

PINK CONNECTION

UBF

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Being Positive is Everything

Shalini Nayar on
fighting cancer

Reviving Traditional Board Games

Dr Ravi Kannan

Bringing Healthcare to a
Remote North-East Town



BEHIND The Scenes

Nothing in recent memory had sent the world scrambling, as the coronavirus outbreak did. However, we must admit that here in India, we have done reasonably well, with epidemiologists trying to analyse the mystery of India's low case count.

A recent article however, in both *New York Times* and *NPR*, has quoted sources to say that India had 100,000 cases a day in September and October last year, and was ready to overtake USA to become a country with the highest reported COVID-19 cases. But, India was now reporting less than 10,000 cases a day. And this, in a country of 1.4 billion people!

Some believe that India's humid, hot climate may have helped in containing the spread, while others believe that Indians, who've been exposed to infections like malaria, dengue, TB throughout their lives, may have had better immunity dealing with the dreaded virus.

Once again, the rate at which Indians are receiving the vaccine is impressive, while so many other countries are struggling to even get vaccine stocks. Of course, it helps that India, especially Hyderabad, is at the hub of vaccine production.

After this, let's not doubt, for a moment, that India is not ever capable of handling a health crisis even of this magnitude. Above all else, let's not forget to acknowledge the role of our frontline healthcare workers, and doctors, who wore stifling masks and PPE suits round the clock to be with the sick in the hospitals. And let's be grateful for that one nurse or doctor everywhere, who held a sick person's hand, when the family could not be with them.

Ratna Rao Shekar



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More like a son: Shalini and her husband with their son-in-law, Zain

“For any cancer patient, support is essential”

On social media, there are pieces of wisdom that float around—which are meant to inspire you or reinforce what you already know. The one that always strikes a chord is about having the right attitude, about how the way you respond, and not react, to a challenge can make all the difference.

Embodying this nothing-can-get-me-down attitude is the Delhi-based Shalini Nayar, who works for a leading designer label. Diagnosed with breast cancer at 50, and currently still undergoing radiation therapy, it is her feisty mindset about fighting the crab that makes for an inspiring story. **Minal Khona** meets this doughty cancer survivor

By all accounts, Shalini Nayar’s life had been smooth sailing till last year. A loving husband and brothers, and a happily married daughter; a challenging job with a leading designer label and good health. She had no complaints with all that life had given her thus far. Then, last summer, during the lockdown, the presence of a lump changed her life as she knew it, forever.

Shalini recalls, “In May 2020, during the first phase of the COVID-19 lockdown, I was chatting with my daughter Symrin on WhatsApp. My arm was resting against my right breast and I felt something. It changed everything. Within 12 hours from that fateful moment, I was undergoing a battery of tests

in Delhi, under the guidance of the Hyderabad-based Dr P Raghu Ram, who is widely recognised as a world-renowned and highly accomplished surgeon. In fact, Dr Raghu Ram was highly recommended by my daughter's husband Zain Ravdjee and his family."

At that time, in May last year, the world was in turmoil—international borders were closed, and the country was in lockdown. Domestic flights and travel were limited and there was a sense of uncertainty of how the pandemic would unfold. Dr Raghu Ram therefore asked her to do a basic assessment of the breast lesion in Delhi itself. "When I went to the hospital in the evening, I knew from the expression on the radiologist's face that something was wrong. I asked her and she told me that the results didn't look good," Shalini recounts.

The pandemonium caused by the pandemic was gradually dying down and luckily for Shalini, the government resumed domestic flights that month. "We decided to fly out the next day and booked our tickets from Delhi to Hyderabad. Although I was afraid, I decided to fly anyway. Luckily, the aircraft was almost empty. God gave me the strength, I believe. I was touched that Dr Raghu Ram had agreed to meet me at such short notice though he was so busy," she says. She underwent another round of tests under his care at KIMS-USHALAKSHMI Centre for Breast Diseases in Hyderabad to confirm the diagnosis, which was important for any treatment.

Dr Raghu Ram confirmed that it was a mid-sized lump that was 2-3 cms in size. But he also told her that it had been caught in the nick of time.

For someone who has always enjoyed relatively good health, other than the odd headache, to be told that she had breast cancer was undoubtedly a shock. Especially, when she had no family history of cancer on her maternal or paternal side. Shalini couldn't quite believe the news.

"When Dr Raghu Ram confirmed it was cancer, I was in a state of shock. I have never been sick and my lifestyle has been fairly moderate. I felt as if the earth around me had moved, and everything around me was crashing. The next few hours were like a blur, with a million questions racing through my mind," she recounts.

“Being a perfectionist, I have always been working long hours and unfortunately, I never went for a check-up though I was aware I should have done it. Blame it on time constraints or maybe, I took my good health for granted”

Understandably, everyone in her family was upset—her husband, Manu Nayar, his mother and brother, sister, her daughter and her son-in-law, her

mother who lives in Kolkata, and her brothers who live abroad. Her sister-in-law, who is a doctor in Australia, sent her reports to her cousin, an oncologist who confirmed Dr Raghu Ram's diagnosis.

