

# ‘Cancer is not a death sentence’



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

**Minal Khona**

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

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

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

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

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

## Learning she had breast cancer

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

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

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

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

## Finding the right doctor

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

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



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



Susila with her supportive husband, G Vijay

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

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

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

## Two surgical options

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

**'On fire'**

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

**Dr Raghu Ram**



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

### Sharing her story

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

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

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

### Lifestyle changes

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

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

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

## 'Raghu Ram was god in human form'

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**Susila Kaila**