

DELHI



Cancer Wards

SOPAN JOSHI



It was a typically crowded day at Delhi's All India Institute of Medical Sciences. The queue at the OPD was long, the patients restless. The aggressive security guards were failing to keep order. The bedlam extended inside. In the passageways, insouciant ward boys noisily carted patients on stretchers with an apathy that is the hallmark of Delhi's auto ricksha drivers. In front of the cardio-thoracic centre, a large family was laying out a picnic on a small patch of green. Groups of people were all over, talking loudly. Construction work was adding to the noise and airborne dust. The next building was the Institute's Rotary Cancer Hospital.

DELHI

Entering was easy. The security guards didn't ask too many questions; one of them even attempted a half-smile. Inside, the halls smelled of cement, disinfectant and a range of odours associated with sick bodies, but difficult to identify. Everything was absolutely still.

More than 150 people were sitting on the benches. Some of them were trying to hide their disfigured faces. There were women with woollen caps on, concealing the loss of hair due to the measured poisons of chemotherapy. A woman stopped a doctor in the passageway and spoke to him. The conversation was inaudible, despite the silence. A hospital attendant called to the next patient on his list, and waited for a response. The clerks were seated behind the reception counter, and they were actually working. Inside the boardroom, about ten doctors attended to several patients, simultaneously. The only sounds were the low murmurs, rustling paper and the occasional spell of coughing.

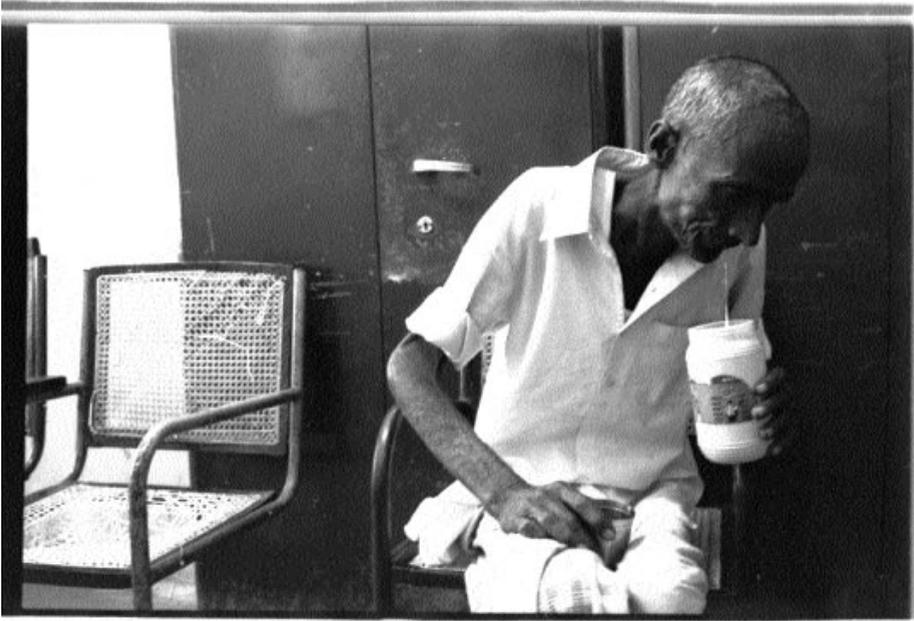
Everyone was either waiting, patiently, or doing their job with a quiet efficiency. It was like having walked through a warp, from pandemonium to a freeze. At one stage, the only visible activity in the hall was in the saline drip close to a patient on a stretcher. From the inverted bottle into the intravenous plastic tube, the drops fell with the regularity of a sand clock. It was measuring time, and so were many of the patients. This is what they mean when they say: Once a cancer patient, always a cancer patient.