"This has been a difficult journey for all of us, and mostly for those who could not be with me because of the restrictions on domestic and overseas travel. I have not seen my mother and not been able to give her a hug since the beginning of my treatment, but not once have I felt alone," she reminisces.

However, Shalini belongs to that tribe of humans who live up to the saying, 'When the going gets tough, the tough get going.' She figuratively rolled up her sleeves and decided to deal with it.

"I am a strong person. After the initial shock wore off, I told myself it is what it is and I need to get it treated and get going. I am not the kind who will curse my luck or cry, why me? I wanted to focus my energy on the positive aspect of starting the treatment and making a full recovery," she says.



Shalini with her husband Manu Nayar, who has been her pillar of strength

Shalini was very keen to preserve her breast and Dr Raghu Ram assured her that this was possible. “He reassured me that the breast could be reshaped using certain oncoplastic techniques (plastic surgery techniques combined with oncological surgery). He however, advised me to get the chemotherapy done before surgery (neo adjuvant therapy). In view of the pandemic, he suggested that the chemotherapy be done in Delhi and he referred me to Dr Bhawna Sirohi at Max Hospitals. We agreed as I preferred to be in my comfort zone and in my own house, rather than be locked up in a hotel room for five months,” she narrates. They connected with Dr Sirohi, a kind and empathetic doctor, who took over the chemotherapy treatment on her return to Delhi.

Shalini’s treatment was done in three phases—first, the chemotherapy followed by surgery and lastly, the radiotherapy. She is in fact currently going through radiation therapy. She says, “On the 11th day after I had discovered the lump, I had my first chemotherapy session on June 4th and my treatment protocol was carefully planned out by Dr Raghu Ram. I have had 16 chemo sessions and it was not easy. But, I stayed positive through it all and the kind and attentive staff helped me a lot as well.”

These days, with preventive medicine, the side effects of chemotherapy have been reduced to an extent. The one thing cancer treatment protocols however have not been able to do as yet, is to control hair fall that occurs during chemo. For most cancer patients, losing their hair is often the most traumatic aspect of the treatment.

For Shalini, it was quite literally, the worst part. She has tears in her eyes as she recalls, “By the grace of God, I didn’t have any side effects during chemo. There was only occasional fatigue and a little nausea. Losing my hair though, was the hardest. Every person loves something special about themselves—for me, it was my thick luscious, perfectly straight and dark hair. I still cannot forget the day when



Shalini has thrown stress out of her life and has made some significant changes after her bout with cancer

I casually ran my fingers through my hair and a bunch of it just came off in my hands. It was almost more difficult than being told about the cancer. That was the only day throughout this journey that I cried.”

“I have thrown stress out of my life. I read therapeutic books, listen to spiritual chants and talks and keep myself calm. I was a workaholic and I worked seven days a week. Now, I have slowed down consciously and gotten off the fast track”

Her husband reassured her gently that he loved her the way she was. Later, her daughter got her a wig that was exactly like her real hair. It was also styled the way her original hair used to be, which gave her a lot of confidence. In fact, after the second session, a patient she had met at the hospital called her and she was the one supporting her emotionally.

After the chemotherapy, it was time for Shalini to fly down to Hyderabad again for the surgery. She stayed at a hotel to complete the 14-day mandatory quarantine period; after which she met her daughter and Dr Raghu Ram. She says, “I admire his professionalism. His father had passed away three or four days prior to the scheduled date of my surgery but he didn’t delay because it was important to remove the tumour. He believed we had already lost valuable days due to the quarantine. I respect the fact that despite his personal loss, he performed my surgery—a wide local excision (lumpectomy) and axillary node clearance (removal of lymph nodes in the arm pit)—on November 27th. The surgery went as planned. He removed the lump and reshaped my breast to cover the defect caused by the lumpectomy cavity.”

Shalini is full of praise for Dr Raghu Ram. “He is always calm, reassuring and inspires confidence. He patiently explained everything, and reassured me that we would get through this together. Despite going through a major personal loss in the middle of my treatment, Dr Raghu Ram never let his own circumstances or emotions affect my treatment. Like most people, I too was scared before my surgery,



Be positive and smile, says Shalini, who is still undergoing radiation therapy

but he made it relatively painless both, physically and emotionally. Wherever I am, I will always be grateful that he was my guiding light at my darkest hour," she says.

After the surgery, Shalini stayed at her daughter's farmhouse. She remembers, "Symrin and her husband pampered me. I felt so loved and cared for and

it became more of a beautiful holiday than a post-surgery recuperation. My son-in-law took care of every detail of my health and safety and stood next to me like a son. My younger brother till date calls me every day and checks on my health. Although we are a close-knit family, this cancer has brought all of us closer. I feel so blessed for all this love and support being showered on me. I think, for any cancer patient, support is extremely essential."

The support of one's spouse during such times can make all the difference, she says. Each time the treatment was discussed, her husband, Manu Nayar, would ask the doctors to start the treatment without delay and without any worry about funds. She says, "My husband was initially quite shaken up with the news. However, he was one of my pillars of strength. He went all out to help me; there is not one thing that I, as a wife can say, he did not do for me or should have done. And no matter what anyone says, if you are fighting cancer, having someone like that to help, even to give you an affectionate hug — it makes a big difference."

