

The Dispatch

MISSION MAKUNDA



Azim Premji
Foundation

Prologue

As we know, the second wave of the pandemic struck closer home, resulting in the loss of many loved ones, relatives and friends. At the time of release, the Azim Premji Foundation has redoubled relief efforts and is supporting a large vaccination effort on the ground in geographies where we are present either directly or where there is a significant partner presence.

On the frontlines battling the pandemic are doctors, nurses, paramedics, ambulance drivers, sanitation workers... to name just a few among the foot-soldiers for whom COVID-19 does not offer the luxury of work-from-home options. In this issue of The Dispatch, we explore the reality of their lives and their heroic battle against all odds.

Our spotlight is on a doctor couple working in an off-the-map corner of Assam's Karimganj district bordering Tripura and Mizoram. Missionary doctors Vijay Anand Ismavel and Ann Miriam believe that a divine calling brought them to this far-flung hamlet in 1992. When the then newly-wed doctors arrived from Tamil Nadu at the Makunda Christian Leprosy and General Hospital, they found a decrepit, run-down establishment in a remote place beset by poverty and illiteracy, and plagued by multiple socio-economic issues. Electricity was a dim flicker. Running water was a luxury. Even the nearest telephone was 50 km away. Supported by the Emmanuel Hospital Association, they embarked on a 30-year project that would revive the hospital and turn it into one of the most sought-after destinations for high-quality and affordable medical care in northeast India. More than that, Makunda would make healthcare history, inspire case studies and research papers, and become an iconic role model for mission hospitals in India.

Fighting their own battles with ill-health, militancy and local violence, the couple raised two daughters and transformed the lives of thousands of patients in the region.

Committed to making medical care affordable to the poor, the institution has over the years added multiple facilities including a nursing school, a secondary school and branch hospitals in Tripura, providing direct employment and cascading benefits to the local community. Today, Makunda is not merely a familiar word, it is a household name whispered with a prayer of gratitude.

In 2020, when the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic swept through India, Makunda was spared the worst. Azim Premji Foundation supported Makunda Christian Hospital to ensure hospital preparedness, and to set up and run the 24-bedded isolation ward for a period of 6 months.

In 2021, ahead of the second wave, the Foundation provided support to strengthen the 30-bedded COVID treatment centre at Makunda Hospital with life-saving equipment like oxygen concentrators, multipara monitors and BiPAP machines; and to strengthen the testing and isolation facilities at the five cluster-level isolation centres operationalized in tea garden communities.

As doctors Vijay Anand and Ann Miriam approach the end of their 30-year commitment, Makunda has gone from strength to strength and continues to be a guiding light for the mission hospital model, indicating a return to the founding tenets of medical care — compassion and inclusiveness. We reflect on the story of their unique mission.

MISSION MAKUNDA

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ART: TADAM GYADU

Bazaricherra, Karimganj District,
Assam-Tripura border, 2020

For nearly three decades,
Dr. Vijay Anand Ismavel
has been working in this
remote hamlet, providing
high quality, affordable
medical care to
its people.

A Stripe-breasted
Woodpecker!
What a rare find!

But only in the last
few years did he
start observing birds.

