

Mahasweta Bhatta

When the spirit is indomitable



With no family history of cancer, at the age of 29, Mahasweta Bhatta found she had third stage breast cancer or what is known as a Locally Advanced Breast Cancer. Yet, she managed to overcome the ordeal and made a complete recovery.

Minal Khona in conversation with this courageous young woman

Given the nature of the beast that cancer is, there is no telling who can get affected. But one thing is for sure: be it perfectly healthy people with no history of cancer in their family to those with a gene that makes the occurrence of cancer a high probability, it can irrevocably change the lives of the people it affects.

Mahasweta Bhatta, is one such young person, who had no history of cancer and seemed to be the least likely to get it. Yet, when she was 29 years old, this mother of an infant son, found that she was suffering from a dull, constant pain on her left breast. And, the long hard journey to discovering she had cancer had begun.

Hailing from Odisha, married to a flight engineer, Prakash Swain, Sweta went to a local doctor for treatment. Though a biopsy was done, the doctor did not diagnose the problem correctly. It was only when her husband's doctor friend heard about her symptoms, he told them that it could probably be cancer.

This happened to Sweta in 2007. She recalls, "I had this constant pain in my left breast. My husband brought me to a famous hospital in Chennai and here, they diagnosed the lump as cancer after performing a small surgery."

The couple travelled to Hyderabad and visited several hospitals. Doctors who had examined her confirmed she had cancer. "I was upset about it and cried a lot at that time," confesses Sweta, as she narrates her battle with the crab.

In fact, Sweta had left her infant son Samarjit with her mother and sisters when she had gone to Chennai for treatment. She reminisces, "I told my family I would come back but, in my head, I was not sure if I would. I was scared, as I didn't know what would happen next."

By some providential chance at that time, Sweta got to meet Dr P Raghu Ram, who was in the early days of setting up his practice in Hyderabad, after returning from the UK. Dr Raghu Ram recalls, "At the age of 29, Sweta came all the way from Odisha for treatment of a locally advanced breast cancer. She was offered mastectomy (removal of the breast) elsewhere. She was in a state of shock and couldn't believe she could get cancer. I reassured her that it was possible to conserve her breast and it took many counselling sessions to prepare her



Timely intervention: Dr Raghu Ram with Sweta and her husband

mentally and give her the much needed inner strength to fight the disease.”

A multi-disciplinary team was involved in treating Sweta. The team decided that she should be given neo adjuvant chemotherapy (chemotherapy before surgery) to shrink the tumour so that the outcomes would be better and breast conserving surgery could be performed with better cosmetic results.

Dr Raghu Ram recalls, “After completion of eight cycles of neo adjuvant chemotherapy, I performed a wide local excision (lumpectomy) and axillary node clearance (removal of lymph nodes in the arm pit) and reshaped her breast using oncoplastic techniques. She was delighted at the excellent aesthetic outcome and the scar on her breast is almost invisible.”

After the surgery, Sweta was disowned by her in-laws, and they even asked their son Prakash to leave her. Luckily for Sweta, her husband stood by her despite the fact his parents filed a police case against him.

That was not the end of their troubles. Working in the airline industry, Prakash lost his job and the cancer treatment depleted their savings. Post the treatment, Sweta stopped the hormone treatment a few months later because they had

run out of funds. But, while the treatment was on, Sweta had suffered a lot due to the side effects of chemotherapy.

She remembers, “I became very weak and could not take solid food. For months, I survived on coconut water and pani puri. I had to go through 27 cycles of radiotherapy and it was after many months that I could eat a little solid food like curd rice, rasam and sambar with rice. I had nausea, diarrhoea and mood swings. I got mouth ulcers and I lost a few teeth too. There was a stone in my kidney as well. My hair fell and even today I am still very thin. I drank carrot juice every day for five years; now, I drink carrot juice made from a kilo of carrots once a week.”

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Luckily for Sweta, her husband now has a job at the airport in Bengaluru. They have also cleared all the debts they had incurred during her treatment. Her periods stopped when she was 32, but she has no regrets that she cannot have any more children. Her family and her husband have been her biggest support systems.

Recently, when Sweta felt discomfort in her breast again, she chose to visit Dr Raghu Ram. She says, “Dr Raghu Ram was very kind and supportive from the time I met him. I was one of his first patients after he returned from the UK. This time,



Sweta's son Samarjit creating memories for the family



Sweta with her husband who stood by her and her son Samarjit (right) The support of her family helped her to fight the cancer

he conducted a check-up and luckily for me, there was no sign of the cancer. He didn't even charge me any fees."

Raghu Ram recalls an interesting episode which had occurred during Sweta's most recent visit. "Sweta took out a pen and asked me if I remember anything related to it. How could I forget? This precious pen was gifted to me by the then President of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh some 17 years ago for having organised the hugely successful first diet of intercollegiate FRCS exams in Hyderabad. Seeing it on my table, Sweta asked if she could keep this pen in memory of her treatment in Hyderabad," he says.

"I readily agreed and am touched by the fact that she carefully preserved it all these years. Not only did she make my day, but my year 2023 special." adds Dr Raghu Ram.

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Sweta's fight against third stage breast cancer, which could have spread to other parts of her body, was treated in time. She fought the disease with extraordinary courage and resilience and did not allow the disease to crush her spirit for she continues to believe in the goodness of people.

Had it not been for the support of her husband and family, and Dr Raghu Ram, she would have found the battle a lot harder. This only goes to prove that recovery is a holistic process. ■

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