was born.”

It is this positive spirit which helped her when she went in for her first chemotherapy session, ironically on April 6, her 20th birthday. Tragedy had struck her family that week, with her mother’s brother passing away suddenly in an accident. “My mother went for his funeral and I went for my chemo session,” she recalls, in a matter-of-fact tone.

I have never had the fear of death either. When I saw the reports, I thought to myself, I will get treated and I will be fine.

The awareness about cancer is low in her state; and Swagatika saw first-hand what lack of knowledge on the disease could lead to. “Some of our neighbours stopped coming over to our house because they thought cancer is contagious. A stranger one day started talking to my father at the hospital. He actually advised my father to discontinue my treatment and save the money for his old age instead. His logic was that since I was a girl, no one would marry me after I had recovered from cancer,” she recounts.

Swagatika’s father, Manoranjan Acharya is a financial planner. She recalls how he was always this strong person in her life but he broke down when he realised his daughter had cancer. “It was like a role reversal. I saw my father as being strong; and my mother, Purnima, as the softer parent. When I got sick, it was as if they switched roles. She was strong and my father would cry like a baby in front of me. When I saw this, I decided to be stronger and kick cancer away,” she reveals.

The chemotherapy was the easier part of the treatment for Swagatika. She didn’t suffer from severe side effects because she was given an injection to minimise it. “I am a big eater; but due to my lack of appetite, I used to force myself to eat because I had to eat to keep my strength up,” she says.

The radiation therapy that followed was nothing short of a nightmare. Her radiation oncologist had warned her about the side effects and that it would not be easy. He gave her the option of being fed through the nose but she refused.



Swagatika with her parents and sister: For the plucky cancer survivor crying was not the solution and she was confident that she would be cured with treatment



Swagatika is back to her first love - Odissi

A stranger one day started talking to my father at the hospital. He actually advised my father to discontinue my treatment and save the money for his old age instead

The side effects have left Swagatika with a thyroid gland that will need lifelong medication; and completely destroyed her saliva glands. "The radiation therapy made me completely voiceless for four months, as my food pipe was squeezed. I used to communicate with a notepad and pen. I had so many mouth ulcers that I could only consume liquid food. I survived on one glass of rice starch and barley water, and plain water throughout that time," she recalls. She could only start eating soft food at the end of the year after her treatment.

The chemotherapy ended in June and the radiation therapy finished in August 2018. Her hair had started growing but the treatment darkened her skin by several shades. (Her earlier skin tone is slowly coming back) Because she has no saliva glands, Swagatika needs to sip some water every five minutes or her mouth dries up.

She says, "Earlier, I used to even get up at nights to do so. Now I have reduced the frequency; in winter I have to drink water every 10-15 minutes and in summer, every 20 minutes." She also lost over 25 kilos during the treatment and while already petite, she now weighs only 35 kilos. But the braveheart that she is, she works on her health diligently, though she cannot eat spicy food; even upma was out of bounds for two years. She cannot eat grilled foods – be it a sandwich or a kebab/tikka – for the rest of her life due to their carcinogenic nature.

Despite all these hurdles, she graduated as a lawyer. "I had my friends and family and all my teachers supporting me. Luckily, Covid happened so I could study at home with online classes; I was not allowed to go out after chemo. I used to get severe headaches and my body was very weak. I did miss out on some classes in my second, third and fourth year, so I was allowed to give the exams for those papers along with my fifth-year exams," she reveals.

Swagatika went on to complete her master's degree too and is practising with a senior lawyer at the high court. Her speciality is civil and corporate law. She is also slowly getting back to dancing. "Odissi is my first love. I have learnt the art form since seven. I am practising the mudras again so I can go back to dancing," she says.

After recovering, Swagatika decided to use her experience and her interactions with other cancer patients at the hospital for the larger good. She set



Swगतिका and her father were among a group of eight cancer survivors who trekked Dayara Bugyal, a mountain 11,830 ft above sea level. It was organised on National Cancer Survivors Day observed on June 5, 2022



Swगतिका has set up the Awaaken Cancer Care Trust to help cancer patients

up the Awaaken Cancer Care Trust in 2018 (yes, it is spelt this way) and registered it in 2019 on the advice of senior doctors. Beyond her work, the activities of the Trust occupy her time.

Swगतिका and the volunteers conduct awareness programmes so that people don't fear cancer. They try to get rid of the stigma attached to the disease. She gets other cancer fighters

to come and speak to people, besides sharing her own journey – something she had done through blogs and social media – during her own tryst with cancer.

The Trust holds camps for breast cancer screening in mobile vans; more than 5,000 women have received free breast cancer screenings so far, she says.

“We even give them free food to encourage women to come forward for the tests. The Trust also helps with funds for those who cannot afford treatment. During Covid, we helped over 100 cancer patients to get timely treatment. We would arrange for the medicines to be sent to them and transport for those who needed to come to hospitals for treatment from extremely far-off and remote villages to Bhubhaneshwar. We have held more than 500 awareness campaigns so far. This is my way of giving back to those who have fear and are not aware of the disease and its symptoms,” explains Swगतिका.

