

Under the shade of the Banyan Tree

Kadiri is amongst the most arid regions of Anantapur. It lies in the southeastern part of the district. Summers here are merciless. The earth shrivels up, man and beast wilt into being caricatures of their selves. The fury of the higher solstice bewilders one and all. Winters are better, but not long enough to wipe the memory of the summer gone by or the one to come.

It is ironical that just a few kilometers away from this hot hell, lies what could possibly be the world's biggest banyan tree. 570 years old, lush, it is spread across five acres of land and still gathering more ground in its evergreen embrace.

The Hindus see a Banyan as the *KalpaVriksha* - the tree that can make a wish come true.

It is also the tree that is usually the focal point of village life. The community meets under its shade to share a pipe, a concern or, just life. For, which tree can be a better metaphor for a community than a Banyan! A root becomes a shoot and which gives off more roots till, one tree becomes many and the extensions are not distinguishable from the original.

It seems natural therefore that community should feature prominently in a beautiful story blossoming gently in the arid land of Kadiri.

This remote village is a mix of rich traders, farmers and daily wage earners. The heat is only in the air; within the people is warmth that is touching in its genuineness. This remoteness means that the village takes time to catch up; in the intermediate period, ignorance extracts its consequences.

It almost did in the case of little Hemlata who is all of four years old.

Hemlata is the much-loved granddaughter of Gouramma and Venkataramadu a simple couple who are daily wagers. The couple had a daughter who was mentally challenged. She was married to a young man and Hemlata was the result of this union. The husband was HIV positive and eventually passed away. However HIV was just another terminology that filtered into the village occasionally like bits of paper blowing in with the wind. Its implications were not understood, nor paid any attention to.

Which is why, when their widowed daughter simply vanished one day, leaving her child behind, it never struck Gouramma and Venkataramadu that she too might have caught the virus and perhaps passed it on to her child. They grieved because she was their child and quite incapable of taking care of herself as also because their little granddaughter would never know her mother.

When little Hemlata, despite wanting in neither food nor love kept constantly ill, they put it as a case of a child pining for her mother. The village doctors always had a pill and a kind word, but the child always had one nagging ailment or the other.

Around this time, as a part of its community awareness drive, Balasahyoga organised an awareness camp in the village for people like the doctors, elders and health workers to make them aware of HIV and its implication.

Balasaahyoga or “active support for children”, is a programme of the Government of Andhra Pradesh and APSACS for children and families, infected or affected by AIDS. Implemented by a consortium of FHI, CARE and Clinton Foundation this programme works around the interesting and innovative platform of Family Case Management.

In order to make a difference to the life of a child it works on the larger environment of the child’s family, treating each household as a unique case, assessing and catering to individual needs so as to create an enabling environment for the family as a whole. The programme offers a basket of services that includes health, psychosocial support, nutrition, education and safety net. These services are leveraged from existing schemes, so there is no duplication of offerings and needs are met within an existing and established system.

Making the larger community a willing and responsible partner in the mainstreaming of the HIV affected and infected is an important part of Balasahyoga’s psychosocial support component. Community Awareness Drives, formation of Community Advisory Boards and the sensitization of health workers are all a part of this programme.

After attending the community awareness drive in Kadiri, a village doctor sat back doctor piecing together all that he had learnt. On reflection he realized that there was a reasonable chance that Hemlata was positive and therefore was succumbing to opportunistic infections. After all it was common knowledge that Venkataramadu’s son-in-law had been positive. It also meant that the child’s immunity was on a downward slide because of which she was catching infections by the day.

Wasting no time he got in touch with RDT, the implementing partners of Balasahyoga in Anantapur. The Family Case Manager (FCM) for Venkataramadu’s family visited the family and took her for tests. The good doctor was right. Hemlata was found positive, her CD4 count was done and she was found to be in need of ART.

Hemlata’s story sounds simple, but put in the medical context it takes on a different colour. HIV develops very rapidly among infants and children. Without treatment, a third of the infected children die of AIDS before their first birthday and a half before their second.

To save children it is imperative to identify them as soon as possible. The asymptomatic ones are difficult to find. Family history and circumstances become the best yardstick to go by. This is where the role and the responsibility of the larger community become so crucial; the community knows its members and can cull out prospective victims. And this is exactly why Balasahyoga emphasizes on its involvement.

Hemlata was already four. In all probability she had contracted the virus from her mother. By some strange miracle, the virus had not ravaged her tiny body as fast as it could have. But the downward

slide had finally begun and there was every possibility that it would be a lightning quick affair to the end. If the community had not bothered about her she could have become another tragic statistic.

Today, thankfully, the little girl is the picture of health and confidence. She has her grandparents wrapped around her little finger; her pretty plump feet seldom touch the ground for she is always carried like a princess not just by her own family but by those around her as well.

In some sense Hemlata is the more the child of the village than of her biological parents. It is to them that she owes her life and health. Like the Big Banyan tree, the community is her Kalpa Vriksha. Under the Kalpa Vriksha nothing is impossible. All you have to do is ask.