

# Waiting

## Ankur Collective

A woman spread out a plastic sheet on the ground and sat down with her three children. She looked so weak and exhausted that she was barely stable. She had somehow kept herself upright by placing both her hands on the ground. She sat there like this for a while, surrounded by her children who gazed at her worriedly.

This part of the G.B. Pant Hospital swells with a crowd that fills up every corner. The area between the 'Emergency' and the 'Out Patient Department' (OPD) is the best for those who have a long wait. Those standing in long queues always find a spot to rest their feet here. Often these are people who do not find a bed in the hospital or have become caught up in the complex web of the OPD operations. Usually no one bothers them here. However, if they don't respond after repeated calls on the speakers, then the annoyed staff members come looking for them.

Today, the hospital staff member, mingling amidst the waiting patients and their families, seemed compassionate, someone who understood them. This heavysset man was moving around with such gentleness in the entire open area. He would stop and talk with people, ask them how they were and then look at all their documents. Perhaps he came often, as many patients seemed to know him. He was wearing a mask, a cap over his head and gloves on his hands. Yet most people recognized him. Some people would approach him just because he was dressed in hospital scrubs.



Women waiting at the Registration Office of a typical Big Hospital in Delhi.



Patient's families waiting in the courtyard of a typical Big Hospital in Delhi.

He would specifically seek out patients suffering from tuberculosis. There were some patients from Delhi, but most seemed to have travelled from outside. You could tell from the bundles of clothes and beddings they carried with them. TB patients need to come to the hospital daily for their medicines. The hospital staff insisted that the TB patients took

their medicines in front of them, as later they might not take their medicines properly. The hospital staff member moving amongst the people today was specially looking for these TB patients. He would examine their documents and check to see if they had taken their medicines.



A man sitting at a distance called out, “Compounder<sup>1</sup> sahib, please come here.” Compounder sahib would first check the patients’ prescriptions and test reports to ascertain what was the nature of their complaints and if they had a clear diagnosis. Many amongst them were new patients who needed help. They seemed lost in this sea of people, the different buildings in this large hospital compound, the overwhelming sounds and all the accompanying chaos. The compounder sahib needed to just barely glance at the documents to guide them towards the correct departments and tell them where they should go and what they should do.

Some people would approach the man just because he seemed like he was from the hospital. It was such a rare thing to find a hospital compounder actually moving amongst the patients to help them out. Often patients and their family would just sit in the hospital grounds, at a total loss because it seemed impossible that they would be able to figure out some sort of a system in this chaos. Patients would consult each other, to find out what to do or how to proceed. The entire open space was full of people waiting. Some lying down, some sitting, some roaming, some eating and some people taking care of their unwell family members.

Getting treatment at a government hospital isn’t easy. People spend months roaming around the OPD and have to sacrifice many hours standing around in the long queues. Every morning they must come to the OPD to get their papers stamped. The doctors would treat you only if you have a paper stamped from the OPD on the same day of the visit. People could spend months sitting in front of this OPD. Those who lived close by

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<sup>1</sup> Compounder is another term used for a pharmacist assistance to a doctor who compounds or prepares customized medicines as per the requirements of a doctor. In India, a compounder is also someone who hands out medication to the patients and explains the dosage and the correct manner for consuming it.

started queuing up during the night. Some people managed to bribe the hospital staff so they could skip these notorious OPD queues.

The woman sitting on the spread-out plastic bag seemed to be totally unaware of all these mechanisms of the hospital. She was totally absorbed in her children. The compounder walked up to her and asked her in a loud authoritative voice, "Show me your papers. Have you had your TB medication today?"

This woman had been sitting here for the last four months. She was around 40 years old and was here with her children. She didn't have a husband. She had come from outside Delhi, from old Faridabad. She had tuberculosis. When she heard the compounder's commanding voice, she quickly took out an old crumpled envelope from her plastic bag of documents and gave it to him.

The compounder examined all the papers carefully. The new and the old OPD documents, her medical prescriptions, test reports, X-rays, some prescriptions made by doctors outside the hospital and her Adhar card. He even checked to see if the date was correctly stamped on her OPD document. Many people had surrounded the compounder with their own documents and questions. But he focused on the woman sitting on the ground. "These are all old documents. Where are all your new documents? Take them out." He returned all the papers to the woman who started going through her bag looking for the new documents.

The compounder moved on. He was constantly answering questions and explaining things to the small crowd which was perpetually following him. Perhaps this wasn't his work, but he could see that there were so many people who were lost and did not know where to go. Nearby, there was an entire family which had spread out all their papers on a mat and were trying to make sense of them.

"What is your purpose here?" the compounder asked them. One of the family members picked up a document and handed it over to the compounder and said, "He has TB." "Who told you that he has TB?" the compounder responded. The person looked down and said, "Our local doctor told us." The compounder seemed to understand the lowered gaze: "There are no papers here to show that the patient has been tested and you are already saying tuberculosis. Let's first get some tests. Come with me."

The eyes of the crowd followed the compounder wherever he went. However, some did not seem to have noticed the man at all, and were lost in themselves. People accompanying the patients wait for such persons to help them out and to guide them in this vast place. The compounder went to every patient and also spoke with the people accompanying them.



In the open field, there were many older people who were perhaps not accompanied by anyone. Inside the gate, in front of the shops, under the trees and near the water taps. There were people everywhere.

The compounder then went back to the woman with her children and asked, “Have you taken out the new papers?”

The woman took out the papers again. The compounder saw the papers and asked her, “Why haven’t you got these stamped with today’s date?” She didn’t respond and instead began looking at her children. The compounder understood her silence. “You have to get your papers stamped with the date every day. When did you start being treated?”

She said, “It has been four months, brother.”

The compounder said, “Son’t you know that you must get a date stamp every day? Come with me.”

He took her to the OPD queue and told her to wait. He then went inside and got the woman’s documents stamped himself. He then guided the woman to the correct room on the second floor.



The hospital compounds are filled with boards pointing out various departments and facilities.

The distinct blue boards providing a guide to the maze world of a Big Hospital, somewhere in Delhi.

People were sitting in small groups in the field at the hospital entrance. For some this was their first experience, while for others this had been going on for a long time. Some of the people were patients, while some were their family members. Some were going to the chemist on the premises to buy medicines, while some were busy filling forms. Some people were resting, while others were fast asleep, as if they hadn't slept for many nights. Some were eating their lunch in a hurry. Most people didn't know each other here, and yet all were trying to find shade from the same harsh sun. All were sitting with hope for a new day. A day in which they would find cure and they would finally heal.