Born with an adventurous streak, Swगतिका has done underwater seal walks and paragliding during her holidays post recovery. She adds, “Recently my father and I were among a group of eight cancer survivors who trekked Dayara Bugyal, a mountain 11,830 ft above sea level. It was organised on June 5, 2022, the day that is observed as National Cancer Survivors Day. I was the youngest among the eight survivors and the only one from Odisha.” She has also been felicitated by the governor of Odisha, Prof Ganeshi Lalji for her selfless service in the field of cancer care.

She is only 24 and has already gone through a lot. But Swगतिका's courage and confidence will certainly continue to be a beacon of positive energy for other cancer fighters. We wish her more power. ■



Keeping alive a beloved daughter's spirit

There can be nothing worse for a parent than losing a young daughter to cancer. Meenakshi and Neeraj Dhingra, who lost their daughter to ovarian cancer when she was barely 28 years, try to go beyond their grief and focus on the positivity and hope with which their daughter had lived. And, they have now set up the Tanisa Foundation that helps cancer patients and their kin to cope during a challenging phase

Nivedita Choudhuri talks to the bereaved mother who shares Tanisa's moving story

It's ok to not be okay. A simple yet powerful message which was often articulated by the ebullient and indomitable Tanisa Dhingra. She may have spent only 28 years on earth, but Tanisa had refused to let her battle with cancer snatch away her peace, joy, and resolve, to live life to the fullest. Almost a year after her passing away due to ovarian cancer, her mother Meenakshi Dhingra is keeping her legacy alive with the volunteer-based, non-profit Tanisa Foundation.

Meenakshi reminisces, "Born in 1993, Tanisa was very wise, hardworking, enthusiastic, and disciplined as a child. She always had her own opinions, and she was curious about things. She would question people if she felt something wasn't right."

"She was a special daughter, and everybody said so from relatives and friends to teachers and colleagues," says Meenakshi.

A student at The Shri Ram School in Gurgaon, Tanisa went on to graduate in commerce at Shaheed Bhagat Singh College in Delhi. She landed a job with Google in Gurgaon and things seemed hunky-dory for a while.

Early on in 2016, Tanisa experienced persistent stomach pain. Antibiotics did not help. Further tests and scans revealed the 23-year-old had ovarian cancer. Shaking her head with disbelief, Meenakshi says, "We always tried to lead healthy lives. Tanisa never ate junk food or processed food. She snacked on salads and fruits and had no bad habits either. She had always been hale and hearty and probably never even had a headache in her life. We consulted many doctors, but everybody gave the same diagnosis. It was exceptionally

In India, there is so much negativity around the disease. Cancer is like a death knell. People only talk of medication and treatment. The emotional well-being and mental health of patients and their families are overlooked
- Meenakshi Dhingra



Tanisa at a Breakfree event where she used to organise many activities for cancer patients, from art and craft competitions children to webinars and meditation sessions for adults

unusual for such a young girl to get ovarian cancer, but my main aim was to get her out of it. I had to steel myself for the sake of my child.”

Her husband Neeraj and she took Tanisa to The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Centre in Houston for treatment, while their son Tejas stayed behind in India. They had stayed there for 10 months while Tanisa had surgery and chemotherapy. In between her treatment, Tanisa made travel plans for them and she roamed around in a wheelchair as soon as she felt stronger.

Tanisa taught patients who were coping with hair loss from cancer treatment to tie scarves and bandanas on their heads. And, she travelled to hospitals to distribute bandanas, all the while keeping her job with Google

They visited Austin, Chicago, New York, Boston and California. These trips were of short duration and made before the next round of treatment would start. Tanisa booked the flights and hotels. She planned detailed itineraries, chalking out what they would see and where they would eat during their trips, whether they would take a bus or the subway to reach from point A to point B, etc.

“The best place to get a pizza, sushi, or cheesecake...Tanisa researched everything. Every minute of her life was spent positively,” reveals Meenakshi.

Meenakshi recounts an incident that throws more light on her daughter’s positivism. “Once, her surgery had to be

postponed because her haemoglobin and other vitals were low. Instead of being depressed that her treatment was being delayed, she came home excited. As she was very friendly and had an attractive personality, she had made many friends in USA and so she went to a graduation party that evening and danced her heart out. There was so much to be learnt from her,” recounts Meenakshi.

In the US cancer centre they were moved by the presence of volunteers. “An 80-year-old coming and chatting to cancer patients, hugging them, holding their hands was unfathomable to us. But, these volunteers made such a difference in the lives of patients and their families with their comforting presence and soothing words,” she recalls.

And continues, “In India, however, there is so much negativity around the disease. Cancer is like a death knell. People only talk of medication and treatment. The emotional well-being and mental health of patients and their families are overlooked.”

They returned to India at the end of 2016. Tanisa, who was in remission now, missed the level of care she had received in America. As in the west, she wanted people in India to lead normal lives despite the disease. She was always an excellent orator and so became a motivational speaker and delivered lectures in Hong Kong, Singapore, America, the UK, and within India itself.

Tanisa even delivered a talk before Google CEO Sundar Pichai. She also organised many events for cancer patients – stand-up comedy programmes and make-up opportunities as well as photoshoots for women.

Having observed people celebrating ‘Bald is Beautiful Day’ in America, Tanisa took inspiration from that to do something similar in India. She organised art and craft competitions for children and games, tambola, laughter therapy, webinars, meditation sessions, antakshari, dance and music for the grown-ups.

