

PINK CONNECTION

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UBF

**“You need to play
mind games with cancer”**

Dr Ananda Shankar
on how she dealt
with cancer

Skin Cancers
and Dr Sharad Paul

The Lepakshi Temples
A Hidden Gem





Ananda with her husband Jayant

were itchy and didn't give me a good feeling," she narrates. But, she wore them as four rounds of chemo were still left.

She was called to curate a show in Chennai and she requested her doctor to allow her to complete them after the show. He agreed and she got a three week reprieve. She had completed 33 days of radiation until then.

"I was so busy during that time that I bypassed the nausea completely. It was as if I did not have time for all of that. I was weak of course but since I practised my dance, I would push myself a little more each day to increase my stamina. It was like I had tuned out the cancer. I didn't focus on the melodrama that goes with it because I had to really focus on my dance — my Bharatnatyam and Kuchipudi. If I did one step wrong, the whole dance would fall flat."

Ananda drew on her inner strength and that of her loved ones to help her recover from what was an extremely long and stressful journey. She says, "I drew strength from the metaphor of the shloka *Ayigiri nandini*. Just like the gods empower Durga through her eighteen arms, I had my sources of strength. My husband Jayant Dwarkanath was a brick — he took care of me all through my battle. My sister, my dog, my mother-in-law, my own inner determination to overcome cancer and above all my dance — everything helped. Cancer was my

battlefield and I rode into it, determined to win."

Talking about it, even at a TED show was helpful in a way. "I tell people even today, if you have any kind of challenge to deal with, and life does throw them at all of us — dig deep within to fight it. My challenge was cancer but it could be something else for another person. Dance was my trajectory out of cancer," says this braveheart.

After a few weeks of wearing the wig, one hot day Ananda took it off since she could not take it anymore. She says, "I went on stage bald, in a sari and my bindi. In fact at the event, a lady minister asked me, "Tirupati?" I replied, "No, chemotherapy."

Later of course, Ananda's hair grew back, in a bunch of springy, tight curls — almost as if it was permed.

Today, five to six years later, Ananda is cancer free. She runs her dance school — Shankarananda Kalakshetra — at three places in Hyderabad with teachers, trained by her, teaching nearly 150 students. She continues to dance and choreograph shows and attend to her job at the railways too. Her one dream is to set up a school where dance and other arts are integrated into the syllabus, so that children learn an art form as they study and can take it up as a parallel profession when they grow up. Ananda is practical enough to realise that only being a dancer in today's

world is not enough to sustain one financially.

She says, "I have the entire plan for the school ready. Everything from the concept to the funds is in place — all I need is land to set it up."

Her advice to people out there who are battling cancer is: "If anyone has cancer, along with the medicines, they need to play a mind game with cancer. Don't give in to the melodrama or the fear within you. For me, dance was not my core competency, it was my core strength. And, I am sure everyone has something they are good at or passionate about. It is important to deal with it in the mind — I used to tell my tumour — Hail fellow, well met, now get out, I don't want you."

The chemo did make her weepy and miserable but she would cry for a little while, she says, and then, pull herself together. Humour helps too, she says. "Faith, and support from friends and family can also take you a long way because your attitude towards your cancer will determine how others respond," she says pertinently.

While dance has been used as therapy to treat other ailments and disorders, Ananda perhaps is one of the few people who concentrated on this ancient Indian dance form to deal with cancer.

Perhaps, one day, others will learn from her example and follow in her ghungroo-clad footsteps. ■

Dr Sharad Paul

Getting under the skin



Dr Sharad Paul, a renowned skin cancer surgeon is a common figure at literary meets these days, where he impresses audiences with his theories on skin that are put forth in his book, *Skin — a Biography*.

S Kavitha corners the New Zealand based surgeon during his recent visit to Chennai

He is most well-known for his non-fiction book *Skin — a Biography* in India and is a familiar face in the literary festivals around the country. Yet, there is much more to New Zealand based skin cancer surgeon Dr Sharad Paul than his explosive and exhaustive treatise on the skin, one of the most pervasive organs of our body.