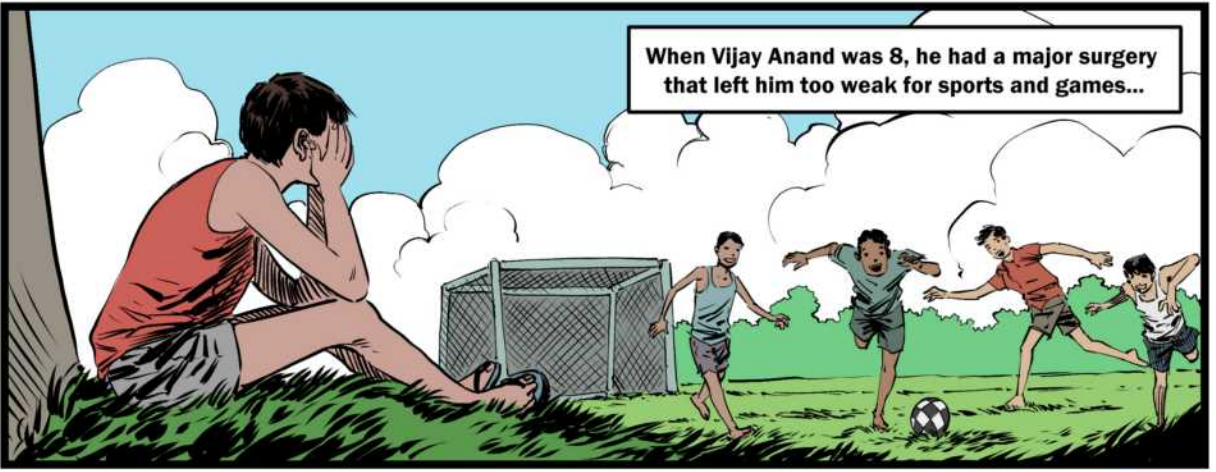
It was not birds but a higher calling
that brought the surgeon..

and his wife Dr. Ann Miriam to
this far-flung neck of the woods
plagued by poverty and illiteracy...

In 1992, the doctors did not arrive here by
accident. In fact, they sought out
this thickly populated remote outpost that
the medical community had all but forgotten.

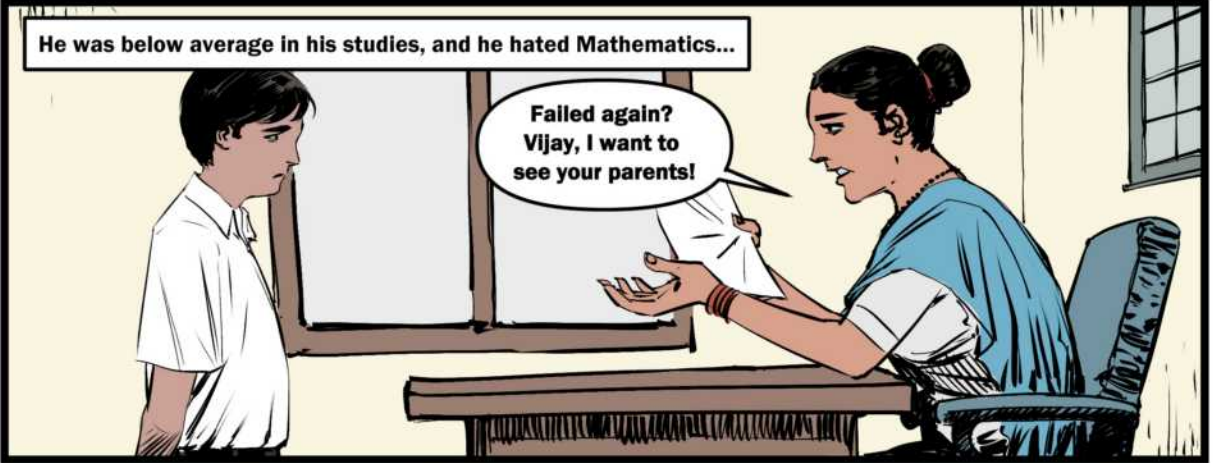
United in mission and purpose,
this doctor couple are birds of
a feather. And their flock is growing.

When Vijay Anand was 8, he had a major surgery that left him too weak for sports and games...



He was below average in his studies, and he hated Mathematics...

Failed again?
Vijay, I want to
see your parents!



While his parents were devout Christians,
Vijay had no interest in church...

Pay attention,
or God will
punish you!

