



Ready to face the world again

By: [Kavita Krishnan](#)

August 29, 2002



All her life, 17-year-old Meena Agawle's only tryst with nature had been to watch the sun's rays through the windows of her Alibag house. A facial boil at birth had gradually eaten into her nose, lips, chin and left cheek, leaving her disfigured.

She was forced to stay indoors and even quit school out of total embarrassment. "I could not bear walking to school and sitting with my classmates with this face," she recalls.

But one day in January 2001, sheer providence led a family member to read a newspaper article that changed Meena's life forever. The article dealt with a Mumbai-based organization that offered remedial surgery for such deformities. Buoyed by her family's encouragement, Meena mustered up the courage to come to Mumbai for medical consultations.

A year of treatment and three surgeries later — two surgeries remain — Meena's cheek and nose have been reconstructed, and she has even begun chasing her dream of being a seamstress.

"I feel confident already," she says, a dark patch of skin on her cheek being the only evidence of surgery. "I had to do something. I could not stay in the shadows forever. I had to venture out and this was probably my only chance."

Meena is now readying for her fourth surgery next month. It will remedy the gap in her lip. She has a surgery every six months.

Dr Ashok Gupta, plastic surgeon and founder of the Indian chapter of Fresh Start Surgical Gifts, which is handling Agawle's case, says the patch on her face will eventually blend with the rest of her face. "We had to provide the internal and

The first surgery last year had made Meena a bit apprehensive. “She could not bear all the bandages on her face,” explains Raju Agawle, her elder brother. But when the bandages were off a week later, Meena was thrilled to see the improvement.

The Agawles, who earn their living from tilling a single acre of land and work as labourers to supplement their income, have spent about Rs 20,000 on medicine and travel to Mumbai and back for the treatment. Much of the other costs have been borne by Fresh Start.

After the first two surgeries, the otherwise timid and withdrawn Meena ventured out and joined a tailoring institute in the village. “I thought I was born again. The world looked beautiful and I felt happy,” she remembers.

Raju bought her a sewing machine. Her dream is to start her own tailoring institute someday. The maji sarpanch of Alibag, Chandrakant Rane, also helped the Agawles make arrangements to attend surgical camps.

Life has changed for Meena Agawle. With a dream in her heart and a song on her lips, she is ready to face the world again. “The injections hardly pain anymore,” she says.

What is Cancrum Oris ?

Cancrum, Meena Agawle’s medical condition, is common in tropical countries among children with malnutrition and poor resistance.

It begins in infancy as a boil that behaves cancerous, though it isn’t.

It develops within four to five days and the area turns black.

In its early stages it could be fatal, because the infection could spread to the brain or block one of the vessels that supply blood to the brain. Also called noma, it leads to facial disfigurement.

Fresh Start Surgical Gifts, a non-profit charity group, provides and facilitates reconstructive surgeries, primarily in children who suffer from physical deformities caused by birth defects, accidents, abuse or disease.

In the last one year, it has facilitated operations of around 600 patients at costs valued around Rs 90 lakh. It is working on sending two patients to the US for advanced surgery.