

# From Silence to Strength

## Transforming breast cancer advocacy in India



In his column this quarter, **Dr P Raghu Ram** reflects on Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation's 18-year journey and how it sparked a movement — challenging stigma, empowering women, and saving lives through awareness, innovative outreach, and grassroots engagement

October, recognised globally as International Breast Cancer Awareness Month, is dedicated to raising awareness about early detection, honouring survivors, and spreading the message of hope, courage, and survival.

Advocacy, at its core, is the art of representing or promoting a cause to influence change within political, economic, and social institutions. In the case of breast cancer, advocacy is about empowering both communities and policymakers to act against the most common cancer affecting women.

The need for breast cancer advocacy in India is urgent. Each year, nearly 200,000 women are diagnosed and 100,000 lose their lives to the disease. In other words, for every two women diagnosed, one tragically dies. The reasons are clear: low levels of awareness, absence of a robust nation-wide screening programme, and inequitable access to quality cancer care. In rural India especially, breast cancer remains a “closet issue”, hidden behind stigma and silence.

**Breast Cancer Advocacy isn't a one-month campaign in October — it's about building a powerful movement and a lifelong commitment powered by devotion, discipline, and a deep sense of duty**

With a vision to break this silence and empower women, I established the Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation (a breast cancer charity) in 2007, naming it after my mother to honour her personal struggle and strength in fighting the disease. The goal was clear — to make breast cancer an openly discussed issue and

promote the lifesaving importance of early detection.

### Four Steps of Advocacy

The Foundation's journey can be understood through four stages:

1. Priming the community—initiating conversations and dispelling taboos
2. Engaging with the community—building trust through awareness drives
3. Establishing political advocacy— influencing policymakers to act
4. Taking advocacy mainstream—embedding it in public health discourse.

Guided by these principles, the Pink Ribbon Breast Cancer Advocacy Campaign was launched in 2007 across Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Over the past 18 years, it has grown into one of India's most impactful health awareness campaigns.

Celebrity survivors and public figures lent their voices, while flagship events such as the “Pink Ribbon Walk” and “Paint the City Pink” became annual traditions during the International Breast Cancer Awareness month. Hyderabad now holds the distinction of being the only city in the world where, for 17 consecutive years, prominent landmarks have been illuminated in pink on a single night in October—a striking symbol of solidarity.

### Digital and print innovations

Innovation has been central to our advocacy. Inspired by the Prime Minister's Digital India vision, the Foundation developed the world's first mobile app on breast health, “ABCs of Breast Health”.

Launched in 2017 by legendary actor Amitabh Bachchan, it is available in English and 11 major

Indian languages, ensuring vital information is accessible across linguistic and geographic barriers. Freely downloadable, the app explains every aspect of breast cancer and benign breast conditions in simple language, filling a massive void in breast health awareness in South Asia.

In parallel, *Pink Connexion*—South Asia’s first quarterly breast health magazine—has provided a consistent platform for patient stories, expert updates, and community education. It recently celebrated its 10th anniversary, underscoring its role in sustaining dialogue on breast health.

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### Large-scale screening initiative

Perhaps the most transformative initiative has been the large-scale Clinical Breast Examination (CBE)-based screening programme, implemented by the Foundation in partnership with the governments of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Between 2012 and 2016, more than 200,000 underprivileged women aged 35–65 years across 4,000 villages were screened by 3,750 trained healthcare workers.

Cancers detected through this initiative were treated free of charge under the Aarogyasri scheme. This demonstrated that CBE, a simple, low-cost method, could be effectively scaled up to wider population-level programmes in resource-limited settings. In 2016, a high-powered steering committee and technical advisory group of the Union ministry of health, of which I was a member, approved its nationwide rollout under the National Health Mission.

### Broader impact

The Pink Ribbon Campaign has not only created unprecedented awareness in the Telugu states but also inspired NGOs and hospitals nationwide to launch similar initiatives, even extending the advocacy model to other health conditions that merit attention. This ripple effect highlights its influence as a benchmark for community-driven health advocacy.

The impact has also been recognised at the highest levels. Recently, the Prime Minister of India publicly

appreciated the Foundation’s advocacy initiatives on X platform (formerly twitter), acknowledging its role in breaking taboos, fostering awareness, and providing a template for the nation to emulate.



Narendra Modi  
@narendramodi

In Hyderabad, I met Dr. Raghu Ram Pillarisetti Ji and Dr. S. Vyjayanthi Ji. Dr. Raghu Ram is a Padma awardee and has done pioneering work in curing breast cancer. We discussed aspects relating to healthcare infrastructure in India. He also appreciated our Government’s efforts in this regard.

@RRPillarisetti



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### Conclusion

Breast Cancer Advocacy isn’t a one-month campaign in October—it’s about building a powerful movement and a lifelong commitment powered by devotion, discipline, and a deep sense of duty.

Over the past 18 years, this campaign evolved into a dynamic force, disrupting stigma, empowering women, and saving lives through awareness and early detection. From innovative digital tools and large-scale community campaigns to pioneering screening initiatives, these efforts underscore the critical role of advocacy in shaping public health.

By inspiring women to undergo regular screening, influencing policymakers, and engaging communities, breast cancer advocacy continues to light the path forward. The ultimate measure of its impact is simple yet profound: lives saved, voices empowered, and a disease once shrouded in silence now brought into the open. And to me, the greatest honour remains seeing this vision—born out of my mother’s struggle —embraced by a nation, offering hope and strength to millions. ■