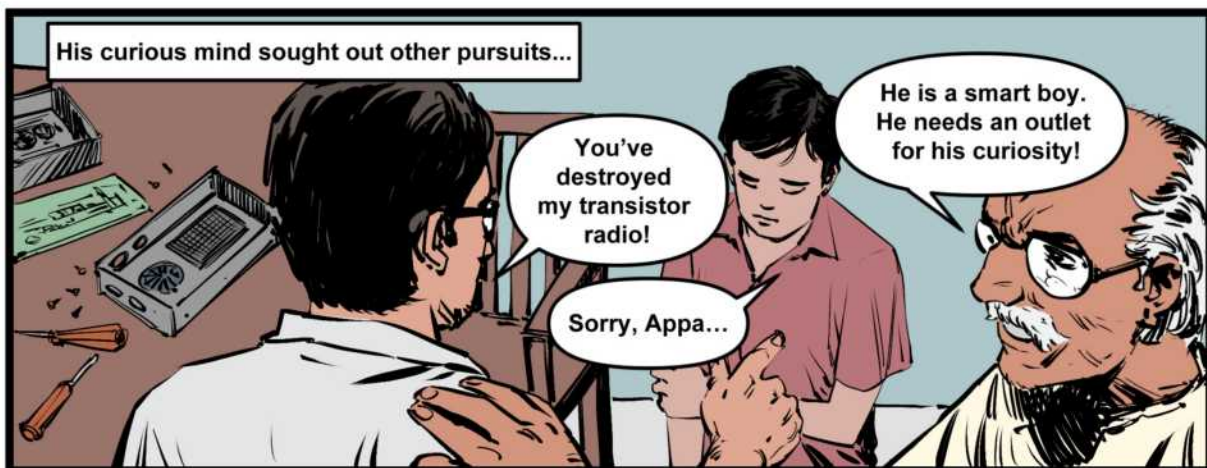


One day while attending a musical play that enacted
the story of King Solomon the Wise, Vijay was moved to prayer.

Lord, make me wise
like King Solomon!

Soon enough, his grades improved
and he developed an interest in electronics.





Unfortunately, he missed the newspaper ad for the IIT-Madras entrance test.

Oh no! What will I do now?

He got admission at another engineering college ...

but things didn't go well...

At the hostel, his seniors taunted and assaulted him.

Tipped off by a friend, Vijay's parents rushed to the hostel and took him back home.

By God's grace, you're still alive.

It's time there was a strong law against ragging.*

Maybe I can never be an engineer. Let me try medical college...

*It would be a few years before ragging was made a punishable offence

On his first day at Kilpauk Medical College, he walked into a surprise test and finished last. The professor made an example of him.

Haha...

Haha...

I guess I'm not really cut out to be a doctor...

Vijay began to attend Christian prayer meetings. He was deeply moved by a verse from Jeremiah 29...

"I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope."

"When you call me and come and pray to me, I will listen to you..."

His grades improved and he became a topper. His admiration for cardiologists grew and he developed a deep interest in surgery. He realised the purpose of his life...

"Lord, I know this is the work you want me to do."

Eldest of five siblings, Ann Miriam was born after a difficult pregnancy. Her grateful mother pledged her firstborn to the service of the Lord.

This is Your Child, Lord!
I give her back to you!

Witnessing hardship and disease as she grew up in Madurai, Ann was constantly reminded of the purpose of her life.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace....

The epiphany came to her while she watched a skit on the life of Dr. Paul Brand, the missionary doctor who was treating leprosy in Kolli Hills.

Then I heard the Lord's voice saying, "Whom should I send, and who will go for us?"

I said, "I'm here; send me."*

I want to be a doctor like Dr. Paul Brand...

*Isaiah 6:8

For Ann, who ranked 15th in Tamil Nadu state in the Class 10 boards, acing the medical entrance exam came naturally.

Well done, Ann!
You have a bright future!

Congratulations!

You did it!

