

THIS DAY

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HOPE FOR CHILDREN SUFFERING FROM CANCER

Mr. Kaviratne and his wife are making a difference in people's lives, writes **Rajendra K. Aneja**

Sita is a cute nine-year-old girl from Ratnagiri district, in India. Her parents, Sakharam and Shaku are landless labourers who toil in the fields. They adore their firstborn child Sita. One day, suddenly Sita vomited blood. The local doctors advised taking her to Mumbai city.

Sita clutched her doll on the bus from Ratnagiri to Mumbai. After visits to municipal hospitals, they came to Tata Cancer Memorial Hospital. The doctors diagnosed that little Sita suffered from acute lymphoblastic cancer. She would need to stay in Mumbai for six months for treatment.

Her parents were mortified. First, their darling daughter had the dreaded cancer. Second, they were very poor. Third, they had no place to stay. What could they do, to save their daughter?

They dreaded living on the pavement near the hospital or at a railway station platform. They would have to search for a toilet every morning, eat some street food, sleep on concrete road, surrounded by beggars, miscreants or stray dogs.

Social workers advised them to visit a facility called, 'St. Jude', located at the Cancer Research Society. They trudged there, forlorn and on the verge of tears. There, a soft-spoken girl with kind eyes met them. Sita's parents were amazed by the cleanliness and brightness of the place. After studying the case, the staff advised, "Yes, Sita and both of you can stay with us for six months."

Sita's parents, queried with trepidation, "What will it cost us to stay here?" The reply stunned them, "You do not have to pay anything!" Sakharam and Shaku could not believe their ears.

They were escorted to a spotlessly clean room. It had a bed for Sita, mattresses for them, a cupboard for clothes, towels and a cabinet for medicines. There were clean bed sheets, curtains and even colourful toys for Sita. The walls were painted sunny yellow, bringing a bright cheer to the premises.

Sakharam and Shaku were flabbergasted by the massive kitchen. In the spotlessly clean room, there were 32 gas connections, with 32 small cupboards. Shaku received a 'starter-kit', jars filled with rice, lentils, sugar, oil, biscuits, spices and even utensils

and soap. In the morning, when Sakharam would take Sita to the Hospital for treatment, Shaku could cook food for her family. The toilets and laundry areas were immaculately clean.

There were tears of gratitude in their eyes. Over 5,000 children, like Sita, come to Mumbai annually, from almost everywhere, to get treated for cancer. Besides the medical remedy, they need to resolve homelessness, hunger, fear, trauma and restlessness. Most of the distressed parents are abysmally poor. The treatment is funded by NGOs, hospitals and private trusts. They have no money to pay for a place to stay. After the gruelling chemotherapy sessions, the children need a soft, warm bed, nutritious food, clean water and rest. Instead, they sleep on stone pavements.

The St. Jude Centres house children below the age of 12, suffering from cancer, who have to receive protracted treatment but are homeless. Their parents are agricultural labourers, workshop workers and hawkers. Some have an income of just about Rs. 100 per day (USD 1 and 50 cents), when they do find work. They cannot afford the treatment and the stay at a hospital. St. Jude Centre, alleviates their suffering.

Kishore is a child of four years, from Patna in Bihar state, with a mischievous smile. His father Dev, works as a factory guard. Dev and his wife Manita, came to Mumbai to get Kishore treated for cancer. They have been staying at the St. Jude Centre for four months.

They get up at 6 a.m. Manita cooks breakfast for Kishore and Dev. Then they are driven to the Tata Hospital for treatment. The sessions are nerve-racking for Dev. They return around 3 p.m. to St. Jude. Then Manita cooks a lunch of rice, lentils and vegetables for her family. Kishore sleeps. His parents also rest for a while.

When Kishore wakes up, he plays with the other children aged between four and 12, all suffering from cancer, hailing from villages in Bihar, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, etc. The children do not speak each other's languages, but the secret pathos of their illness and the trauma of daily treatment, bonds them. The staff at St. Jude

has a series of activities like painting, etc. to keep the children cheerful.

Dev, Manita and the other parents share experiences and provide solace to each other. The parents of the afflicted children have a lot to talk. They share and learn from each other, managing the agony of seeing their offspring ill, an exacting treatment, severe financial stress, meeting the emotional and psychological needs of the children. The centre provides them with the opportunity to vent their feelings and get strength from each other on how to cope living in a city, compared to the villages they came from. If the children are physically afflicted, many parents are emotionally wounded.

The parents also share the responsibility of keeping the premises clean, between them. At 6 p.m., the mothers retire to the kitchen to cook dinners for their families. Finally, it is lights out at 10:30 p.m. Tomorrow, chemotherapy starts again for many children. They must rest well at night.

The inspirations behind this laudable endeavour are Mr. Nihal Kaviratne and his wife Mrs. Shyama Kaviratne. Mr. Kaviratne worked for Unilever in senior roles across the globe and as Chairman of Indonesia. On his return to India, Mr. Kaviratne decided to dedicate his energies to meaningful social work, which would make a difference in the lives of people. St. Jude is his vision.

Mr. Kaviratne's leadership in the corporate sector is evident in the management and processes of the Centre. St. Jude is managed like an excellent company. The first centre was perfected in activities and processes. These learnings were then manualised.

There are manuals on 'Successfully Creating and Managing a Childcare Centre', 'Handbook for Patients', 'Operating Manual'. These are detailed and specific, covering admissions criteria, maintenance of centre, code of conduct, etc. Within the short span of four years, St. Jude has established seven centres, providing accommodation to children, battling cancer. Over 500 children and their parents have fought the dreaded ailment, with dignity and fortitude, through St. Jude.

Socially responsible corporations also participate.

The global CEO of Unilever Paul Polman was moved and participated. So was McKinsey & Company, which now contributes to the mission. The number of Centres and rooms is still growing.

All of us lament the slow pace of infrastructure reforms, health benefits, medical services and growing corruption in India. However, talk and criticism do not resolve problems. Action does. As Dag Hammarskjöld, a former Secretary-General United Nations, wrote in his brilliant autobiographical book, entitled, 'Markings' – "In our world the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action."

St. Jude is a tribute to the philosophy of Mr. Kaviratne and his wife, who set out to make a difference, through action, not words. "Our philosophy" they say, "is to think big, start small and move fast."

St. Jude thus provides a warm, clean home to homeless children suffering from cancer and to their parents. However, it provides much more. It provides a supportive community. The families open their hearts and derive strength from each other. From being lonely and forlorn, the child and his or her family, receive nurturing relationships.

Surrounded by an abundance of affection and love, the children too, respond positively to the treatment at the hospital. They manage the daily round of painful chemotherapies, blood transfusions, with dignity and cheer.

When the children are cured, they go back home. Many of the parents keep in touch with the staff of St. Jude, even after they have returned to their villages. They are touched forever; by the love and care they have received at St. Jude. Life will never be the same again for them. They have met hope.

Some children do not survive the illness. Their parents are heartbroken. The team at St. Jude who nurture the children suffer.

St. Jude does not just offer a place to stay for children afflicted with cancer. It offers a chance, to live life again. Beautifully.

Aneja is an alumnus of the Harvard Business School and was Managing Director of Unilever Tanzania. He is the author of a book, "Rural Marketing across Countries."