To begin with Dr Paul, a GP and plastic surgeon by education and training runs a successful skin cancer surgery clinic in New Zealand. This doctor of Indian origin pursued his post-graduation in plastic surgery from St John's Medical College in Bengaluru because of his interest in reconstructing the skin of dowry acid attack victims. However, when he immigrated to New Zealand in 1991, there were few and far burn cases in the country.

"Burn cases are rare in New Zealand. People there suffer more of skin cancer because they are exposed to huge amounts of UV radiation from the sun all the time," says Dr Paul. Indians, on the other hand are not at a high risk for this type of cancer and it seems to be pretty rare here, he admits.

"Indians are more prone to pigmentation. We don't get sunburnt like the white skin, which then leads to blisters and raises the risk of melanoma. Sun exposure plays a huge role in skin cancer," he points out.

According to Dr Paul, besides the UV radiation, skin cancer like all other cancers has a genetic and lifestyle aspect to it. Just as in breast cancer, where a family history of the disease can hike up one's chances of getting cancer, so it is with skin, he says. If you have someone in your family who has had melonama, then your risk of getting skin cancer is high and a regular screening programme is

If you have someone in your family who has had melanoma, then your risk of getting skin cancer is high and a regular screening programme is advised. And if it is detected early, the chances of cure are higher

advised. The chances of cure are higher if it is detected early.

Besides genetics, lifestyle does play a role in cancer, Dr Paul states categorically. “At a cellular level, it has been proved that the manifestations of cancer in our body are similar to the ones seen during stress, injury or ageing. Skin reflects what is inside, you cannot be unhealthy and have good skin and conversely, if you have good skin you are probably healthy,” he says.

Most cancers have a lifestyle aspect to them, he says, providing examples like people who consume plenty of meat and have less roughage are likely to get bowel cancer. Or, women who are more sexually active have chances of contracting cervical cancer.

Or, there is a theory, he adds, that women putting off having babies for a career increase their risk for breast cancer. Breast cancer is estrogen dependent and with late pregnancy your high estrogen levels go unopposed, he states quickly adding that breast cancer is also the result of multi-factoral reasons.

It is clear that ageing and cancer are dependent on the lifestyles we lead. “The extent of exercise, the foods we eat and when we eat all play a role in ageing and getting cancer,” he says. “I am surprised people have such bad lifestyles in India. They eat a lot of processed food with everything coming out of a packet. Lifestyles have become westernised here and Indians are consuming food, which is traditionally not part of their diet. They lead sedentary lives and have an excessive fondness for sugar. How can you then look younger?” he asks. Amazingly, it is known now that cancer cells are similar to the ones we get from stress, injury and ageing, he reiterates.

Anti-ageing creams seem to have become popular in the Indian market in the recent past. Dr Paul points out that creams might help at a superficial level but it is the changes at the cellular level which need to be addressed. Moreover, to a question on

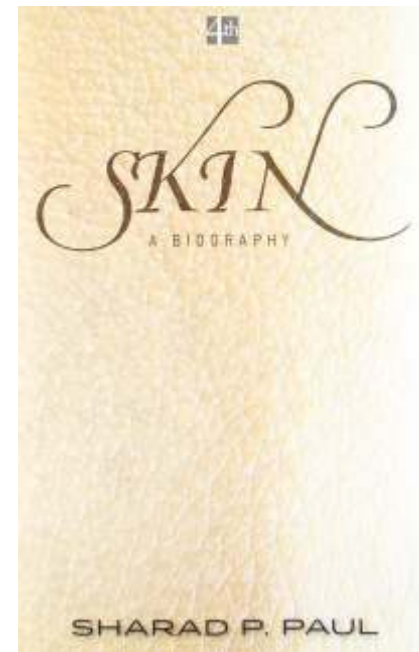
whether some of these creams might be harmful in the long run and can cause cancer, he replies that there are papers which have shown that certain ingredients in cosmetics are to be avoided.