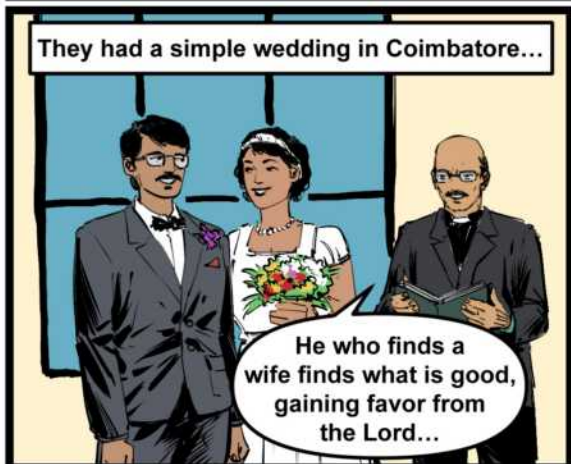
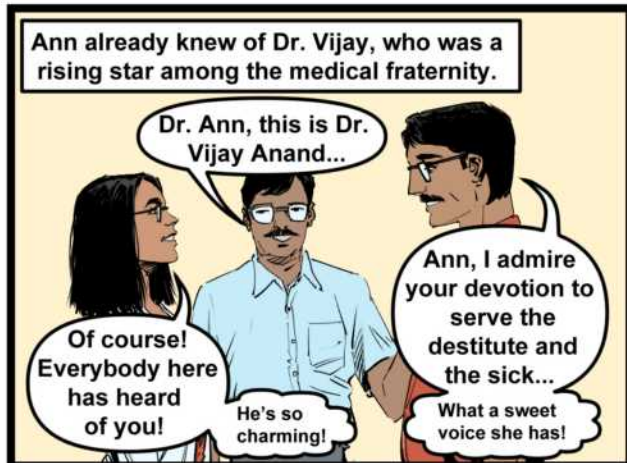
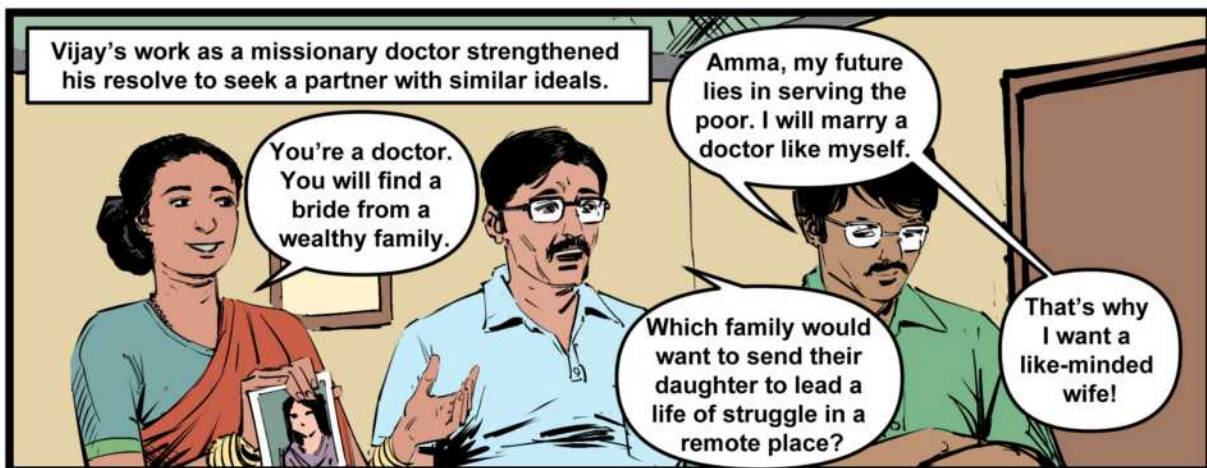
Praise the Lord!