Her employers too were supportive of her during her ordeal. Her designation is the 'Principal of First Impressions' for Delhi designers, Shantanu and Nikhil. She explains, "It is a communication role, where I introduce people to the organisation — clients, stylists etc., I am practically the oldest or the first employee to join Shantanu and Nikhil, when they had started their company. They were kind enough to let me go on medical leave and they would send me messages to check on me. They even sent me a message saying they would lay out the red carpet for me, when I return

to work. They treat me like family because I have worked selflessly and I have been with them for so long."

Today, the cancer has shaken her enough to make permanent changes in her lifestyle. "Being a perfectionist, I have always been working long hours and unfortunately, I never went for a check-up though I was aware I should have done it. Blame it on time constraints or maybe, I took my good health for granted. I have made some important changes in my life now," she says reflectively.

She has now started inculcating changes in her lifestyle and diet. "I also have to change who I am; I can't be the person I was before the cancer. I eat almonds and nuts, fruits, honey, dates, raisins and I have reduced eating red meat. I am off unhealthy and fried food. I had never exercised earlier; in fact, we have a gym at home that I have never used. Now, I work out there on the exercise cycle. As a person, I have stopped getting angry; there are many moments of stress that lead to anger, I have thrown stress out of my life. I read therapeutic books, listen to spiritual chants and talks and keep myself calm. I was a workaholic and I worked seven days a week. I have slowed down consciously and gotten off the fast track."

Yet, it is her positive attitude that underlines everything the cancer has put her through. She concludes saying, "Be positive and smile, do not be afraid or shy away from talking about it. Triumph is in hope, courage and collaboration over adversity. I am still undergoing radiation therapy, so I cannot say I am a cancer survivor yet. I firmly believe I will be well and happy." ■

"I applaud Shalini Nayar for her tremendous willpower, courage and determination in her fight against cancer. She underwent a wide excision of the tumour coupled with reshaping of the breast to avoid any cosmetic deformity (oncoplastic breast conserving surgery). I am delighted that she has had an excellent aesthetic outcome. In her case, a mastectomy (removal of breast) was avoided and consequently the psychological morbidity linked to breast removal was taken away."

Dr P Raghu Ram

Spreading Light in Silchar



A surgical oncologist found his calling when he decided to give up his practice in Chennai and move to work at the Cachar Cancer Hospital in Silchar. Dr Ravi Kannan took up the challenge and found that he could impact the lives of deprived daily wage earners suffering from cancer in Assam. And, for all his hard work and efforts, he was awarded the Padma Shri.

Nivedita Choudhuri profiles the doctor, who has brought change in a backward, poverty-stricken area where healthcare is still inadequate

Dr Ravi Kannan's patients have truly seen one thing more relentless than cancer. The doctor himself. Not only does he give them courage but he also ensures that his patients—mostly poverty-ridden, from one of the most deprived areas in India—do not stop their treatment for fear of missing out on a day's work and their daily wage.

Dr Ravi Kannan, a surgical oncologist, who was awarded the Padma Shri last year for his work, is modest when it comes to accepting any praise though. He gives all the credit to the unstinting support of his entire team at Cachar Cancer Hospital and Research Centre in Silchar, Assam.

Of course, since last year, the COVID pandemic has changed everything.

"We did not feel the full impact of the pandemic till around May, when the migrant labourers started returning home. So, we had time to prepare ourselves. Drills were carried out for the staff and we equipped ourselves with PPE, masks, aprons, sanitisers, etc. A ward for cancer patients who had contracted COVID-19 was created. Of course, it was difficult for the cancer patients who got the virus and they had to be isolated as a result. There was a patient who just had a tracheostomy done and two other cases of head and neck cancer in the isolation

ward. They were upset as they could not meet their families, but our nurses took good care of them,” said Dr Kannan.

“Around 85 cancer patients had the virus. All but one recovered though several had comorbidities such as diabetes. It was challenging because we had to reschedule radiation timetables for the patients. In the last few weeks, there have been no new cases,” he added.

The 56-year-old Dr Kannan was born in Chennai but travelled with his father, who was with the Indian Air Force, all over the country. He grew up in Shillong, New Delhi, Jamnagar, Benaras and Ambala and completed his MBBS degree at Kilpauk Medical College in Chennai, and his MS at Maulana Azad Medical College, New Delhi. He specialised in oncology from the Adyar Cancer Institute in Chennai, where he spent a number of years, before he left in search of new challenges in December 2006.

It seemed God had heard his prayers for, out of the blue, he got a call from Dr Chinmoy Choudhury, chairperson at Cachar Cancer Hospital. He invited Dr Kannan to take charge of the centre. But first, Dr Kannan decided to visit Silchar to take stock of the situation.

However, his wife Seetha Lakshmi, a regional officer in the United States Educational Foundation in India (USEFI) in Chennai was apprehensive about the new job in Assam. She could only think of ‘insurgency and floods’. However, Dr Kannan managed to persuade her to visit Silchar for a weekend trip. Little did they realise that this trip will change the lives of their family and the under-privileged community in the remote Barak Valley of Assam forever.