“Some papers have linked the use of cosmetics to breast cancer but that cannot be the only reason, it also has to be genetic,” he points out. His new book, *Dermocracy: For Brown Skin, by Brown Skin, The Definitive Asian Skincare Guide* published last year by Harper Collins lists products to avoid in cosmetics and what to look out for, he adds.

However, the good news in the field of cancer is the advances researchers have made in cancer cure. “The latest buzzword in cancer cure is genetic targeting therapy. In this therapy, your genes can be tested for a likelihood of cancer and we can pick out people at a high risk. If you can catch cancer at the early stages it can be cured and you can probably know how a patient will respond to a particular treatment. There are advances in stimulating one’s immune system to protect one from getting cancer. With all these developments, we might not have to do surgery for cancer at all in the next fifty years,” he says.

Dr Paul, who does thousands of skin cancer checks for free at his clinic besides his paid work in a year, is something of an authority on skin cancer. He has recently co-authored a textbook on all his clinical cases and treatment of skin cancer, which will be released by an American publisher, Springer later this year.

Besides his skin cancer operation and reconstruction work, Dr Paul also turned to cosmetology (but he completely shuns cosmetic surgery) by developing a range of skin care products for brown Asian skin at his academic research facility in New Zealand. “It is an extension of what I am interested in. We did a lot of research on Indian skin or brown skins and found we have fundamentally different problems to white skin. Our problems have to do with



pigmentation or getting darker and since we know skin responds differently to different creams, we researched these differences and developed a range of skin care products and presented a paper on this at a medical conference in Hong Kong,” he reveals.

Using plant based material, the range covers moisturisers, cleansers to ageing creams and he plans to bring them to India soon.

In his book, *Skin, a Biography*, published in 2013, Dr Paul explodes the idea of superiority of skin colour. This book, which is a guided tour of the evolutionary history, biochemistry and science of human skin, talks about why we developed skin, the genes that make skin like an envelope for our body, and how our different skin colours emerged.

From listing the average area of skin to being at 1.8 sq metres, he goes on to devote a lot of space in his book to melanin, the skin pigment which determines our skin colour. Irrespective of race or skin colour, we all have about 10,000 melanocytes per sq cm, which produce melanin, he writes.

Our skin colour is heavily dependent on two vitamins— vitamin D and folic acid. People migrating from Africa, he

writes in his book, changed colour and their skin lightened as they no longer needed the dark skin to survive in a temperate and colder environment and this explains the light skin of Europeans. Also, he explains that the Africans’ skin turned black to preserve the folic acid in them.

Indians, of course, suffer from a huge lack of vitamin D because their skin type or dark skins do not absorb vitamin D from the sun as easily. Reducing skin colour to a battle between vitamin D and folic acid, he turns the theory of race superiority on its head.

Dr Paul, who has a strong literary and creative side to him, has also penned a couple of fiction books. One of his fiction, *Kite Flyers* is set in Chennai against the backdrop of the late Tamil Nadu chief minister M G Ramachandran’s rule. A son of doctor parents who had moved to Chennai from London, Dr Paul had obtained his medical degree in Chennai at the Kilpauk Medical College.

Before *Kite Flyers*, his first fiction *Cool Cut* was published by Picador in 2007, followed by *To Kill a Snow Dragonfly*. Unlike other doctor authors like the famous Dr Abraham Verghese of *Cutting Stone* fame, his fiction is not related to his medical work, he clarifies.

“I’m just inherently creative, poetic by nature. I think fundamentally I am a storyteller. When people read my non-fiction, *Skin, a Biography*, they tell me that it is like reading a story,” says Dr Paul. In fact, it is his “creative” nature that helped him to discover a new skin grafting technique called “halo grafting”.

The New Zealand Medical Chair Association has bestowed its highest honour, the Chair’s Award in 2012 to Dr Paul for his substantial contribution to the health of the New Zealanders. An award he received according to the chairman of the association for his skin surgery clinic’s free skin cancer checks, his new skin grafting technique and for his once a week creative writing classes for poor children.

Dr Paul is also a senior lecturer at two universities in Auckland and Queensland and until recently, also owned and ran a string of book store cum cafés in New Zealand. Not to overlook the fact that he gives inspirational talks at Stanford University alumni meets and at the University of Oxford.

