

# Ravindra Salunke, Osmanabad

## Health

### A Welcome Sight

Today, as we all face the Covid crises together, the loss of human life and the struggles that the needy have to go through just to make a decent living are there for all of us to see. But the struggles have always been there, although they not have always been so starkly visible. If there is anything we have learnt during these times, it is that human life is valuable and we need to be there for each other if we want to go into a better future. It is with this sentiment that we bring you the story of Rotarian Ravindra Salunke and his effort to give the gift of vision to the less fortunate.

Ravindra Salunke and his colleagues at the Rotary Club of Osmanabad began the work of bringing vision to the needy more than 15 years ago in the district of Osmanabad, Maharashtra. Osmanabad ranks as one among the most backward districts in the country. Challenged by drought conditions and arid geography, the district lacks in basic infrastructure and facilities to say the least. "The living conditions of the poor are unimaginable," says Rotarian Salunke. "In addition to all our efforts in the region, we wanted to create a permanent project for the community here in Osmanabad that will benefit people in the long-run." And as we say at the Giving Circle, once there is an intention, the path always becomes clear.

"When we first researched the area, we realised that there isn't a single private hospital in the 150 km radius of this district which treats patients with eye diseases," says Rotarian Salunke. This is an alarming figure considering there are nearly 15,000 people each year in Osmanabad that suffer from cataract. "The civil hospital was able to treat just 3000, meaning that 12,000 people were still untreated." And what would happen to the untreated patients? "The glaucoma would eventually deteriorate into cataract and they would lose eyesight permanently." Needless to say, without eyesight the person would be unable to work and contribute to their family in a meaningful way. This would serve as a death knell for the needy and poor who were barely getting by as it is.

In order to raise funds for the hospital, they used to crowd-fund the old fashioned and hard way, by appealing to each and every family in the district. All in all, they collected a whopping 67 lac and we are able to purchase land and build the hospital. But the struggles to get the hospital going had only just begun. "Any doctors I would speak to, would decline as soon as I told them the hospital was in Osmanabad. The situation is only slightly improved today and it continues to be a challenge to bring doctors who will stick." Between 2006 and 2013, the hospital ran their operations only through part-time doctors. Seeing that this would be a challenge, Rotarian Salunke and the Rotarians decided to build a secondary line of paramedics who would take on a majority of the pre and post op care as well as follow-ups, apart from the day-to-day running of the hospital. "The people who joined us in 2006, continue to be with us even today," says Rotarian Salunke proudly, "They are proud of the work that we are doing here."

Today, the F Ajmera Rotary Netra Rugnalaya conducts upwards of 1500 cataract surgeries per year and have treated 15,000 plus patients free of charge since they began doing the Phaco\* surgeries five years ago. Their reputation has grown to be one of the best eye hospitals in the region. People from neighbouring Solapur and Bijapur also travel there for surgeries. "Our ratio is 50% paid and 50% free surgeries. Sometimes the percentage of free surgeries is more. The profits made from just four surgeries enables the hospital to conduct a camp in the nearby villages, identify a patient, bring them to the hospital, conduct the surgery, give them an

overnight stay and return them to the village the following day. "All of this is included in our package of Rs 2500. One contribution can help us serve one life."

Now in its 15th year, the hospital has attracted the help of high-profile hospitals and corporations that wish to support their continued work. PBMA's H. V. Desai Eye Hospital, Pune, Seva Foundation, UK, and Corporate funding from the Vision 2020 Fund have helped the J.F. Ajmera Rotary Netra Rugnalaya improve the technology and facilities they have on offer. Recently, they have also begun checking vision at an early age, examining children from age 6 to 12 for squint eye and other vision impairments. "We would like to expand our area of work," says Rotarian Salunke, "But we are unable to do so without the contribution of individuals."

When asked about what keeps Rotarian Salunke going despite the struggle of so many years, his response is full of sincerity and kindness. "When a poor person goes through a cataract surgery and you see the joy and relief on their faces, it gives me immense pleasure. I am not a doctor but I have been managing this hospital for the last 15 years purely because I want to help them." Even over the phone you can sense the emotional connection he has with this project. "Doing such a simple thing that can change a person's life, that is what gives me satisfaction," he concludes. Doctors are Community Helpers and people like Salunke are Community Servers.

\* Phacoemulsification – a modern cataract surgery using ultrasonic handpiece equipment

Visionaries like Ravindra Salunke give "Vision". Giving Circle encourages you to take inspiration from such unsung visionaries and join these causes or start your own initiative. There is no right time, browse through our Circles and get inspired to join one of them or start your own. We curate and scale Community Service ideas.