Dr Ravi Kannan is modest when it comes to accepting praise for all his good work

Dr Kannan sees to it that his patients—mostly from one of the most deprived areas in India—do not forego their treatment because they may miss their daily wages by visiting the hospital

The fact that we live in a world of contrasts became clear to Dr Kannan as soon as he reached Silchar. His eyes took in the natural splendours of Barak Valley and its lush green forests and tea gardens. At the same time, he could not ignore the acute lack of infrastructure and the concentration of poverty in the area.

Cancer patients had to travel around 350 km to Guwahati for treatment. Most of the local people were daily-wage earners, who consumed a lot of tobacco, betel nut and alcohol. Instances of mouth cancer, head and neck cancer, oesophageal cancer, lung and gall bladder cancer were rampant. But, they lacked the funds required to travel to Guwahati and so disease and death went hand in hand.

Seetha Lakshmi, too, was deeply moved by the appalling conditions in which the local population lived. Most families lived in homes with leaking roofs and terrible sanitation. Dr Kannan recalls what she told him: “They need us. We must not disappoint them.”

They returned to Chennai and Seetha Lakshmi was given the difficult task of informing their families that they were planning to relocate to Assam. Dr Kannan’s colleagues in Chennai believed he was committing professional harakiri. But Assam beckoned and Dr Kannan had found his true calling.

From a world of relative comfort, Dr Kannan moved to a world of uncertain power supply and inadequate road connectivity. It was June 2007.

“When I started working here, Cachar Cancer Hospital had only 23 staff members. Established in 1996, the hospital was unable to cater to the needs of the local people. Firstly, there was insufficient staff—we just had six healthcare assistants who doubled as nurses and six cleaners, two technicians but only one doctor! I did not think much before I came here and certainly I did not do a SWOT analysis. And, I ended up spending a lot of time firefighting. My family, which included my daughter, had to do a fair bit of adjusting as well,” recounts the good doctor, who took over as director of Cachar Cancer Hospital.

There were plenty of problems in the beginning. The patients were too poor to pay for their treatment and it was difficult to pay the salaries of staff members. The local people were wary of joining the hospital because they knew they can command better salaries in bigger cities. Dr Kannan found that 60 per cent of the patients did not return for a second appointment! Less than 30 per cent of the patients completed their treatment at the hospital.

The doctor discovered the reason after some investigation of his own. Most of the patients—around 80 per cent—were daily-wage earners, either working in tea plantations or as agricultural workers. They could not afford to forego their earnings for even one day by visiting the hospital. A two-pronged strategy was adopted by the hospital to tackle the problem.

Firstly, every patient was sent home with a follow-up date. Secondly, it was decided that employment will be provided to the family members accompanying the patients. The hospital started paying the attendants for watering plants, cleaning the wards or doing other small tasks. Initially, they were paid Rs. 30 and food was also provided. Now, the attendants get food and an amount of Rs. 300.

The situation did not improve overnight. Another audit showed that 55 per cent of the patients had completed their treatment.

Dr Kannan points out, "It was encouraging and discouraging at the same time. While the compliance figures had gone up, I realised that Cachar Cancer Hospital was the last stop for treatment for all my patients, who simply could not afford to travel anywhere else. For instance, a cancer hospital in Mumbai may have patients from many states in India. People may come for a diagnosis or an opinion. But, my patients in Silchar have nowhere else to go. So, the 45 per cent of patients who are not returning to me are not getting any treatment at all."

Dr Kannan started home visits to solve this problem. Doctors started going to the villages and the patients were told they do not have to pay for home-based care. Satellite clinics were set up in remote areas and the medics started phone consultations as well. Reminders about future appointments were given to patients and the doctors stayed in touch with patients who had returned home with prescriptions.

Patients pay a one-time registration fee of Rs. 500 at the hospital and can avail treatment for a lifetime. This fee is charged to ensure that patients attend follow-up appointments. The few who come from far-off places are also provided accommodation and food.

"We have around 350 staff members, including 10 doctors. There are over 100 beds, which is a huge jump from the initial years when the cancer hospital had only 20 beds. We have around 4,000 new patients annually and another 20,000 come for follow-up appointments," Dr Kannan says.

Patients come from as far as Karimganj, Dima Hasao and Hailakandi (Assam), and from Tripura, Manipur and Mizoram. With all these effective measures in place, the compliance rate has gone up to 70 per cent, reveals the doctor.

Other plans include a department of nuclear medicine at Cachar, courtesy a CSR grant by the Airports Authority of India. Individual grants have also poured in. Seetha Lakshmi is also involved in the running of the hospital as a volunteer. She helps with the correspondence, coordinates programmes, compiles reports and communicates with individuals and organisations.