So, how did an Indian carve a niche for himself in a foreign country? “I just focused on my work. And, it helped that I am passionate about what I do.

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I re-trained in New Zealand though I had my Indian degrees and completed three years of general surgery and two years of plastic surgery and became a GP.” He became a fellow of the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners in 1999, and also got a Masters of Philosophy in Medical Law and Ethics from the University of Glasgow in 2002.

“I am humbled where I have reached today,” says Dr Paul, and quotes from his book *Kite Flyers*. “Dreams belong in the clouds, if not we will not move mountains to reach them...” And, that is what he did, worked hard and moved mountains to become an achiever in a foreign land. ■

The Bewitching Beauty of the Lepakshi temples

Lepakshi, a treasure trove of temples is an architectural marvel but sadly remains under-explored. The temple, which is the perfect example of the Vijayanagara style of architecture, also finds a mention in the ancient script *Skandapurana*. It is a temple where both history and mythology converge, passing from the realms of gods to men and ensuring that even time, does not forget its bewitching beauty. Lepakshi is truly a temple waiting to be discovered...

Text: Mallik Thatipalli

Photographs: Lakshmi Prabhala

Much like some of the greatest temples of medieval India, once you set your eyes on the massive temple complex of Lepakshi, it takes your breath away. Its architecture, its marvelous engineering and mesmeric beauty stand testimony to the technical finesse of ancient Indian temple builders. Divided into different uneven complexes, most of the temple is built on a low-lying rocky hill called Kurmasailam — (tortoise hill in Telugu), after the shape of the hill.

There are many stories spun around the temple's origins. Some believe it dates back to the time of the *Ramayana*. It is widely believed Lepakshi got its name when Jatayu was slayed by Ravana while abducting Sita. This was the place the mighty bird fell and Rama, on coming across the wounded Jatayu kindly said, "*Le pakshi*" (rise, bird in Telugu) before healing him. It was rebuilt in the 16th century during the rule of the Vijayanagara kings. Another version says the temple was built by the sage Agastya to appease Veerabhadra, Lord Shiva's fiery offspring, who was born of a lock of hair.

The entire temple is built from granite and the rocky surfaces outside make it difficult to walk at times. A distinguishing feature is that the smaller temples which house the idols of Ganesha, Nandi, Shiva, Bhadrakali, Vishnu and Lakshmi, are as opulently built as the main temple.

There is a story lodged in every crevice and carving of the ancient temple, some partly folklore and others giving birth to stories themselves.

To say that the temple has not received the attention it deserves is an understatement. Despite its rich legacy, it remains mostly forgotten but for visitors from the surrounding areas. As far as conforming to the stringent rules of the *Shastras*, the Lepakshi temple can be even called a rebel, considering that it is the only temple in Andhra Pradesh where Shiva and Vishnu face each other directly. Also, the presiding deity here is Veerabhadra, which defies the *diktats* of the two erstwhile predominant streams of Hinduism - Shaivism and Vaishnavism.

The temple has a central pavilion and apart from the *garba griha*, is divided into the *mukha mandapa*, *artha mandapa* and *kalyana mandapa*. The entire temple is filled with carvings of drummers, dancers and divine beings keeping a watchful eye on the visitors. The sculptures and the mural paintings are considered exceptional for their seraphic beauty and craftsmanship.

Most of the etchings depict tales from ancient Indian mythology — like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and from a few other relatively unknown ones like the Tumbura and Dattatreya episodes. The attention to detail given to the rock carvings, with even the stalk of a lotus being clearly defined, is what makes a trip to this hidden gem of a temple worthwhile.

The Lepakshi temple showcases the finest specimens of mural paintings of the Vijayanagara era. The pier just before the *garba griha* has a 24 by 14 feet fresco of Veerabhadra on the ceiling, which is resplendent even in its fading glory. The rest of the frescoes on the ceilings are equally fascinating. Made from bright vegetable dyes — red, orange and green — each of them are still visually captivating, centuries after they were made. One fresco depicts the five modes of *shringara*, all brides and grooms had to adhere to before their wedding while another depicts the celestial union of Shiva and Parvati complete with details of the finery worn by attending guests!