This was my first close encounter with cancer. I had never been in a public space in Delhi where so many people could wait so silently – not even at the cremation grounds. But here, the burden of cancer had brought about a civilising influence that was startling, a respect for life and death that is invariably missing in the city. I had heard of people who had cancer, but somehow I had seldom spoken to a cancer patient. Statistics showed that the disease was increasing, but I never knew how much. How do so many remain hidden from the public eye? Where do they live? Would they talk? *Do they talk?*

A thin young man with a receding hairline stood nearby. Perhaps he'd be a little more forthcoming than the older people, I thought. Just as I addressed him, an old woman got in the way, a little like a mother protecting her brood. "What do you want?" she said. After ruling out any threat, she moved away a little and started talking softly. Her son Mukesh had leukaemia, but he'd been made to believe that he had tuberculosis. She said he was a bus conductor before he fell ill two years ago. I took her address and decided to pay the family a visit.

Nand Nagari was always a place that existed only on the signboards of overcrowded buses. It took more than an hour and several enquiries to reach the run-down neighbourhood on Delhi's north-eastern fringe. Mukesh was known in the locality as the boy who fell ill. Sitting in the one-room house in which his sister had died a few years ago after the kitchen stove exploded, he began to recount his healthier days.

Seven days a week, he would conduct a Blue Line bus plying on route 281 (Nand Nagari to Central Secretariat). He used to make four-five trips every day. He was able-bodied, and would never allow students to travel free even if they said they were 'staff'. Yes, leaning out of the window, shouting and beating the body of the bus were part of his duties. Had it not been for tuberculosis, he might've become... a bus driver. It was unnerving to see that bus conductors – vanguards of villainy and mistreatment in Delhi buses – could talk like ordinary human beings.



DELHI

DELHI

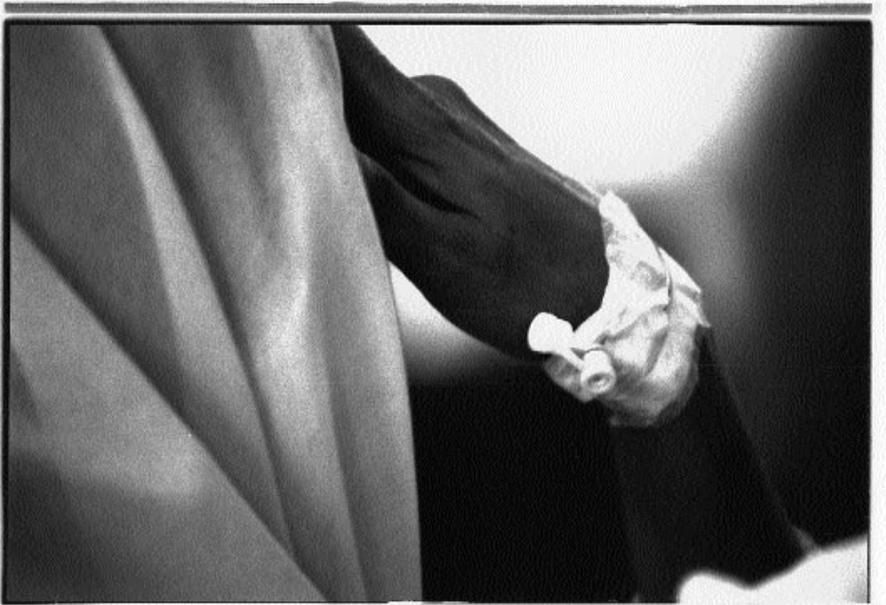
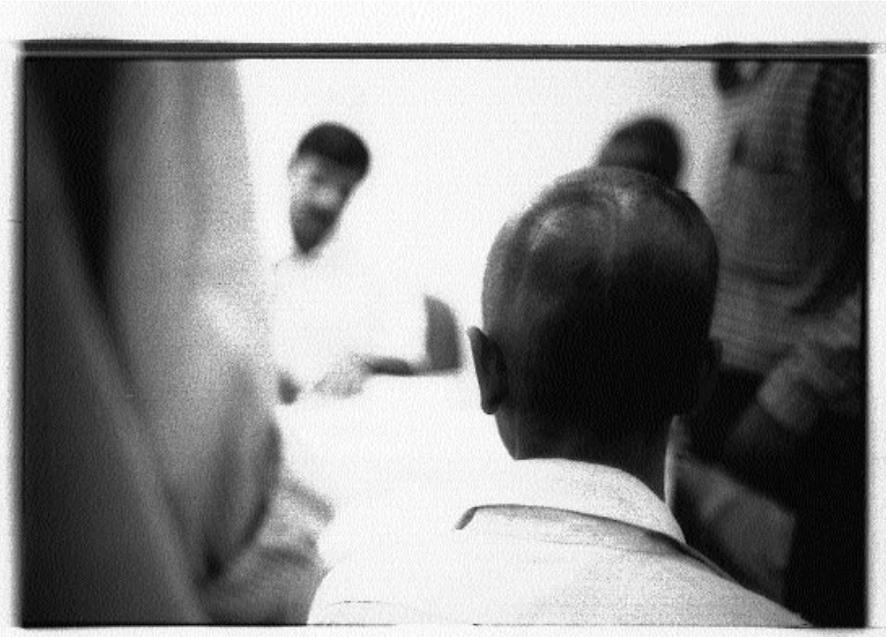
No, he hadn't heard of benzene. He didn't know that it is a potent carcinogen. That it is known to cause leukaemia. That it was present in copious amounts in Delhi's air, especially after the city's environmental regulators triumphantly introduced green-labelled unleaded petrol that has a lot of benzene to help it burn. Mukesh did remember some awful evenings when it was difficult to breathe. In vivid detail, he described the taste and smell of diesel fumes, the burning sensation that he could feel in his chest.

