#WOMEN IN FOCUS

JOYEETA TRISHA
refused to let cancer steal her future



When photographer Joyeeta Trisha was diagnosed with breast cancer at 36, her entire world came to a halt. As a single mother facing terrifying uncertainty, she held on to work, family, and hope to rebuild her life.

Trisha says the first signs did not look like what she might have imagined breast cancer would look like. She began experiencing unusual tiredness, nausea and changes in her bowel habits. Food no longer tasted the same, and before her periods, she experienced breast pain that felt different.

Initially, she attributed the symptoms to her busy lifestyle, stomach problems, migraine or sinus issues.

"I thought I was sick because I did a lot of work," she recalls.

For three to four weeks, however, the symptoms continued. Then all of a sudden, she noticed something else: a lump near the side and lower part of her breast, extending towards the underarm area. Her instinct told her something was wrong.

"I never felt this before," she says.

That feeling eventually prompted her to see a doctor.

"No one expects to have cancer"

The diagnosis came at an age when Trisha never imagined she would be dealing with such a serious illness.

"I was 36-37 years old. I didn't expect to have cancer," she says.

The financial burden was one of the first challenges she had to confront. As a middle-class family, she says, they did not have a large amount of savings readily available for prolonged cancer treatment. She had some gold jewellery that her mother had given her, which became part of the financial consideration during her treatment.

At one point, she thought of fundraising, but later decided against it. "I thought about fundraising first. But then I thought about my self-respect. I thought, I won't do this. I will see how long I can continue."

Her treatment expenses came gradually rather than all at once. With the support of her siblings and family, she continued. But money was only one part of the struggle.

TREATMENT, EXHAUSTION, AND A BODY THAT WANTED TO RECOVER

Trisha's treatment was particularly difficult because of how frequently she had to undergo chemotherapy. She explains that chemotherapy cycles are often spaced out so that the body has time to recover. In her case, however, she had chemotherapy at shorter intervals.

She would spend days recovering at home, only to face another cycle soon afterwards.

"I couldn't leave my house for a week or ten days," she says. "Then I would have another chemo cycle."

The physical effects were difficult. Her appearance changed, and she lost her hair.

But she learned to separate the temporary effects of treatment from the disease itself.

She knew that chemotherapy, rather than cancer itself, was responsible for her hair loss. She reminded herself that once treatment was completed, her hair could grow back.

For Trisha, understanding what was happening to her body became an important part of coping with treatment.

THE HARDEST PART AND THE HIDDEN COST OF CANCER

While the physical side of treatment was difficult, Trisha describes the emotional struggle as one of the hardest parts of her journey.

She was a single mother. Her son was around 10 or 11 when she was diagnosed. Trisha did not tell many people outside her family that she had cancer. There was a reason: she had seen how cancer is often viewed in Bangladesh.

For many people, a cancer diagnosis immediately creates an assumption that the person will die. She did not want that fear surrounding her while she was trying to survive.

"I don't want to die before I actually die," she says.

For the first few months, she cried frequently. She became deeply depressed and could not work. She also feared that she would die. Her son feared the same. Even her doctors could not promise her that treatment would definitely work. They could tell her that if the treatment worked, she could recover. But cancer does not respond identically in every person. That uncertainty was frightening.

SHE KEPT FIGHTING

Despite the fear, Trisha decided to keep going. She also realised that she needed something beyond medical treatment to help her cope mentally. During one of her visits for an ultrasound, a doctor encouraged her to continue doing whatever activities she could manage and to keep herself occupied. Trisha followed that advice. Gradually, work became part of her recovery.

She began returning to professional activities whenever her physical condition allowed it.

"I believe that doing meaningful work helped me during my recovery," she says.

For someone whose life had always revolved around photography and creative work, staying connected to that part of herself gave her something to focus on beyond cancer.

NEARLY TWO YEARS OF TREATMENT

Her treatment was not a short journey. She underwent eight chemotherapy sessions in total. She received chemotherapy before surgery, underwent surgery after the initial rounds, and later received further chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Targeted therapy and immunotherapy also formed part of her treatment. The exact combination and sequence of treatments, she emphasises, depended on her individual condition and response. The process continued for almost two years.

At the end of it, mammograms and blood tests showed that she was cancer-free.

But for Trisha, "cancer-free" did not mean that the journey was completely over. Regular follow-ups remained important because breast cancer can recur, particularly during the years following treatment.

LIFE AFTER CANCER

Today, Trisha is working almost fully again. She continues to work as a photographer, focusing on lifestyle and portrait photography. She travels whenever she can, taking her son with her. Recently, she travelled to Japan and South Korea with him.

The woman who once spent months wondering whether she would survive now speaks about cancer from the other side of a long and difficult treatment journey. But she does not describe herself simply as a survivor. Her story is also about paying attention, asking questions, understanding one's own treatment and refusing to let fear dictate what happens next.

Her message to others is perhaps the simplest part of her story. If something feels different, get it checked. Because sometimes, the body speaks long before a diagnosis does. The important thing is to listen.

By Farhana Faiza
Photo: Vaskar Sam