The panels however are fading and peeled off in places, almost as if they are crying out for help to return to their pristine former glory. While those with vertigo will need a break from craning necks gazing at those alluring artworks, others can take in the magnificent Natya Mandapam or dance hall with its superbly sculpted pillars.

The unfinished Kalyana Mandapam is another hall renowned for its artistic beauty. So enchanting is its appeal that you listen to the guide wordlessly when he informs you that it was actually the venue of Shiva and Parvati's wedding. Such is the beauty of the nine pillars surrounding the mandapam, each in the form of a square and flanked with a deity playing a musical instrument that you begin to believe that a place so artistic as this would surely be the venue of a celestial wedding.

The most spellbinding feature of the temple however, is the famed hanging pillar. The temple rests on 109 pillars, of which 70 remain unbroken. Defying

gravity, the central pillar rests more than one inch above ground level, and is easily proved by the guide who passes newspapers and much more, from one end to another end to audible gasps from the onlookers. There is an oft-quoted yarn about the mystery of the pillar — a British engineer in the 19th century tried to understand the mechanism of a pillar suspended in air and ended up damaging nearly ten pillars next to it, after which all attempts to understand the engineering behind it, were dissuaded by the priests.

Once you reach the temple's outer enclosure, what catches your eye is a massive Ganesha chiselled in stone and leaning against a rock. Opposite it, is an enormous coiled Naga displaying seven hoods. It forms a sheltering canopy over a Shivalingam and is considered as the largest Nagalinga in India.

Myths, local lore and beliefs resonate throughout the temple complex. A compound outside is called Sita's swing and attracts hordes of curious



Myths, local lore and beliefs resonate throughout the temple complex



The Nagalinga is considered to be the largest in India



One of the beautifully carved entrances to the temple

crowds as according to the temple lore, the goddess, Sita fell down from a swing here landing her left feet at the temple and the right at another temple, 29 kilometres away. The imprint of the Goddess's feet attracts attention as it is believed to always have traces of water, even during the peak summer.

The outer enclosure has more than 40 temples and would easily take visitors half a day to explore the many treasures present in abundance.

The Lepakshi temple can be even called a rebel considering it is the only temple in Andhra Pradesh where Shiva and Vishnu face each other directly. Also, the presiding deity here is Veerabhadra, which defies the *diktats* of the two erstwhile predominant streams of Hinduism - Shaivism and Vaishnavism

A shrine is dedicated to the fiery goddess Bhadrakali, in an unusually benign expression while almost all the rocks, or so it seems, bear carvings narrating tales from Indian myths. There are rocks with engravings of Shiva being bathed by an elephant, spider and snake and which are always surrounded by tourists clicking selfies!

Another draw at Lepakshi, besides the Hanging Pillar is the spectacular Nandi, located 250 metres away facing the temple. At 27 feet in length and 15 feet in height, it is a gigantic structure made from a monolithic granite stone and is the biggest in the country. Apart from its mammoth size, what captures your attention is its breathtaking beauty. The perfectly proportioned body adorned with carved ornaments makes you wonder if they are real and its precise geometry has made it as popular if not more, as the temple itself. Lepakshi is where pilgrimage and tourism meet as perfect partners.

Words fail to render justice to the architecture of the place, its magnetic

charm and the expertise of its craftsmanship. Though well connected by road it is still relatively unknown, and apart from the annual temple festival in February, is devoid of many pilgrims. While visiting the temple, do bear in mind that there is a lot which Wikipedia does not know, so hiring a guide is a good idea.

Lepakshi is also a testimony to the unique Indian disregard for its cultural riches — the broken pillars lying on the platforms, centuries-old sculptures defaced by graffiti and murals ravaged by time, narrate a tale of untold neglect.