Dr Kannan's Padma Shri win sparked celebrations in both Assam and Tamil Nadu. Though, the doctor is touched by all the accolades, he is not about to be carried away and continues to soldier on. The phrase that springs to mind when you think of him is this: he cannot direct the wind, but he will direct the sails for as long as he can. ■

"Ravi is an amazing surgeon whose grit, fierce determination, extraordinary passion and tremendous body of work has transformed cancer care in one of the remotest regions in Assam. During my Presidential term at The Association of Surgeons of India (ASI), he was selected to deliver the Col. Pandalai Oration during ASICON 2021 - 81st annual Congress of the Association, to be held in December. This most prestigious Oration instituted in memory of the founder President of ASI, is the highest academic recognition that can be achieved by a surgeon practising in India. I truly believe that ASI has been honoured in honouring him. More power to Ravi."

Dr P Raghu Ram
President ASI (2020) & Col. Pandalai Orator
(2018)



Dr Kannan has the unstinting support of his entire team at the Cachar Cancer Hospital and Research Centre in Silchar, Assam

Indigenous Games:

More than a Nostalgic Spin!

Traditional Indian childhood games are a two-way street and can teach you important life-skills. And, that is the message Sangeeta Rajesh and Archana Reddy of Hyderabad, the founders of Good Old Games, hope to spread through their ethnic games. **Mallik Thatipalli** catches up with the resourceful duo from Hyderabad

The ethos of Good Old Games, which is focused on reviving ancient and indigenous games of India, is not just to evoke nostalgic feelings about a bygone era. Instead, this unique enterprise, established by the duo in Hyderabad—Sangeeta Rajesh and Archana Reddy—draws attention to the fact that the games of yore can actually help children learn life-skills to cope with the complex challenges of today.

Working with children, both the founders, Sangeeta Rajesh, a remedial therapist, and Archana Reddy, who runs a school in Hyderabad, were increasingly troubled by the issues facing children today. In an informal chat with *Pink*, Rajesh says, “We realised that children today were dealing with multiple issues such as obesity, eye-sight problems and discrepancies in learning and development. I remember, as a child we used to study with 50 other students and we did not receive quarter of the attention children get today. And, yet, we had none of these issues.”

After deliberating over the subject, they felt that the excessive use of smartphones and technology among younger children (ages 2 and above), is probably the cause of the problems. Rajesh and Reddy decided to infuse the “magic” of native games into the lives of children of today.

Co-founder Reddy points out, “Our childhood games were simple but they taught us ethics and importantly, enabled us to tackle challenges that life eventually throws at us. Unlike technology, which is a one-way street, these games teach us life lessons.”



After 18 months of painstaking research, Good Old Games, was opened in 2016, offering around 15 games, which have been played by generations of Indians. The games like Navakankari or Daadi, a board game are common in south India as the Kailasam or Paramapada Sopana Patam, a version of the proverbial Snakes and Ladders; and the chess game, Chadarangam.

There's Gaccha Kayalu too, known as the game of the five stones. Throwing them in the air, you have to deftly catch the stones in combinations allowing the rest to drop. The game is believed to build one's concentration, memory power and improve aiming skills. Bambaram (the traditional flick top); Pithoo (which involves a ball and a pile of stones); Pachisi and the Ashta Chamma (similar to the modern Ludo); Vamana Guntalu, (the popular wooden board game with 14 pits) and Puli Joodha (goat and tiger board game) are all part of their collection.

The games are aesthetically packed in cloth (silk, wool, velvet, embroidered weaves), wood (rubber and teak) and metal (brass, cast iron and copper) to make it appealing to the Instagram-friendly generation.

The research continues to be the most painstaking part of their journey. The

entrepreneurs visited the Madurai fair —Chithirai Thiruvizha Jatara— which is famous for showcasing a rich variety of indigenous games. At that fair, they sourced native rattles, spinning tops, catapults and spindles as well as raw materials like palm tree shells and leaves.

Our childhood games were simple but they taught us ethics and most importantly, enabled us to tackle challenges that life eventually throws at us. Unlike technology, which is a one-way street, these games teach us life lessons

At Karaikudi town in Tamil Nadu, they chanced upon vintage sets of the region's most popular game Pallanguzhi (called Ali Guli Mane in Kannada and Kuzhipara in Malayalam), which was mostly played by young girls. Fascinated by the intricate patterns and materials used such as marble, beads and fabric such old Kancheepuram saris, they came away inspired by the craftsmanship of yore. A visit to the National Gallery of Modern Art in Delhi gave them

insights on games played by the royal families of India.

Rajesh admits that their biggest source however has been the elderly people in their families. She says, "We made a list of all the games we knew and then turned to the elders to help us out. A little later, people started approaching us at our exhibitions to share inputs. Truly, it has been a collective effort."

After their research was completed, they worked with artisans from Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh, to make the games more visually appealing. Design is one of their biggest USP—from their Pallanguzhi sets shaped like a swan or a fish to chess sets fashioned as Jaipur chowkis and snakes and ladder boards in circular shapes or made from Kalamkari weaves—their games are eye-catching.

They picked up interesting stories during their research. For example, in Tamil Nadu, Pallanguzhi, known as Vada Galla Peeta in Telangana, was used to keep young girls home-bound after they reached puberty and to teach them simple and compound interest. "It was an integral part of every household even in Sri Lanka, so it's astonishing that so much has been lost in a short time," says Reddy.