“Tanisa did not want to stop living for even a second. She encouraged patients to wear red lipstick and red dresses while



Tanisa with her close-knit family



Tanisa celebrates Bald is Beautiful Day

going for chemotherapy. She wanted them to look beautiful," remembers Meenakshi.

She told people that even if they were very ill, they should take out one hour every day to live it up. Tanisa taught patients who were coping with hair loss from cancer treatment to tie scarves and bandanas on their heads. And, she travelled to hospitals to distribute bandanas, all the while keeping her job with Google. "In fact, her bosses were very happy with her work and often sent her to deal with the most difficult clients," says Meenakshi.

Tanisa did not want to stop living for even a second. She encouraged patients to wear red lipstick and red dresses while going for chemotherapy. She wanted them to look beautiful, says her mother Meenakshi

Life without Tanisa

The close-knit family of four was dealt a cruel blow when Tanisa passed away on December 30, 2021. She had been ill for one year before that and never recovered. Meenakshi's life turned upside down, and she experienced severe depression for the next three months. While rummaging through Tanisa's books one day, she found a book on Ikigai – a Japanese concept referring to something that gives a person a raison d'être to live. She realised that death must not end Tanisa's work.

Once she found purpose in life again, Meenakshi decided to start an organisation in Tanisa's name and provide succour to cancer patients as her daughter had tried to do. In the past few months, Tanisa Foundation has touched the lives of around



Tanisa at an event for cancer patients

3,000 patients. The foundation has donated Smiley kits, consisting of bandanas, earrings, a bag, and stress-free balls, while also offering protein powders to poor patients. The stress-free balls help patients to exercise after surgery. Hair donation drives are arranged to provide wigs for patients experiencing hair loss.

Says Meenakshi, "Nutrition is very important for cancer patients. Treatment sometimes results in loss of appetite, vomiting and ulcers in the mouth. Protein powders are wholesome supplements that build strength and go a long way in the fight against the disease."

They have also set up screening camps around Delhi and NCR area in association with medical institutes to offer health check-ups that look for early signs of cancer in people. The foundation has come up with a concept called Breakfree: Forget Cancer.

"We reserve a day when we celebrate with patients, carers, and our supporters. We come together as a community and have fun despite our battles. Breakfree events were initiated by Tanisa at Medanta hospital and we are continuing her work with the same spirit and energy that she brought to her events," asserts Meenakshi.

She is now planning to write a book on her daughter and inspire youngsters who "suffer from depression over trivial matters such as not scoring well in tests or not being able to afford a new dress".

"Tanisa was an optimist who never looked at a glass as half empty or half full. If she saw a glass as half empty, she would immediately pipe up and say that it needed to be filled up. Ever the meticulous planner, she said if Plan A did not work, Plan B or Plan C or Plan D would. Though she is not here with us, I believe she is still looking upon us and guiding us in our endeavours," says Meenakshi, signing off. ■

Oh! Calcutta!

A couple in Kolkata, Tathagata Neogi and Chelsea McGill have been organising Heritage Walks in Calcutta since 2017. They have made it their goal to uphold and create awareness about its rich heritage and stir interest about the micro-histories of the metropolis that are fast disappearing.

Nivedita Choudhuri meets up with the intrepid duo on a recent trip

Any season is good to explore the old and the ancient if you are a history buff. And, what better way, to access those hidden gems than to amble through constricted alleyways and one-way streets in a manner that vehicles can't. Kolkata may be widely flayed for its filth and grime, but Tathagata Neogi and Chelsea McGill take delight in uncovering the hidden treasures in this much-maligned city before an admiring audience of culture aficionados. The couple have made it their goal to uphold and create awareness about the rich heritage of the metropolis.

Neogi, an alumnus of the esteemed Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Purulia, went on to graduate in history at Jadavpur University in Kolkata and completed his studies in UK with an MA and PhD in archaeology at the University of Exeter.



Enthusiasts at the South Park Street Cemetery walk in Kolkata

McGill, on the other hand, came to Kolkata from Ohio, USA, armed with a degree in linguistic anthropology. She was on a Critical Language scholarship, which is an overseas language and cultural immersion programme, targeted at students enrolled in American colleges and universities. She spent a brief period in Dhaka before forging an association with the American Institute of Indian Studies in Kolkata's Swinhoe Street.

A chance meeting with Neogi through a common friend turned into a lifelong association for both. The two married in 2014, and settled down in Kolkata. Based on their collective knowledge and skills, they decided to give up their teaching jobs and set up an enterprise offering walking tours and community-focused workshops to day-trippers and local history enthusiasts.

Heritage Walk Calcutta, a historical tour agency, thus took shape in 2017. Co-founders Neogi and McGill decided to curate experiences based on exhaustive research and share the results with locals and foreigners alike. In 2020, the business was rebranded, and the name changed to Immersive Trails.