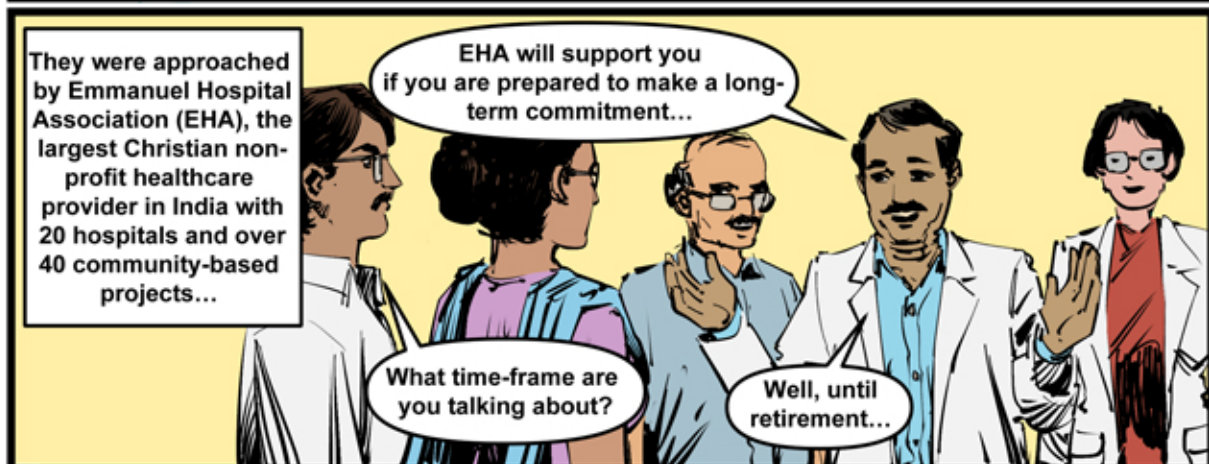
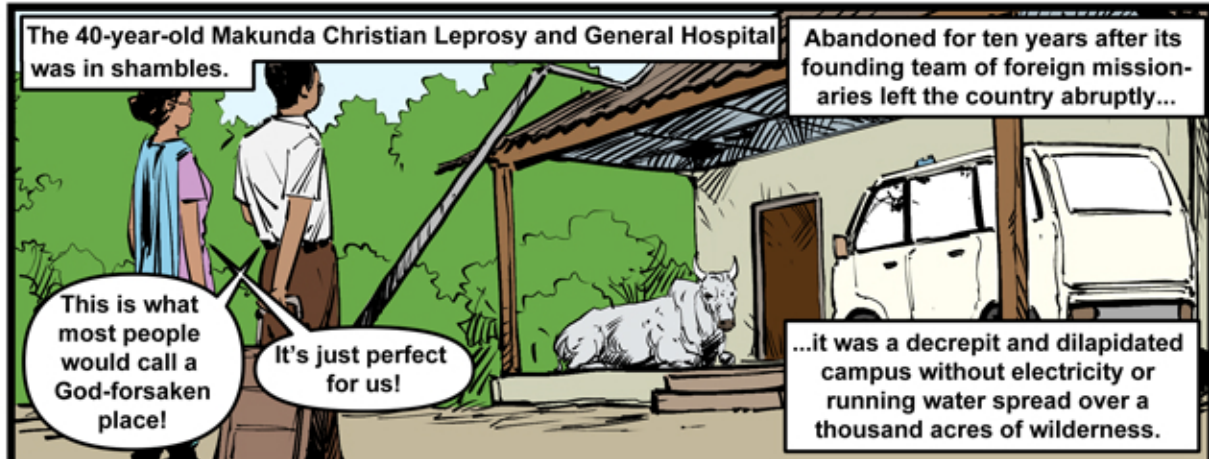
She joined Madurai Medical College and graduated with flying colours.

She felt that her services were most needed where healthcare infrastructure was broken.

Medical facilities in remote parts of North India are very poor. That's where I want to work, Amma.

Go where you want to go, dear... but don't go alone. Marry a like-minded person. God will show you the way.