Good Old Games offers a variety of board games from their Pallanguzhi sets shaped like a swan to their circular shaped snakes and ladders



The dynamic duo Sangeeta Rajesh and Archana Reddy

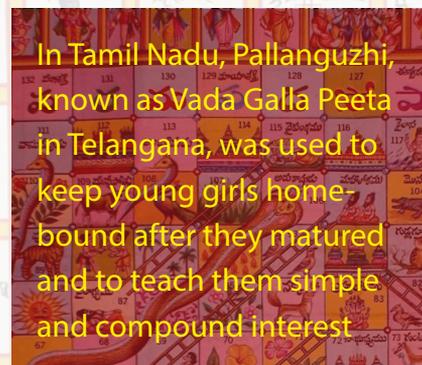
They also found out that Parama Pada Sopanam did not end at 100, as it does in the modern snakes and ladders version. The game was believed to be symbolic of a man's attempt to reach heaven—the ladders represent virtues—while the snakes indicate vices. Snakes and Ladders also called Moksha Patam or Mokshapat, has been created by Sant Gyandev in the 13th century. It was introduced by spiritual leaders to teach good values to children.

The squares with ladders on the board depicted different virtues—square 12 was faith, 51 was reliability, 76 was knowledge, and so on. Similarly, the squares with snakes such as square 41 represented disobedience, square 49 was vulgarity, 84 was anger, etc. The hundredth square stood for moksha.

Interestingly, Reddy says the game didn't end at 100. There were 21 more boxes, which had various *Dashaavataras* and other images of gods and goddesses. "You can move ahead only if you roll a 6 or 12 on the dice. The game demonstrated that spiritual life isn't easy. Once you crossed them, you had to roll 1 to win, which symbolises the last stage of the spiritual journey. In all, it had 140 places and takes hours to finish," she explains.

They also stumbled upon the Bongaram (in Telugu) or the Bambaram (in Tamil) game, which

was played with spinning tops. These tops have either blunted edges or they are razor sharp. In the latter, which is popular in rural areas, the players deposit their Bambarams in a circle, while each player takes a turn and uses the sharp edges of his top to break the other tops. A big favourite during Pongal and Diwali in Tamil Nadu, it improves hand-eye coordination and concentration.



They have also revived the Puli Meka, another fun two player game. It consists of 16 goats, three tigers and one board. In this game, one player controls three tigers while the other controls 16 goats. Goats lack the inherent strength of the tiger but they have to vanquish them through sheer numbers and guile. This game teaches young people teamwork and to strategise.

Good Old Games is slowly expanding their oeuvre of games. A recent addition has been the 'playing cards' of ancient India—Krida-Patram. Made

of handmade cloth pieces, they feature ancient designs from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Later, they were made from tortoise shell or ivory and decorated with pearls and precious metals.

Rajesh says, "If you played these cards in the morning, Rama was the king, while Krishna was the king after dusk." The duo has also introduced Baahubali Chadarangam or chess sets which can easily fill a room.

"Nostalgia is a big draw. Many people purchase our products impulsively as they connect to the concept instantly. But, we don't know if they use them a lot. However, we are hopeful because it is our true inheritance, after all," says Rajesh, pointing out that our ancient texts are replete with images of Lord Shiva and Parvati playing the game of Pachisi, while *Mahabharata* has Karna and Duryodhana's wife playing Ashta Chamma.

The COVID-year has brought in a lot of opportunities for Good Old Games, along with some challenges. Initially, the demand for their products shot up, as people were locked up in their homes and wanted to play indoor games. However, their stock was exhausted within months and the artisans couldn't source materials easily, which led to demand with supply issues.

Now, however things have returned to normal. Rajesh shares that they are setting up a stall at the Crafts Council of Telangana's building in Hyderabad and are also keen to expand their range of games.

With Good Old Games they hope to ensure kids today learn not only about Peppa, the pig but also about innovative games that can teach you a significant life-skill or two. ■



COVID-19

Vaccination and Cancer

The COVID-19 vaccine is relatively safe for cancer patients, says **Dr P Raghu Ram**, who also sheds light on other aspects of the vaccination



We heaved a sigh of relief when a couple of vaccines was approved by the government to beat the COVID-19 pandemic. However, because of a lot of false news and rumours, there is confusion in the minds of people about whether they should take the vaccine or not. One such doubt relates to the COVID-19 vaccine and patients undergoing cancer treatment. The question that is often asked is whether cancer patients should get vaccinated? Or, whether the vaccine will be beneficial for cancer patients, as it is for the general public or will it worsen their situation? Here, I shall clear the doubts people have about the vaccine for cancer patients.

Is COVID-19 vaccine safe for cancer patients?

Yes, it is. The risk of the novel coronavirus infecting a healthy person and a cancer patient is the same. However, the chances of the infection getting worse are much higher in the latter, since they are likely to be immunocompromised (particularly so, if they are taking chemotherapy). And, since the COVID-19 vaccine builds immunity in the body to protect us against the virus, it is important for cancer patients to get themselves vaccinated.