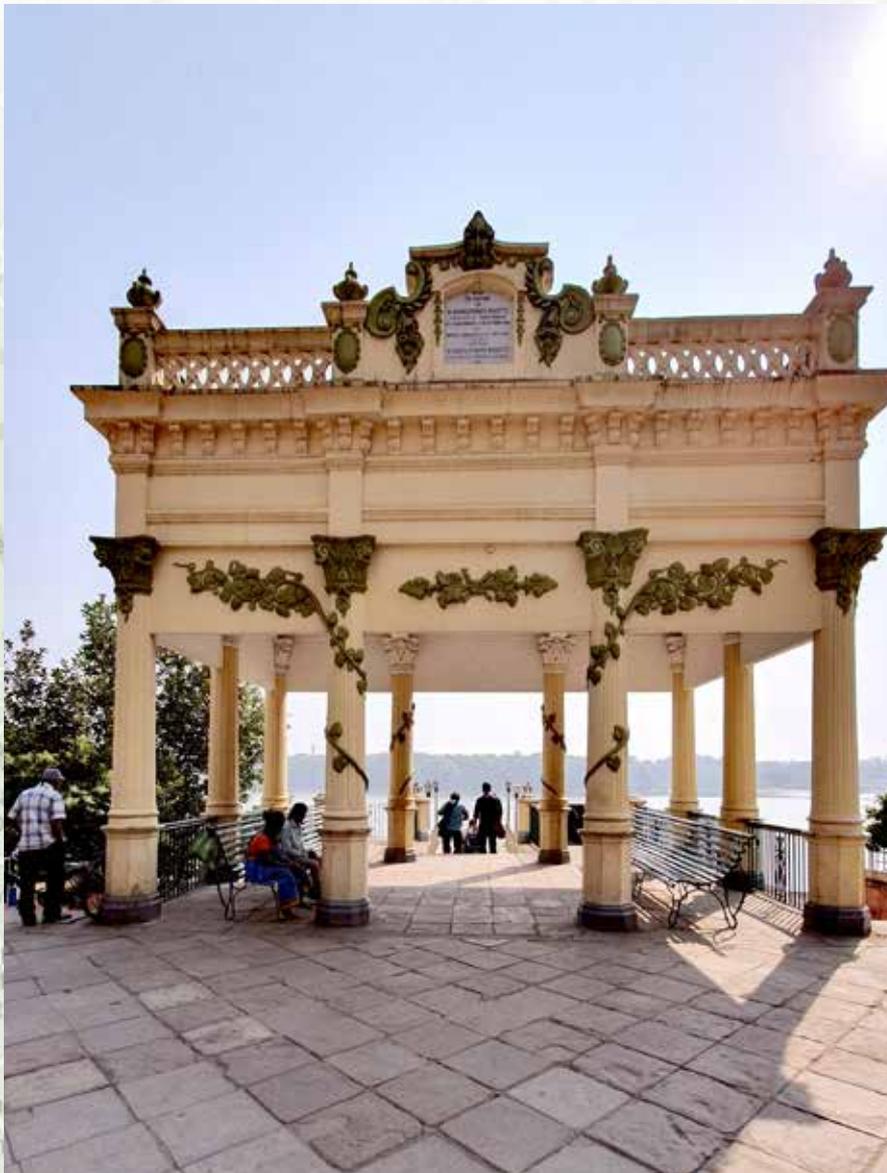
Says Neogi, "We were concerned that our microhistories were getting lost. We decided to document our heritage, buildings and family histories and save them from extinction." His education in the UK had introduced him to the concept of community archaeology and sustainable community-focused heritage management projects.

"I loved the idea of professionals working with communities and inspiring them to identify, record and protect their local heritage through targeted training. When we were looking at organising walking tours for culture buffs, we found that most catered only to outsiders. Also, they cost a bomb, and were not really tailored for the local population," explains Neogi.

Neogi and McGill tirelessly delved into archives for their background research, instead of relying on the internet. They tapped the National Archives in



Visitors marvel at a building during the Calcutta's Victorian Business Houses walk



Durga Charan Rakshit Ghat in Chandernagore, which was shown as part of the Other Colonies Trail

America, British Library, the State Archives of West Bengal, and the India Office Records to do research on their areas of interest.

“Once a tour is ready, it does not mean that we stop researching into the subject. For instance, our tour of Kolkata’s Old Chinatown has constantly evolved over the past four to five years,” shares McGill.

“I felt the disproportion between hasty development and the conservation of heritage must be addressed through engagement, community awareness, and empowerment. The capacities of local communities must be enhanced so that they can document their

heritage for the future generations, thereby preventing a loss of identity and history,” points out Neogi.

Further, he adds, “Chelsea and I believe that awareness about heritage should begin from an early age. It can be achieved through fun and interactive sessions. Children will like history more if it can be made to come alive.”

That is why they planned capacity-building workshops in schools and other organisations and kept prices for the walks reasonably priced to make it more accessible. The walks are led by Neogi or other historians who are well-informed about Kolkata’s history.

“It takes anything from four months to a year to plan a new tour because we have to be very methodical and painstaking about the research,” he says.

