

## Letter to the Editor

# Empowering lives through compassion: my experience as a Ni-kshay Mitra

Sir,

Tuberculosis (TB) is one of the major public health problems in India. Although medical science has made considerable progress, social and economic constraints continue to deny many patients proper treatment and cure.<sup>1</sup> TB control is part of the targets of sustainable development goals, which aim to end this epidemic by 2030.<sup>2</sup>

As a health worker and a concerned member of society, I have always been aware of this fact. But my actual journey towards contributing began when I became a Ni-kshay Mitra is more than a partner in care, more than a supporter in healing, and most importantly, a companion in someone's battle against TB. In the constant efforts to eliminate the disease an important initiative named 'Nikshay Mitra' under 'Pradhan Mantri TB Mukh Bharat Abhiyan' was launched in September 2022.<sup>3</sup>

### INSPIRED TO TAKE THE FIRST STEP

My journey as a Ni-kshay Mitra began with a humble but impactful conversation with a senior leader. One of my seniors Post graduates was doing her thesis on TB patients. By seeing the sufferings of patient to meet day to day calorie and protein requirement and her knowledge about improved nutrition on outcome of the disease made her contribute in providing nutrition through Ni-kshay Mitra.

Her dedication and passion, as well as her first-hand experience working on the initiative, inspired me deeply. She with her heart-touching stories of how she transformed lives and received gratitude by not in words, but in the smile, dignity, and strength restored to TB patients. That inspiration sowed a seed in my heart. I realized I, too, could be able to guide someone through the thorny journey of recovering from TB. With that in mind, I enrolled myself as a Ni-kshay Mitra.

### KNOWING THE ROLE

The Ni-kshay Mitra program, under the Pradhan Mantri TB Mukh Bharat Abhiyan, calls upon individuals, institutions, and organizations to adopt TB patients and provide them with comprehensive care - nutritional, emotional, and vocational support for a period of at least six months. This represents a powerful model of community ownership and joint responsibility, where treatment is not solely a government function but a shared mission of the society.

When I formally became a Ni-kshay Mitra, I was entrusted with patients battling poor nutritional status, which made their journey to recovery even more challenging. My role as Ni-kshay Mitra began with provision of monthly nutrition kits containing energy dense food such as protein supplements, pulses, rice, cooking oil, and fresh fruits. But over the time I felt my support should be beyond food. True support meant restoring hope, dignity, and a sense of belonging to individuals who often felt sidelined by illness. I extended my support to show them that they were not alone and that their community stood with them in both strength and compassion.

### WALKING WITH THEM, NOT JUST FOR THEM

The most memorable part of my journey was the experience of greeting the patients I had adopted. Initially, hesitation existed on both sides i.e. mine from not knowing how to approach them, and theirs, shaped by intense feeling of stigma, neglect and mistrust. But slowly with frequent visits, empathy, and consistency, our relationship began to take shape.

One of the patients from a poor background, had been fighting TB while taking care of her infant child. She had nearly lost her treatment because of financial hardships. Through regular counselling and nutritional assistance, she regained her strength and successfully finished her treatment with her remarkable resilience.

I still carry with me the words she once told me: "It's not the food, it's that somebody remembered me." In that moment, I realised that being a Ni-kshay Mitra is not charity but it's solidarity. It's staying with someone when the rest of the world has walked away. It's all about telling them that "You are important, your healing is important, and you are not alone."

### A DEEP SENSE OF HAPPINESS AND FULFILMENT

The most fulfilling aspect of this experience has been the profound joy and inner contentment I have experienced in assisting people who are less fortunate. Recognizing that the little I have done might enable an individual patient to take a step towards a better life, through the provision of proper nutrition and helped me find a greater purpose that went far beyond my professional role. There is something wonderfully satisfying about seeing firsthand the immediate results of your work: elevated energy, smiling

faces, and the appreciative nods of families that were seen and heard. Assisting a person not only to survive, but to be able to live a healthy life with dignity, is a joy that cannot be described. Each time I delivered a nutrition kit, it wasn't about food, it was about hope and strength, and about saying to someone, "You are not forgotten."

### **VISIBLE HEALTH IMPROVEMENTS DURING TREATMENT**

One of the best things I noticed in the patients was the visible weight gain and general improvement in overall health among the TB patients I helped. During the treatment course, combination of balanced nutrition with medication brought about perceptible physical changes and physical transformation, brighter faces, and renewed strength. Numerous patients who had initially appeared weak, frail and exhausted gradually regained their physical stamina, strength and confidence. Health professionals and physicians involved in the patients also observed such changes, highlighting the importance of nutritional care in TB treatment. Observing them first-hand further confirmed to me the efficacy of community-based support systems such as this.

### **THE CONTINUING NEED IN COMMUNITIES**

Though certain NGOs and benevolent organizations are already operational in these communities and distributing nutrition baskets among the TB patients, I came to understand through my visits and experience that the demand is still huge and extensive. There are numerous patients who still remain neglected because of insufficient resources, geographical limitations, or gaps in coverage. This underscored the need for additional individual volunteers to come forward as Ni-kshay Mitras. The scope of the problem is too big for any one organization to tackle in isolation. Involvement of the community and people like us (Medical professionals) can help fill these gaps in a constructive manner. Each additional pair of hands fortifies the safety net for the vulnerable.

### **SPREADING THE LIGHT FORWARD**

Inspired by the positive effect and profound satisfaction I had, I felt it was necessary to spread the word more. I started discussing the Ni-kshay Mitra program with colleagues, recounting tales and down-to-earth advice on how small actions have far-reaching effects. Initially, there were some doubts regarding the logistics or the time involved. But as I described how the system works, with electronic tracking through the Ni-kshay portal and proper communication by district TB officers, their apprehensions began to dissipate. In time, many of my colleagues enrolled themselves as Ni-kshay Mitras as well.

It was inspiring to witness a ripple effect in progress by each of us doing our part, but all of us working toward the greater end of a TB-Mukt Bharat. Our team even discussed

holding quarterly community outreach activities, uniting education and support distribution.

### **REFLECTIONS ON THE JOURNEY**

In retrospect, becoming a Ni-kshay Mitra has been the most impactful experience of my professional and personal life. It brought me back to the reality that healthcare is not always about the hospital or the pills. It finds its strength in human contact, listening to a person's tale, showing up even when it's hard, and believing recovery. This initiative also taught me that small actions, when done sincerely, can have monumental effects.

A packet of milk powder, a word of encouragement, a weekly check-in all seemingly ordinary gestures, but together, they weave a fabric of trust and healing. For myself, I have become more empathetic, more centred, and more sensitive to the potential of acts of compassion. It reminded me that we won't change the world in an instant, but we can, indeed, change a person's world (one patient at a time).

### **THE ROAD AHEAD**

Though we have come a long way in TB control, the journey to elimination is yet long and arduous. Stigma, poverty, and disinformation still deter patients from coming forward in time. Ni-kshay Mitra is an effective tool to fill these gaps, but it requires more hands and more hearts. To anyone reading this and wondering whether they can make a difference, my message is clear: Yes, you can. You don't have to be rich, powerful, or even a health worker. You just need to care. Mentor support began it all for me.

Now, I hope this story inspires you to begin yours. Let us stand united, for each patient, each family, each life quietly fighting TB. Let us be the beacon that adds warmth and strength in their darkest hours. United, as Ni-kshay Mitras, we can achieve not only a TB-free India, but a kinder and more united country.

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