On the inside, his own cells were eating him up. On the outside was a consuming city. The Supreme Court order on moving Delhi's commercial transport fleet to compressed natural gas was too late to affect Mukesh's employment or health. Moreover, who would scientifically establish that his condition was due to Delhi's toxic air? The Indian Council of Medical Research did not want to share recent information on cancer. And the doctors at AIIMS are too busy trying to keep patients alive.

They seemed likely to fail in the case of Amarnath Tiwari. At a young age, Tiwari started taking the appropriately named Shramjeevi Express train to Delhi. He came upon employment, and became a porter in the crowded Naya Bazaar area of the Walled City. Leukaemia struck in 1992, and he faced the dilemma of concealing the ailment to retain employment or allowing his body to rest. Like hundreds of cancer patients, AIIMS was the last resort. There, he found humanity in doctors who arranged some treatment money for him from the Prime Minister's Relief Fund. Some relatives living in Dwarka on the south-western margins of the city gave him shelter, but for a price. He remained alive, thanks largely to regular treatment, sundry bottles of Bournvita and Horlicks that he could buy with the treatment grant, and the prayers of his three daughters and six younger siblings in Bihar. He did not know exactly what Delhi meant to him. Once, it was employment. Later, it was the reason for his disease. Still later, it became his only hope.

Not everyone is as fortunate. The city treats every poor cancer patient differently. Most cannot reach the overworked AIIMS doctors. There are other hospitals, but they are mostly too expensive or too inefficient. The handful of cancer support groups in Delhi, struggling to raise funds, point out that a large number of patients simply disappear. Some leave their loved ones to avoid being a burden. Some are turned away by their loved ones. Then there are those who find their way to Shanti Avedna Ashram, not very far from AIIMS. It is a hospice for terminally ill cancer patients. It is in the heart of the city, but on the fringes of society. Here, I saw Christian nuns provide the dignity to cancer patients that their relatives denied. The smell of Death lingered in the corridors, as if the Grim Reaper had a branch office here. But he wasn't ugly. And he definitely wasn't in a great hurry to reap his harvest, unlike the relatives of the patients who lie inside.

Outside, there was heavy traffic on the Ring Road, not far from the ashram. Mangal Das, 50, was dodging the impatient vehicles, trying to cross the road. On his shoulders sat his 14-year-old son Sadhu, recently operated upon for a brain tumour at AIIMS. They were trying to get to a tent house godown, where some relatives from their village had provided free shelter and food. Sadhu's chances of surviving cancer were not bad. But surviving Delhi's traffic was a different proposition.



DELHI