

*By Neena Bhandari in Sydney for BBC*

The greens of the Sydney Cricket Ground were dotted with shades of pink on Saturday as cricket and culture collaborated on the third day of the Fourth Domain Pink Test Match between India and Australia to raise awareness about breast screening and care.

Media reports suggest at least a hundred women turned up wearing pink sarees at the ground to support the cause. Not only women, even men were seen sporting pink turbans, shirts and caps. Dancers in traditional Indian wear danced to classical Indian tunes and gave the cause a celebratory vibe.

On Thursday, Indian captain Virat Kohli had used a bat with pink coloured sticker and handle and wore pink gloves

Women aged between 50 and 74 years, from Indian and Sri Lankan backgrounds, were identified by the Cancer Institute New South Wales (NSW) as having one of the lowest rates of breast screening in the state. To address this issue, the NSW Multicultural Health Communication Service together with other stakeholders had launched the Pink Sari Project in September 2014.

Once the funding ceased, to help sustain the project for the long term, a team of volunteers set up the Pink Sari Incorporated in October, 2016.

The association's initiatives have seen the screening rates amongst Indian and Sri Lankan communities nearly triple to 14 percent within four years from the original target of 5 percent.

Resplendent in their pink saris, turbans and kurtas, the association's volunteers and supporters called for DRS - Do Regular Screening.

Pink Sari Inc., a not-for-profit grassroots association based in NSW state partnered with the McGrath Foundation on what is known as Jane McGrath Day, after the wife of Australian cricketing great Glenn McGrath. Jane died of breast cancer in 2008.

"This is the first time we are using sport to reach out to the millions of people, who would be watching this Test in India and here, with our message about the importance of breast screening and early detection. We are hoping that friends and wives of our cricketers will also advocate this message back home to the women in India", says Shantha Viswanathan, president of Pink Sari Inc., who has lost family and friends to breast cancer due to late detection of the disease.

She feels partnering with McGrath Foundation, which was started in 2005 by Glenn and his late wife Jane McGrath who lost her battle with breast cancer, is a good synergy. "We are batting for prevention and early detection and the Foundation offers after care by providing trained Breast Care Nurses. Their service is so important for people going through the disease. May be, we could also work together in recruiting people from the Indian and Sri Lankan diaspora to make the care more culturally sensitive and appropriate to our community", says Shantha, who migrated to Sydney from Bangalore in 1980 with her husband and two children. She has been volunteering with Saheli – SEVA (South Asian Hub for Enterprise, Leadership and Initiatives - Social Entrepreneurial Ventures of Australian South Asians), which focuses on health and socio-economic well-being of women.

In Australia, one in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer by the age of 85 years. BreastScreen Australia is the national breast cancer screening program, which invites women aged between 50 and 74 years for a free mammogram every two years with the aim to reduce deaths from breast cancer through early detection of the disease.

When the Pink Sari volunteers started approaching the community to raise awareness about screening, the responses they received ranged from, "I know, I am not going to get breast cancer as I don't have any symptoms. If it happens, and if that is my destiny and karma, we will deal with it when it happens. I don't need to know now". There were those who felt that screening actually caused the cancer, and others who feared the few minutes of pain while screening.

Modesty was a major issue and many women didn't feel comfortable baring their breasts in front of a health professional to get the mammogram done. There was also a culture of silence, where people didn't like sharing news about cancer with others. For some, it was the fear of the unknown. The new migrants, who hadn't seen their mothers, aunts or sisters getting screened, weren't aware of the services available. Then there were those who did get screened, but not every two years.

"The screening rates amongst South Asian women are very low compared to the state average. In South Asian communities, a woman is viewed as the family anchor and they are so consumed looking after others that they put their own health last on the priority list. Sometimes there is a language barrier as they are not very conversant in English. We have been organising information sessions in Indian languages. For example, we have run sessions in Punjabi in the gurdwaras", says Anoop Johar, who migrated to Sydney from New Delhi in 1984 with her husband and two small children.

She works as a health educator in the Western Sydney Local Health District in the State Department of Health and joined the Association to contribute her knowledge and experience to this initiative. When she visits India, Anoop says, "I share the Pink Sari initiatives and people do take interest and listen. Gradually, they are beginning to understand the importance of screening and they share Indian awareness raising initiatives too. Within our family whatsapp group, my aunt, who had to undergo a mastectomy as her cancer was detected at an advanced stage, also constantly encourages others to get the mammogram done".

India continues to have a low survival rate for breast cancer, with only 66.1% women diagnosed with the disease between 2010 and 2014 surviving, a Lancet journal study had found in 2018. According to the Union health ministry, breast cancer ranks as the number one cancer among Indian females.

Pink Sari uses Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/pinksariinc/>) and social media to promote its message globally.

"Our message is that don't be shy, make a girl date to go and visit the mammogram clinic. We all think that we are invincible to some extent until it starts hitting home", says Aparna Tijoriwala, who lost her mother to brain tumour. In 2006, her teenage son was diagnosed with *Hodgkin lymphoma*. He had a relapse within two years, but it was detected early and he is in complete remission now.

She feels a cricket test match is the best platform for Pink Sari to reach as many Indians as possible. "More men come to watch sport, but it is equally important for men to take it upon themselves to support and encourage their wives to get screened", says Aparna, who works in the IT sector and migrated to Sydney from Mumbai in 1995.