Although, there is not much data available on the COVID-19 vaccine side effects in cancer patients, it is relatively safe for them to get vaccinated.



Vaccination before cancer treatment or after?

A multimodality approach in cancer care, involving surgery, chemotherapy radiotherapy and hormone therapy, is decided by a multidisciplinary team. Of these modalities, chemotherapy suppresses the body's immunity. Those patients requiring chemotherapy should ideally be given the vaccine, at least, a couple of weeks before commencing therapy to allow the vaccine related immunity to develop.

If vaccination has to be administered after commencing chemotherapy, it should be given between the cycles rather than during the chemotherapy session. To sum it up, patients undergoing cancer treatment and those who have been treated for cancer in the past should go ahead and get vaccinated when it becomes available.

An unprecedented global effort has been invested in controlling the 'unwelcome visitor' in our lives. The vaccine is our only hope against COVID-19 and it plays a crucial role in acting as a barrier, and breaking the chain of infection. Let us say a resounding "No" to vaccine hesitancy!

Is monitoring necessary after vaccination?

It is important to report to the doctor if there are any unusual changes. These usually occur within 48 hours after being vaccinated.

Is it required to take two doses of the vaccine?

Absolutely. The best level of protection is seen in those who take both doses. Even after taking the vaccine, it is vitally important to follow the basic principles of masking, hand hygiene and physical distancing, until the broad transmission in the community is under control.

UBF Diary

January 2021

Dr P Raghu Ram conferred the OBE— Officer of the Most Excellent Order of British Empire

- One of the youngest surgeons of Indian origin to get the prestigious award
- Given to those who have 'gone the extra mile' in their service and stand 'head and shoulders' above others in their distinction
- Governor of Telangana felicitates Dr Raghu Ram on being honoured by Queen Elizabeth II in the 2021 New Year's Honours list

Dr TAMILISAI Soundararajan, governor of Telangana felicitated Dr P Raghu Ram at Raj Bhavan on January 9, for being honoured in the 2021 New Year's Honours list by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II with the prestigious OBE—Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire.

The governor paid tributes to Dr Raghu Ram on becoming one of the youngest surgeons of Indian origin in over 100 years, to be conferred with UK's second highest ranking Order of the British Empire award (excluding a knighthood/damehood). It was given to Dr Raghu Ram in recognition of his outstanding services towards improving breast cancer care and surgical education in India and for UK-India relations.

The British Honours system aims to show gratitude publicly to those who have 'gone the extra mile' in their service and who stand 'head and shoulders' above others in their distinction.

Meanwhile, Dr Raghu Ram too expressed his heartfelt gratitude to Telangana government for giving him the opportunity and encouragement over the past 13 years, which has enabled him to implement several landmark initiatives, replicating the best of British practices in breast healthcare in Telangana and India.

"I feel immensely proud to be a 'living bridge' between the UK and India and I dedicate this incredible recognition to my family, and equally, to my patients who have given me the unique privilege to be involved in their care. I owe a deep sense of gratitude to the Board of Directors of KIMS Hospitals, who gave me a free hand to translate my vision into reality and to my colleagues at KIMS-USHALAKSHMI Centre for Breast Diseases & Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation, for their extraordinary contribution to ensure the best possible care to my patients," he said.



Dr Smt TAMILISAI Soundararajan, Hon'ble Governor of Telangana felicitating Dr P Raghu Ram



Hyderabad Turns a Powerful Pink for 10th year in a Row



Established in 2007, Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation (UBF), a not-for-profit breast cancer charity has completed 13 eventful years.

Through the Foundation's consistent innovative initiatives, breast cancer is no longer a 'closet issue' in this region—it is a commonly discussed topic now thus bringing about the much-needed awareness resulting in more lives being saved.

Hyderabad is the only city in Asia to have prominent buildings and historic monuments turn pink in one

night since 2010. Despite the ongoing pandemic, Charminar, the Buddha statue and KIMS Hospital were illuminated in pink on September 30 evening, for a record tenth consecutive year, to mark the beginning of International Breast Cancer Awareness month in October.

The idea was started by the Estee Lauder group of companies in 2000, when they illuminated their buildings around the world in pink, to mark the breast cancer month and this campaign caught on worldwide.

The UBF Oration: Saving Lives with Early Detection

The International Breast Cancer awareness month kicked off with the 2020 edition of Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Oration virtually delivered by K Sujatha Rao, former union health secretary on October 4, 2020.

'Gift your loved ones, who are 40 years or older, an annual mammography screening, instead of a sari or something else during Dasara and Diwali' – this was the heartfelt message by Dr Ushalakshmi, founder chairman of UBF and a gritty, breast cancer conqueror.

Raj Bhavan support

Speaking on the occasion, Telangana governor, Tamilisai Soundararajan, who was chief guest of the programme, said that she has been encouraged by UBF's inspiring Pink Ribbon campaign for over a decade. To strengthen the campaign in the state, Raj Bhavan would be illuminated in pink on the last day of October 2020, she added.