This is the place that God has chosen for us!

We have the potential to make the greatest transformational impact.

It has everything that we need to be in God's service!

Remote, a large population, illiteracy, poor healthcare...

We can build a school, a nursing college, and more!

This large campus will help us expand in the future!

These humans are crazy!

I'm nuts about them!

The doctors analysed the problems before them...

The hospital has been defunct for more than ten years...

There's no electricity or running water...

There's a huge social stigma about leprosy...

The tribal population has low trust in healthcare...

We don't even know the local language!

There's militancy, and violent opposition from local groups...

The roads are bad, and the nearest phone is 50 km away!

We have no experience in administration, law or finance!

How do we manage the place?!

Let's make a 30-year plan!

There's a lifetime's work ahead of us!

Their first task was to understand the local populace, particularly tea garden workers and tribal communities, which they were going to serve. They went from village to village, asking questions and making notes.

What a sweet little baby. How old is she?

How did you hurt your foot?

What food do you grow and eat?

What kind of work do you do?

One of their first tough cases was a heavily pregnant woman who was brought in labour to the hospital with a lot of complications. Operating on her without electricity or running water, they managed to save her life, though she lost the baby.

It was a divine miracle that we could save her.

So many women are dying during childbirth...

Infant mortality is high, too. That's going to be a big challenge for us here.

Poverty and illiteracy went hand in hand, as did malnutrition and ill-health. Leprosy was rampant. Patients, even recovered ones, were ostracised and forced to live separately. The hospital welcomed them and gave them homes on its campus.

Treatment costs in private hospitals bleed these poor people dry.

They sell their homes and valuables, and sometimes in spite of that they die...

How can we make medical treatment truly affordable for the most deserving patients?

At the cost of a haircut, maybe? That's Rs. 10 per patient.

Even that was a fortune for some patients. Some of them paid in kind. They brought rice and vegetables. Often, they would give the doctors a chicken or a duck, or a handful of eggs. Ann and Vijay were struck by the dignity of their patients.

It is the people who have nothing at all who have everything to give.

Doctor, you owe me one rupee change. I really need that money.

I'm so sorry. Here's your change! God Bless!

This doctor couple was determined to change the Mission Hospital model, which has long been criticised for its unsustainable Robin Hood approach.

In the name of the poor, the well-to-do people often benefit from free treatment.

We will charge all patients equally, irrespective of their income.

An affordable treatment model is more sustainable. We can provide 15% of our income as charity to the poorest patients.

And we will provide equal services to all patients.

The Makunda Model ensures that patients pay only as much as they can afford and the balance is written off as charity.

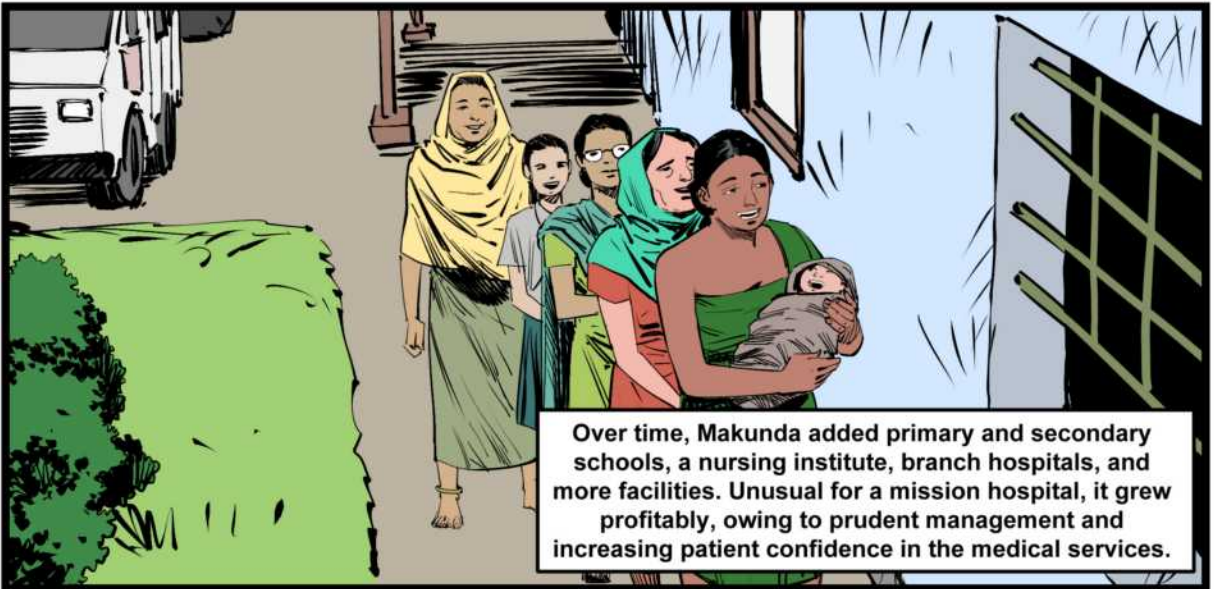
If we find out that the patient's family has sold a house or any high-value asset, we will repurchase it on his behalf.