Holding its own and standing tall amidst ancient temples of India, Lepakshi remains a symbol of the golden age of Indian culture with an synthesis of architecture, murals and sculptures. Lepakshi is where both history and mythology converge, passing from the realms of gods to men and ensuring that even time, does not forget its bewitching beauty. ■

UBF Diary



Rallying for breast cancer

Dr Raghuram participated and flagged off the Pink Ribbon rally in Warangal in November. The rally was held to spread the message of early detection of breast cancer and salute breast cancer conquerors in their fight against breast cancer

Catching them young



Dr Raghuram addressed around 600 students in Karimnagar on the importance of the early detection of breast cancer



Watch out for the Pinkathon 2015!

Having launched the Pink Ribbon Campaign and Pink Ribbon Walks in Hyderabad in 2007 and having taught the importance of the early detection of breast cancer through a number of unique and innovative initiatives, Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation proudly associates with actor Milind Soman and the United Sisters Foundation to organise the Pinkathon in Hyderabad on March 15.



ASICON - A path-breaker



Dr Raghuram addressing delegates at ASICON 2014, Hyderabad in December last year



Dr Raghuram organised the largest annual surgical congress in south Asia at the Hyderabad International Convention Centre - ASICON 2014 from December 26-30. Around 7,000 surgeons from all over India and abroad including the who's who in every surgical sub-specialty from the world over and presidents of American College of Surgeons, Royal College of Surgeons, Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, College of Surgeons of Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and all SAARC countries participated in this 'intellectual extravaganza'.

Congratulations! Dr Raghuram to be conferred India's highest civilian award - the Padma Shri

Dr P Raghu Ram's name has been approved by the President of India for one of India's highest civilian awards – the Padma Shri – in recognition of his distinguished service in the field of medicine.

A modest Dr Raghu Ram says, "I am delighted and honoured to be chosen for one of the country's highest civilian awards. My heartfelt gratitude to the government of India for considering me worthy of this singular recognition."

And, he dedicates this award to his mother Dr Ushalakshmi, who conquered breast cancer and indeed to all the women in this country who have fought breast cancer with courage and determination.



Breast cancer during pregnancy



Breast cancer can strike at any time in our lives. What should a pregnant woman do if she has breast cancer? **Dr P Raghuram** answers a few common queries

A 27-year-old pregnant woman, who was diagnosed with breast cancer during her pregnancy, had a number of questions which she posed to me. Here are my answers to a few common concerns

If breast cancer is diagnosed during pregnancy, chemotherapy may be given during the second and third trimesters (between three and nine months into the pregnancy).

Can breast cancer be diagnosed during pregnancy?

Breast cancer can rarely be diagnosed during pregnancy.

What are the treatment options when a pregnant woman is diagnosed with cancer?

Effective treatment can be given with a specialist team discussing the options with the pregnant patient. Generally, the treatment offered will depend on the type and extent of the breast cancer, the stage of pregnancy when the cancer is diagnosed and the individual circumstances of the patient. The specialist team must include both a cancer specialist and an obstetrician.

Can pregnancy be continued after diagnosis of breast cancer?

It depends on the trimester (stage of pregnancy) whether or not to continue the pregnancy. The decision to terminate a pregnancy is a personal one. It can only be made by the patient and her partner, following a discussion with the specialist team and obstetrician.

There is no evidence to suggest a termination of pregnancy will improve the outcome for women in this situation. However, termination may be discussed if chemotherapy is recommended during the first trimester, if the breast cancer is the type that can grow more rapidly or has spread to other parts of the body. Whatever decision is made, it is important to remember that there is no one common rule for everyone because each individual's case is different.

Can the breast cancer in a pregnant woman affect the baby?

There is no evidence today that breast cancer affects the baby's development in the womb. Cancer cannot be passed onto the baby and there is no evidence that the child will develop cancer later on in life if the mother was diagnosed with breast cancer during pregnancy.

Is breast cancer aggressive when diagnosed during pregnancy?

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 it becomes difficult to detect cancer in the breast during this time.

Can chemotherapy be given during pregnancy?

If breast cancer is diagnosed during pregnancy, chemotherapy may be given during the second and third trimesters (between three and nine months into the pregnancy). It is not usually given earlier than this because the foetus grows quickly early on and could be affected by the drugs. ■