Chief Guest Dr Smt Tamilisai Soundararajan, Hon'ble Governor of Telangana



Dr K Ushalakshmi, Founder Chairman of UBF



Jayesh Ranjan, Chief Advisor, UBF



Sujatha Rao, Former Union Health Secretary, Govt. of India

In her oration, talking about 'Breast cancer advocacy, screening and early detection of breast cancer', K Sujatha Rao said breast cancer is the most common cancer affecting women in India.

"If diagnosed early and treated early, many lives can be saved. It is for this reason that the government is focusing on raising awareness, early screening and diagnosis among women," she said, adding that India needs to step up the number of oncologists and other allied specialities, and upskill physicians, and nurses working in district hospitals and primary health care centres.



Dr B Bhaskar Rao, Managing Director, KIMS Hospitals

December 2020

ASICON 2020

A Memorable Virtual Conference in Challenging Times

Due to the ongoing pandemic, the 80th annual Congress of the Association of Surgeons of India (ASICON 2020) was held as a virtual event. More than 6,000 surgeons from India and abroad participated in this three-day Congress held from December 16 to 19.

Delivering his presidential address, Dr P Raghu Ram said that it has been a god-given opportunity, a great honour and an incredible privilege to serve the esteemed association, which is Asia Pacific's largest and the world's second largest surgical organisation.

"Insight, integrity and inspiration have been the three pillars of reference in my leadership journey. Over the past 24 months, both in my role as vice-president and president ASI, I have been working to the best of my abilities to ensure creative leadership and accountable governance, which has been my "mantra". The expectations and views of "grassroot" members have been uppermost in my mind, all along. As I come to the end of my tenure, I would like to express my profound gratitude to the membership for electing me to this apex position, with an unprecedented victory margin, never before witnessed in ASI's 82-year-old history."



His Excellency Dr Lotay Tshering, Hon'ble PM of Bhutan

In the history of the association, this was the very first time that a prime minister of a country graced an important ASI ceremony as the chief guest. Dr Raghu Ram said that this speaks volumes about the enormous credibility, high regard and extraordinary impact that the association has earned for itself worldwide.

"The PM of Bhutan, Dr Lotay Tshering is an epitome of simplicity, who is transforming Bhutan and he would hopefully serve as an inspiration to the over 6,000 surgeons, who are participating in this scientific extravaganza," Dr Raghu Ram said.

Meanwhile, delivering his chief guest's address virtually during the convocation ceremony, Bhutan PM, Dr Lotay Tshering said, "It is important to be good human beings first and later good surgeons. It is important to adhere to the Hippocratic oath. Surgeons operate with a knife and I have the advantage of operating with the pen as a politician and with a knife as a surgeon. I am a surgeon first and forever. Politics is only a passing phase in my life."

Dr Lotay Tshering further spoke about the Gross National Happiness (GNH), which is a philosophy that has been the guiding force for Bhutan that aims for collective happiness and well-being of a population. As a doctor himself, he emphasised to the surgical fraternity the importance of serving selflessly for the greater good of humanity.

Justice G Raghuram, director, National Judicial Academy, who inaugurated the conference said in his address, "I compliment and commend Dr Raghu Ram for implementing a creative leadership and accountable governance in the association, during the most disastrous pandemic year and for raising over ₹1 crore towards procuring and delivering the much-needed PPEs and hand sanitisers to frontline healthcare workers across the nation."

"I am very happy to learn about the landmark online training initiatives spearheaded by the association over the past few months, which would certainly pave the path towards significantly improving surgical care in the country. I commend the surgical fraternity for the yeoman service in these challenging times, many times sacrificing their personal comfort, braving all odds of equipment



Justice G Raghuram, Director, National Judicial Academy

shortages, spending sleepless nights, and also putting their families at risk as well. There is a need to revisit and adhere to the nuanced ethical norms during these challenging times, and importantly adhere to the Hippocratic oath at all times," said Justice Raghuram.

(A bird's eye view of Dr Raghu Ram's visionary leadership journey as President ASI 2020 'The year that was' can be accessed by reading the Editorial, published in the December 2020 issue of the Indian Journal of Surgery, which is the 'voice for surgery' in India) Here is the link:

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12262-020-02675-0>



President, ASI in Conversation
with Sadhguru at ASICON 2020
Compassionate Knife

Compassionate Knife - an Interaction with Sadhguru

Dr Raghu Ram interacted with Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, founder of Isha Foundation in a programme titled "Compassionate Knife", in which Dr Raghu Ram posed a few questions related to the challenges and dilemmas faced by the medical fraternity and sought Sadhguru's answers to them. This interview was showcased during prime time at the conference and has so far been watched by over 83,000 people worldwide.

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7GK4Ca_In4

PINK RIBBON CAMPAIGN (2007 - 2021)

Celebrating 14 positively eventful years...

Spreading the message of hope, courage and survival in the fight against breast cancer

Breast cancer is the most common cancer affecting women in India

Early detection of breast cancer saves lives

Breast Awareness – 5 Point Code

1. Know what is normal for you
2. Know what changes to Look for and Feel
3. Look and Feel
4. Report any changes to your doctor without delay
5. Have an annual screening mammogram from the age of 40



Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation
Hyderabad, India

Empowering people...impacting lives

www.ubf.org.in