

1 in 1,000 Indian kids born with a cleft lip

Malathy Iyer | TNN

Mumbai: When Pinki Sonkar, an 11-year-old from Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, tossed a coin at the Wimbledon finals last week, there was little evidence of her cleft lip that was the subject of an Oscar-winning documentary film in 2009.

A series of free surgeries have wiped out most evidence of Pinki's disfiguring birth flaw. This is something that 18-year-old Saelee Awate and her mother Supriya from Sanpada understand and appreciate. "Saelee herself has undergone four operations since she was five months old," says Supriya, proud of Saelee's appearance and confidence.

But Saelee's response captures the change in the world of cleft lip and palate patients in recent years. "I feel there is no need to make a big show about cleft lip anymore," says the BSc (IT) student, a few days ahead of World Plastic Surgery Day on July 15.

Plastic surgery have evolved in the last decade allowing surgeons to fix the most complex clefts. "We can fix gum and nose deformities in a single operation," says plastic surgeon Nitin Mokal, among those chosen by international NGO Smile Train to perform cleft lip reconstruction. It gives financial assistance averaging almost Rs 13,500 per surgery, and helped 3.5 lakh surgeries in India in the last decade.

There also is an expensive option of using biodegradable collagen - a laboratory-generated tissue - to fasten the healing process. Plastic surgeon S Keswani says, "Earlier, children with a cleft in the gums didn't have the option of artificial teeth. But now by the time they are out of their teens, children look perfect," he says.

Saelee says her cleft lip never bothered her much. "My parents never made me feel I was different. It helped me a great deal," she adds. Twelve-year-old Samiksha Darshetkar wants to become a doctor to help children like her. "Due to her brush with medicine since childhood, she seems to have set her mind on taking up

CLEFT LIP LEFT BEHIND THEM

SAIELEE AWATE

Now 18 years



5 months



1 year



11 years



SAMIKSHA DARSHETKAR

Now 12 years



3 months



9 months



8 years



► International NGO, Smile Train, which aids cleft-lip operations for Indian children since 2002, funded over **3.5 lakh** surgeries till date, including Pinki's (below)

BIRTH DEFECT

When: Cleft lip and cleft palate are birth defects that affect the upper lip and roof

of the mouth, if the tissue that forms the roof of the mouth and upper lip don't join before birth. It can vary from a slight notch to a whole side-cleft running up to the nose

Problem: It can affect the way the child looks, cause problems in eating, talking and also ear infections

Pregnancy care: There can be a

family history, or it can occur out of the blue. One school of thought is that women should take vitamin B and folic acid supplements before conception

Affected: In India, one in every 1,000 is born each year with a cleft lip and palate

SURGERY: Cleft lip surgery is done three months after birth. For clefts of the gum, a bone-graft operation is done at nine to 12 years of age. Cleft palate surgery occurs at six months to a year (Source: Association of Oral & Maxillofacial Surgeons of India)



Surgeries helped **Pinki Sonkar (left)**, born with a cleft lip, smile again. Subject of an Oscar-winning film, she also flipped the coin at this year's Wimbledon men's final

medicine," says her mother Smita, who lives in Girgaum.

In the last few years, there has been growing evidence that cleft lip and palate could be the result of poor vitamin B and folic acid levels in the mother. "Planning a pregnancy in which the mother takes

these vitamins before conception would help wipe out such deformities," says Mokal. Many Indians realize they are pregnant well into the second month. "But as cleft fusion could occur between three and six weeks of pregnancy, the damage is done," he adds.