No one should have to sell their home for medical treatment here.

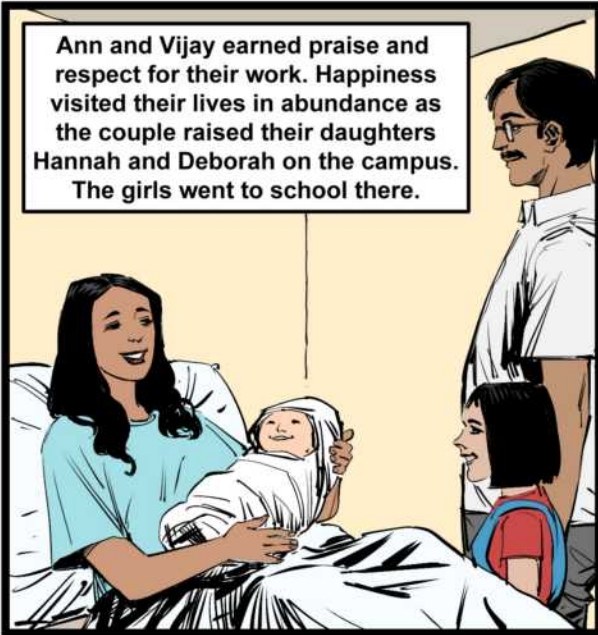
Over the next 20 years, the doctors achieved what was considered impossible. They turned the decrepit old Makunda Hospital into a sought-after centre for healthcare in the region. The hospital gained a name for offering affordable healthcare with a high emphasis on quality. Patients came from all over the northeastern states.

By God's grace, you have recovered completely!

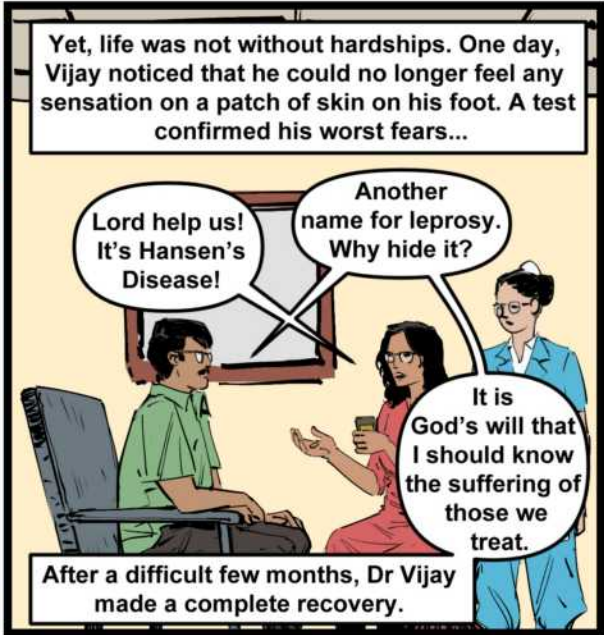
Take care of yourself!