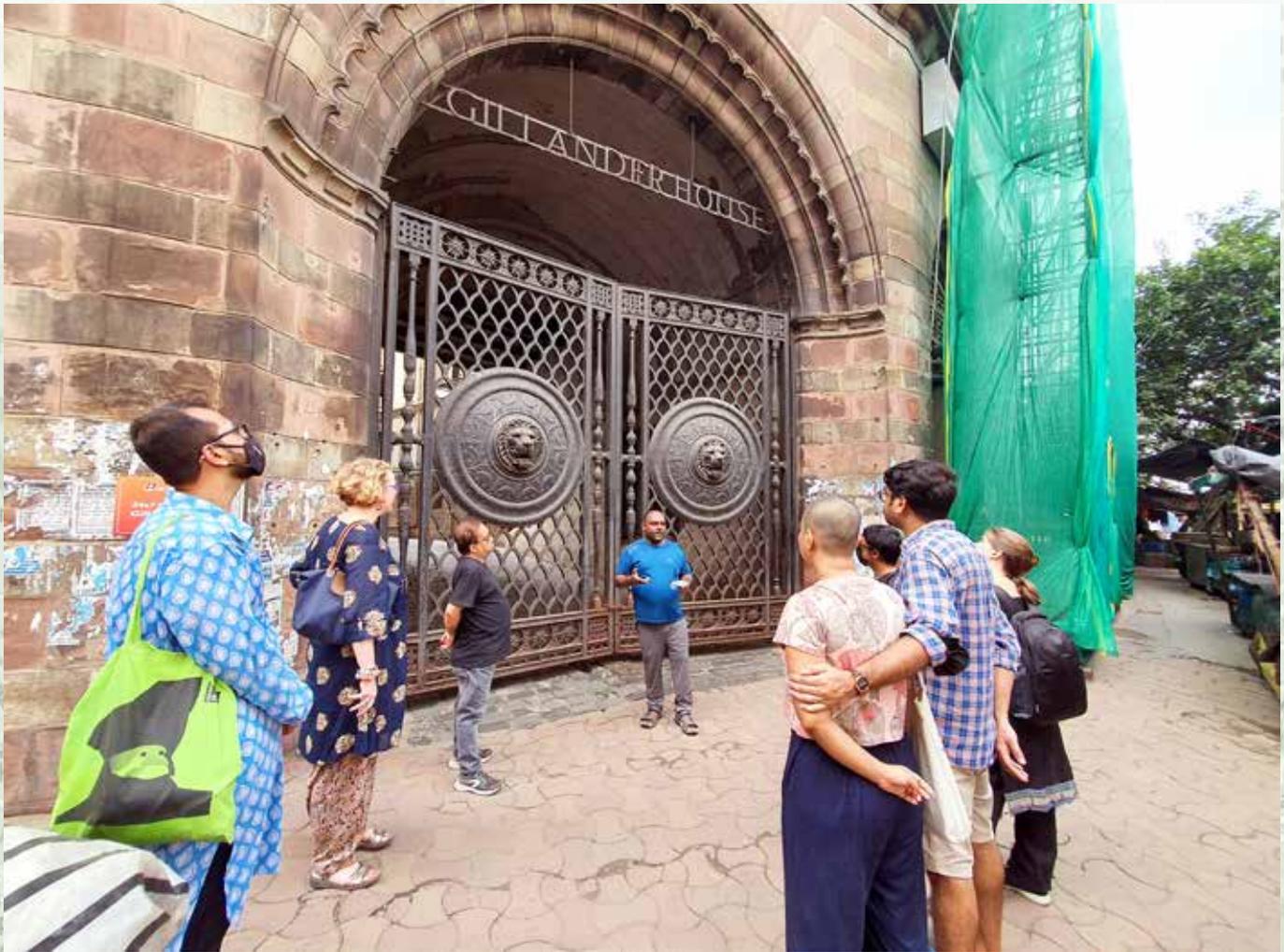
“Some of the walking tours focus on the city’s iconic Dalhousie Square, which evolved from a collection of thatched huts to becoming the nucleus of the British Empire, and the South Park Street Cemetery, where lie the graves of the earliest colonial settlers,” informs McGill.

Calcutta during World War II, the St John’s Church Walking Tour and the Calcutta Business Houses Trail are also quite popular among history buffs. There was trouble from the Axis Powers as Japanese missions tried to obliterate the city’s industrial sector and foil Allied war effort in India and Burma. The World War II trail is very rewarding for war historians.

St John’s Church – constructed in 1787 – was one of the first public buildings to be put up by the East India Company in the city. It has the mausoleum of Job Charnock, founder of Calcutta in 1690. The business houses trail takes up the stories of some of the most flourishing companies in the metropolis in the 19th century. To make history fun and accessible outside academia, a scavenger hunt was organised in September to test how much participants knew about Kolkata.

Immersive Trail’s workshops highlight the importance of involving residents and communities in management of heritage properties and sites. Neogi and McGill want to transform our degenerating heritage assets from crumbling objects of study to vibrant sources of learning.

The topics in the workshops range from how to read historical maps, explore the undercurrents between politics, society, and architecture in 19th and 20th century India, terracotta architecture of Bengal to introduction to heritage documentation and oral histories, doing archival research online and researching family histories.



Gillander House shown on the business houses walk

Chelsea and I believe that awareness about heritage should begin from an early age. It can be achieved through fun and interactive sessions. Children will like history more if it can be made to come alive
- Neogi

Covid gave the entrepreneurs a chance to go online as face-to-face meetings became a thing of the past. They turned increasingly to technology as a means of adapting to the new situation. So, now you have Immersive Virtual Experiences, where travel buffs can pay to watch the Sutanuti Diaries, Victorian Calcutta, Chowringhee Architecture and Calcutta Cinema Heritage Experience among others.

Neogi and McGill expanded their repertoire to include the Pattachitra Durgas of Hatserandi, a village in West Bengal's Birbhum district, and Birbhum's terracotta temples. More than 2,500 people from over 40 countries have been on these online tours.

