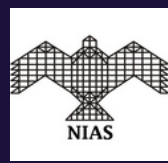




When everyone gave up, she stood strong and fought

Poonam Kumari

*TB Champion
Jamui District, Bihar*



Poonam is chirpy and charming with childish innocence. Unfortunately, in 2014, Poonam was diagnosed with TB and then almost a year later with MDR-TB.

At first, accompanied by her mother, Poonam went to a doctor in her village but could not get a clear diagnosis. Over the next few months, she visited multiple doctors, who asked for many different tests, but had no conclusive outcome.

As her health further deteriorated, she was taken to Patna and was diagnosed with TB. She began treatment but started to experience severe side effects. She says she felt there was no option but to give up the medicines after a few days.

At the suggestion of a neighbour, Poonam was taken to another hospital in Patna where she underwent a test that confirmed MDR-TB.

“When I was diagnosed with TB, I did not think it was a dangerous disease. We got to know about its seriousness only after talking to several doctors. We contacted at least ten doctors,” she explains. She was worried about the expenses needed for treatment but was relieved to learn that she could avail free treatment in the public sector. “We couldn't have afforded treatment in the private sector; that might have cost us a lot of money. My father needs to support the education of my brothers as well,” she says.

Most of Poonam's extended family stayed away from her. She was disappointed that even her cousins maintained a distance; Poonam says she was very disturbed by the harsh and discouraging words her relatives used in conversations with her parents. "They would even say things like, there was no point in consulting doctors and taking medicines. It was better to let me die. My father was also disturbed, but he convinced me that things were not as bad as the others were suggesting and asked me to trust him," she says. "My parents and brothers were very supportive. They didn't make me feel like I was going to die."

Poonam's friends also stood by her, and there was no deficit in their love and affection. They used to check on her constantly whether she was taking medicines regularly. She also says that her fiance looked after her. "During the hard times, I got to know who would stand by me when I needed help," Poonam says.

Today, she is a trained Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) and is pursuing BSc in Nursing from MGM College, Patna. She also works part-time at a private hospital to support her education.

"I want to tell people that they should not ostracize people affected with a disease. It's important to meet sick people and give them confidence. People with TB should take their medicines regularly. I know what it feels like, so one shouldn't get worried and go down that difficult path. It is important to remain positive," she says confidently.

“A person who was admitted along with me in the hospital, Abhishek Kumar, told me he received an invitation to join a capacity-building workshop for TB survivors. I joined the workshop and subsequently enrolled in a mentorship programme. As a TB Champion, I raised awareness about TB, supported people with TB and worked to ensure a stigma-free village,” Smrity recalls.

Today, as a member of TB Mukta Vahini, a survivor-led network, Poonam inspires other TB survivors to join the network and support TB-affected communities.

“Recently, I have joined a group of TB Champions from TMV who are providing tele counselling support to people with TB on treatment during the pandemic. Two of the biggest challenges they face are the inability to get their medicines on time and to avail of the benefits of the Nikshay Poshan Yojana. So we collect the information and pass it on to the TB programme staff in our area and see that their problems are resolved. We hope this way; we can reach out to hundreds of people with TB and become a part of their journey to cure,” Poonam signs off.