Over time, Makunda added primary and secondary schools, a nursing institute, branch hospitals, and more facilities. Unusual for a mission hospital, it grew profitably, owing to prudent management and increasing patient confidence in the medical services.



Ann and Vijay earned praise and respect for their work. Happiness visited their lives in abundance as the couple raised their daughters Hannah and Deborah on the campus. The girls went to school there.



Yet, life was not without hardships. One day, Vijay noticed that he could no longer feel any sensation on a patch of skin on his foot. A test confirmed his worst fears...

Lord help us! It's Hansen's Disease!

Another name for leprosy. Why hide it?

It is God's will that I should know the suffering of those we treat.

After a difficult few months, Dr Vijay made a complete recovery.



A few years later, the family was returning home to Makunda after a 200-km drive from Agartala, the capital of Tripura...

Such a long drive. You must be exhausted...

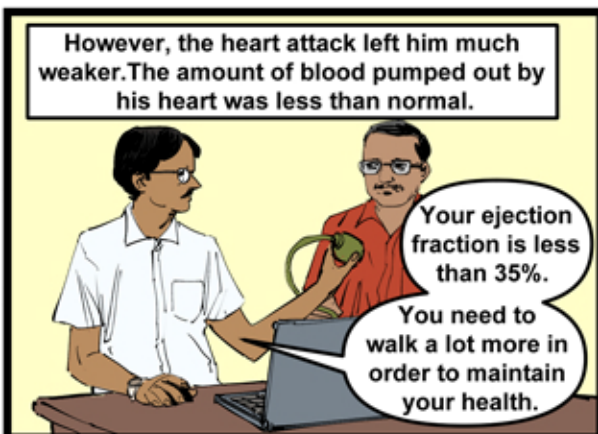
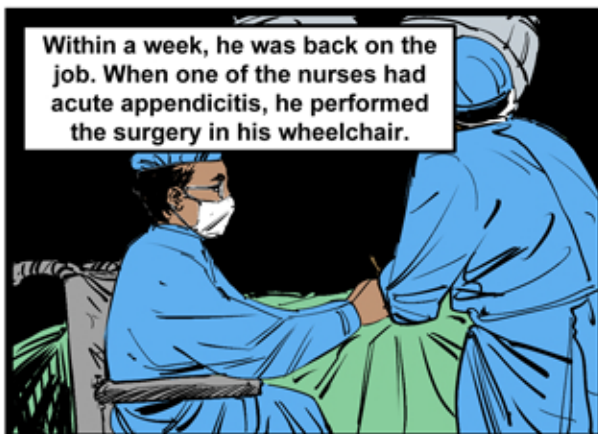
Yes, I'm a little tired but I'm fine...



As Vijay walked towards his house, he felt tired and breathless. He clutched his chest in pain and collapsed at the foot of the stairs...

Uhhh...

Mom! Something's happened to Dad!



EPILOGUE

At the time of release, doctors Vijay and Ann continue their outstanding work, striving towards strengthening the institution they have built. Nearing the end of their tenure at Makunda, they have handed over charge to Dr. Nalli Chandan, the present CEO and Medical Superintendent, and Dr. Roshine Mary Koshy, who co-ordinates COVID-19 emergency action on the ground.



While the Azim Premji Foundation is energized and inspired by the vision of contributing to developing an India as envisioned in our Constitution, we acknowledge that others may tap into similar reservoirs of energy and inspiration and find deep faith in spirituality and religion.

This story has an energizing vitality, different from ours, yet it resonates harmoniously with our goals and values, and the selfless humanitarian work done by these doctors is truly inspiring.