Covid, however, took a toll on the health of these two passionate scholars, and they still suffer from long Covid and lingering symptoms

such as nerve pain and fatigue. They have had to reduce their tours to just one or two every week and take on interns to help with research. They are now working on Dekko, a virtual experiences platform that will enable those who cannot travel to experience the heritage structures. Wnder, an audio walking tour app for immersive self-guided experiences, is also on the anvil.

Ill health has not stopped Neogi and McGill from venturing outside Kolkata though. On a recent trip, the intrepid couple led explorers to the two mediaeval capitals of Bengal, Gaur and Pandua. Another trip will offer visitors the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Immersive Experience from Sukna to Kurseong. They will later go on a heritage trail and a gastronomy trail through Darjeeling town, explore a tea garden and monasteries.



Tathagata Neogi and Chelsea McGill



The old Standard Chartered Bank building (during a trail on banking history in colonial Calcutta)



Writers' Building in Dalhousie Square, Kolkata



Some of the walking tours focus on the city's iconic Dalhousie Square, which evolved from a collection of thatched huts to becoming the nucleus of the British Empire, and the South Park Street Cemetery, where lie the graves of the earliest colonial settlers, says McGill

Then, there is the Manipur and Nagaland World War II Trail, which kicks off with a visit to the Imphal War Cemetery. The tour includes a look at the India Peace Memorial, the battles of Bishenpur and Imphal in 1944, the INA Complex, Kohima War Cemetery, and other war landmarks.

McGill rues the fact that there is so much to sustain but there isn't any clear vision on delineating historical districts and landmarks. Where citizen groups are active, such as in the Old Chinatown area of Tiretta Bazar, revival efforts are gathering pace. She recalls how people discouraged her and Neogi when they were taking the plunge to set up their business, saying academics should not make money off heritage.

It has been a hard and rocky road for the duo from battling Covid to finding investors. But Neogi and McGill will not rest till they make every day a celebration of travel, culture, history, and heritage. ■

Breast Cancer

in Young Women

Dr P Raghu Ram throws light on the issues, dilemmas and challenges that crop up for younger women with breast cancer. One needs to be aware that they are very different to those faced by older women



In India, a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer every four minutes and succumbs to the disease every eight minutes, making it the most common cancer affecting women in the country. Due to lack of awareness and absence of a robust population-based screening programme, more than 60 per cent present in the advanced stages – for every two patients diagnosed with breast cancer, one dies because of it.

Unlike in the West, where breast cancer occurs after 60 years, in India, the highest incidence of breast cancer is between the ages of 40-50 years, at least a decade earlier. The reason being that more than 75 per cent of India's population is under the age of 50.

To state that the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer in the young is hugely challenging, would be an understatement. The thought of having cancer may never have crossed their mind and hence they tend to ignore any new changes in the breast, which results in delay in the diagnosis. As breast tissue in younger women is denser than older women, it is rather more difficult to detect early subtle changes on mammogram (X-ray of the breast). Also, breast cancer in the young tends to be more aggressive, less likely to respond to various treatments and can be associated with poorer prognosis.

Being diagnosed with breast cancer at a young age can be a huge shock and an agonising experience. Cancer does not just affect the body. It affects the mind and

soul. Just treating the physical being does not complete cancer treatment. The issues that crop up for younger women with breast cancer are very different to those faced by older women.

Challenges for younger women with breast cancer

First of all, counselling is fundamental and a vitally important component of cancer care, which ensures patients and their relatives are better informed, better prepared, and more importantly, feel more in control at every stage of their treatment.

Some women are diagnosed with breast cancer during pregnancy or shortly after giving birth – the happiest times can suddenly take a turn for the worse. There is no conclusive evidence that breast cancer during pregnancy is more aggressive than breast cancer occurring at other times. However, for some women there may be a delay in diagnosis because of the difficulty of detecting a cancer in the breast at this time. The treatment offered to pregnant women will depend on the stage of breast cancer and stage of pregnancy when diagnosed. It is important for the treating team to liaise with the obstetrician looking after the patient.

Some of the treatments offered during breast cancer treatment can have an impact on fertility. Young women just diagnosed may not raise the issue of fertility with their doctor because they will be overwhelmed by the diagnosis, or they are not aware that cancer treatments can impair fertility or they do not want children. It is the duty of the treating doctor to refer the patient and

To state that the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer in the young is hugely challenging, would be an understatement. The thought of having cancer may never have crossed their mind and hence they tend to ignore any new changes in the breast, which results in delay in the diagnosis

her spouse to a fertility specialist for consideration of fertility preservation before embarking on breast cancer treatment.

Hair loss can be one of the most distressing side effects of breast cancer treatment. Giving up hair before commencing treatment is one good way of dealing with this distress. Wearing a wig before commencing treatment can help restore self confidence significantly. Currently, there are also various methods to preserve the hair during chemotherapy by using “cold caps” and “scalp cooling systems”.

Breast cancer surgery

Surgery for breast cancer affects how the breast looks and feels. Although some may require mastectomy (removal of breast) and the option to have breast reconstruction, with advances in cancer care, it is increasingly possible to undertake breast preserving surgery ensuring excellent cosmetic outcome through various oncoplastic techniques.

The aim of oncoplastic breast surgery is to have a wide local excision of the cancer coupled with

partial reconstruction of the defect in the breast to achieve a cosmetically acceptable result. Avoidance of mastectomy, consequent reduction of psychological morbidity and patient satisfaction are the principal goals in the development of various oncoplastic breast conserving techniques.

Having practised exclusively the art and science of breast surgery for many years both in the United Kingdom and India, I have seen many ordinary women become extraordinary through their courage, determination and perseverance, which are crucial to the victory against cancer.

Out of difficulties grow miracles. A disease is nothing but the body’s signal to transform lifestyle, thought processes and approach to life. Cancer is one such disease that can be conquered if one does not get overwhelmed by fear and uncertainty. I take this opportunity to salute cancer survivors...nay ‘cancer conquerors’ all across Bharat and pray for their good health and happiness. ■

KIMS HOSPITALS™ **UBF**

KIMS - USHALAKSHMI Centre for Breast Diseases

CELEBRATING 15 POSITIVELY EVENTFUL YEARS (2007-2022)

BREAST AWARENESS 5 - POINT CODE

- Know what is normal for you
- Know what changes to look & feel for
- Look and feel
- Report any changes to your doctor without delay
- Have a Screening Mammogram ideally every year if you are aged 40 and over

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UBF Diary

Philanthropic Gestures All Around

Breast cancer survivor's family donates Rs 60 lakhs to Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation to provide free comprehensive breast cancer treatment to 150 underprivileged women patients. KIMS Hospitals too contributes Rs 5 crores to better the lives of these women

The Governor of Telangana, Dr TAMILISAI Soundararajan, allows Raj Bhavan to be illuminated in 'Pink'

Impressed with the innovative breast cancer awareness initiatives spearheaded by Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation over the past 15 years, and equally, the state-of-the-art surgical care provided by Dr P Raghu Ram at KIMS-USHALAKSHMI Centre for Breast Diseases in KIMS Hospitals, Mrs Motaparthi Chandra Subbarao contributed Rs 60 lakhs to Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer (UBF) Foundation, which will be utilised towards providing free comprehensive breast cancer treatment at KIMS Hospitals to 150 underprivileged women with breast cancer.

In her statement, Motaparthi Subbarao said, "After my daughter was detected with breast cancer five years ago, I wondered how poor people could afford to pay for the expensive treatments. I am proud to make a donation to the cause of helping the needy patients in their cancer care. I want to thank Dr Raghu Ram for his extraordinary surgical skills and humane touch in providing breast cancer care to his patients. I am grateful to him for waiving his fee and to Dr Bhaskar Rao for making expensive drugs available to the needy patients at highly discounted rates for this noble cause. My heartfelt gratitude to the governor for recognising the goodwill and the services offered to these 150 underprivileged patients being treated for breast cancer."



Governor of Telangana handing over the cheque to Dr B Bhaskar Rao, chairman and managing director of KIMS Hospitals



Dr Smt TAMILISAI Soundararajan, governor of Telangana addressing the gathering



Smt Motaparthy Chandra Subba Rao donating Rs 60 lakhs to Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation

Dr Raghu Ram, founder & CEO of Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation and director & consultant surgeon at KIMS-USHALAKSHMI Centre for Breast Diseases at KIMS Hospitals said, "I have pledged to waive my fee for all patients requiring surgery under this initiative. Furthermore, underprivileged patients will receive chemotherapy and Anti HER2 targeted therapy (which are the most expensive components of cancer care) free of cost, which are also absolutely vital to ensure survival and quality of life benefit."

Further, he said, "Since 2009, over the past 14 years, as a result of the consistent and determined efforts of UBF, Hyderabad has been turning 'Pink' to mark the beginning of International Breast Cancer Awareness month. I am most grateful to the governor for giving permission to the Foundation to illuminate Raj Bhavan in 'Pink' for the third consecutive year, which aims to spread the message of hope and courage in the fight against the most common cancer affecting women in India."

Dr Bhaskar Rao, chairman and managing director of KIMS Hospitals said, "Over the past 15 years, Dr Raghu Ram has been working with missionary zeal towards creating awareness about early detection of breast cancer through a number of impactful initiatives. As a tribute to his unwavering



K Padmanabhaiah, chairman ASCI's delivers his speech



Dr P Raghu Ram thanking the donor



Dr Raghu Ram and his spouse, Dr Vyjayanthi interacting with the governor of Telangana



Governor meets and greets Dr Ushalakshmi & Chandra Subba Rao

commitment towards providing state-of-the-art breast cancer care, KIMS Hospitals has more than matched this donation by eight times with a very magnanimous philanthropic amount of Rs 5 crores by significantly subsidising and waiving treatment costs for these pre-identified 150 underprivileged women with breast cancer.”

According to Dr Bhaskar Rao, on an average, Rs 3, 33, 000 will be utilised from the donated amount, for each of these 150 patients over the next few months.

Delivering the chief guest’s address, Dr Tamilisai Soundararajan, governor of Telangana said, “I am delighted to learn that Mrs Subbarao’s contribution has generated a huge philanthropic fund of Rs 5 crores from KIMS Hospitals, which would be utilised towards providing comprehensive breast cancer care to 150 underprivileged patients. I pay rich tributes to Radha Kantipudi for her noble thoughts and sincerely hope that this philanthropic initiative will serve as an inspiration to many more people in the community to come forward to help those who are less fortunate.”

Raj Bhavan goes pink for third consecutive year

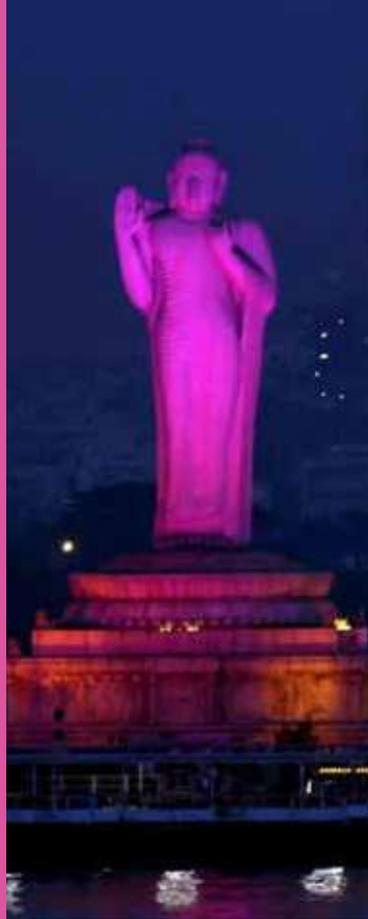
Praising Dr Raghu Ram, the governor said, “Over the years, I have witnessed first-hand Dr Raghu Ram’s dynamic efforts and landmark initiatives that he has championed under the auspices of UBF. I commend him and in appreciation of his unstinting efforts, I have given permission for Raj Bhavan to be illuminated in ‘Pink’ for the third consecutive year, to further create the much-needed awareness about the importance of early detection of breast cancer. During this festive season, I urge the men to gift their loved ones a screening mammogram. Women over 40 must have an annual screening mammogram, which helps to detect breast cancer in the very early stages. Early detection saves lives. Let us dedicate this International Breast Cancer Awareness month in October to effectively spread this message. I am very happy that several women who have already benefitted from this initiative are here with us today and I wish all of you to be in the pink of good health, always.”





Governor with Breast Cancer 'Conquerors' in the background of the Raj Bhavan, illuminated in Pink for the third consecutive year - an initiative of the Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation





Durgam Cheruvu Cable Bridge, Charminar, Buddha Statue, Prasads Imax and KIMS Hospitals turn pink - an initiative of Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation



Breast cancer overtakes cervical cancer to become most common cancer

Breast cancer has overtaken cervical cancer to become the most common cancer affecting women in India. Close to 30 per cent of all new cancers detected in women in India are breast cancers. 178,000 new breast cancers are diagnosed every year in India. In other words, a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer every 4 minutes.

The incidence is rising year on year in India at a rapid rate and by 2030 the number of new cases diagnosed every year is expected to cross 200,000. In India, a woman succumbs to breast cancer every 8 minutes. Every year, 90,000 succumb to breast cancer and these figures will cross 100,000 deaths per annum by 2030.

Compared to the West, where most breast cancers are diagnosed after the age of 50, most breast cancers in India are diagnosed in younger women between 30 – 50 years, at least a decade earlier when compared to the Western world. Due to lack of awareness and absence of a robust organised population based breast cancer screening programme, more than 60 per cent present in the advanced stages with poor survival.

For every two women newly diagnosed with breast cancer, one woman dies of it in India.

The Breast Cancer 'Conquerors'



“I congratulate you on your vision & empathy for women and appreciate your commitment to fulfilling that vision. I am happy to see your initiatives towards spreading awareness of breast health & the holistic manner in which all follow up is done – investigations, treatment, therapy & counseling. Your efforts lend strength to the efforts of individuals like myself who are fighting to make a difference. Thank you.”

Gautami Tadimalla (9 March 2009, KIMS Hospitals, Secunderabad)
Actor & Politician



“Thank you Dr Raghu Ram for your work, commitment & dedication. Your story is one that I will repeat many times when I speak with Breast cancer survivors in India & in America. I thought that I was afraid of cancer. I learnt that I was not. I learnt that early detection of breast cancer saves lives. And I wish more women could know this as well.”

Mrs Jeanie Mulford (26 October 2008, KIMS Hospitals, Secunderabad)
Spouse of Mr David Mulford, US Ambassador to India

KIMS-USHALAKSHMI CENTRE FOR BREAST DISEASES

SOUTH ASIA'S FIRST PURPOSE BUILT
COMPREHENSIVE BREAST HEALTH CENTRE - EST. 2007

THE INSPIRATION

Dr. Kotha Ushalakshmi Kumari

A gritty Breast Cancer 'Conqueror'



KIMS
HOSPITALS™



“My Team & I would like to thank you for inviting us down to India to take part in this fantastic event to help create awareness about “early detection”. Its important, not to be afraid, but to visit a Doctor in time and one can have their good health back - ‘just like me’”

Marcia Barrett (25 October 2008, KIMS Hospitals, Secunderabad)
Lead Singer – Boney M



“Very few give up their lucrative career overseas for an ideal. That's what you did. I really admire your 'nationalist' feeling that your expertise is needed more in India than in the UK. More strength to your arms and more brilliance to your brains. Just carry on this great work that you are doing. I salute you.”

Mrs Pamela Yash Chopra (16 March 2017, Hotel Marriott, Mumbai)
Spouse of Late Mr Yash Chopra - the legendary Bollywood Producer