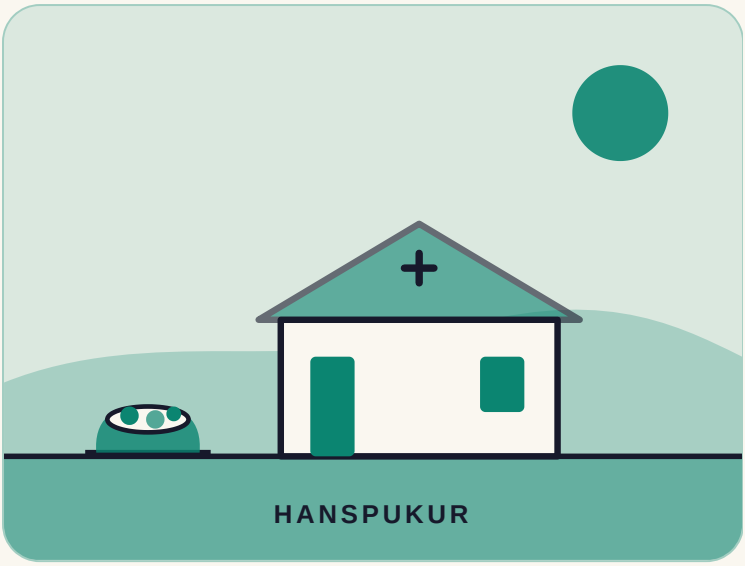

INDIA

The vegetable seller who built a hospital

After her husband died for lack of care, a poor widow near Kolkata vowed to build a hospital. She did.

WHERE	Hanspukur, near Kolkata
WHO	Subhasini Mistry, a vegetable seller who built the Humanity Hospital
WHEN	1971 to 2018

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

Subhasini Mistry grew up poor in a farming family near Kolkata, India. At 12, she was married. She and her husband, Sadhan Chandra Mistry, lived in the village of Hanspukur. They had four children.

In 1971, her husband fell ill with gastroenteritis, a stomach illness that is easy to treat. She had no money for a doctor. One account says staff at a government hospital ignored him because he was poor. He died.

Subhasini was left with four small children. The eldest was eight. She was poor and could not read. That day she made a promise. She would build a hospital for the poor, so no one else would die for lack of care.

Twenty years of work

She cleaned houses. She worked as a labourer. She sold vegetables from a stall under a bridge in Kolkata. She sent one son to an orphanage so he could go to school. Each time she could, she put a little money into a post office account.

> **There is no work my hands have not done.**
>
> SUBHASINI MISTRY, QUOTED IN UNSUNG

Not everyone believed in her. The Better India reports that people laughed. How could a woman who could not read, and sold vegetables, build a hospital?

20	Rs 926	2018
years of saving	given by villagers for the first shed	year she received the Padma Shri

A hospital that began in a shed

In 1992, she bought land in Hanspukur. She asked the villagers to help. They gave small sums and what they had: bamboo, palm leaves, earth and wood. The poorest gave their work. Together, they built a small shed to serve as a clinic.

Her son Ajoy had become a doctor. He joined her. Reports differ on the dates. One says the foundation stone of the hospital was laid in 1993. Another says it opened in 1996.

Today the Humanity Hospital treats about 150 outpatients a day, a 2018 report says. The fee is Rs 50, and it is waived for the very poor. The team also runs another unit in the Sundarbans, a remote area.

In 2018, the Indian government gave Subhasini the Padma Shri, one of the country’s highest civilian honors.

How it unfolded

- **1971** Her husband dies. She vows to build a hospital.
- **1992** She buys land in Hanspukur.
- **1993** A foundation stone is laid (one report).
- **1996** The hospital opens (another report).
- **2018** She receives the Padma Shri.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

Many people dream of helping others once they are rich. She began with almost nothing.

She also sent her son to school, and he became the doctor who carried the work forward.

OUR TAKE

She turned one terrible loss into a promise, and she kept it.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1

Turn a loss into a promise

Her husband died for lack of care. She vowed that no one else in her village would.

Try this: Write one sentence about a problem you want no one else to face.

2 Save a little, often

She put money into a post office account whenever she could, sometimes Rs 50, sometimes Rs 200.

Try this: Set aside a small fixed amount this week for something that matters.

3 Ask the community to share the load

Villagers gave money, bamboo, palm leaves, earth and their own labour.

Try this: Ask three people for one small thing toward a shared goal.

4 Invest in someone who can carry it on

She paid for her son Ajoy's schooling. He became a doctor and joined her.

Try this: Teach one skill to someone younger this month.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

A promise, kept slowly, can build a hospital.

Sources

Unsung
Subhashini Mistry

The Better India
How the Son of a Vegetable Vendor Fulfilled His Mother's Dream of Opening a Hospital (2017)

eNewsroom
From Selling Vegetables to Building a Hospital: The Padma Shri-Winning Journey of Subasini Mistry (2018)

Fact-check note: The three sources agree on the main story and differ on details. Her husband died at 34 (eNewsroom) or 35 (Better India); he was a vegetable vendor (Better India, Wikipedia) or a labourer (Unsung), so the story gives no job. Unsung says the youngest son, Ajoy, went to the orphanage; eNewsroom says the eldest; the story says “one son”. The hospital’s start is given as a foundation stone in 1993 (Better India), a clinic in 1993 that grew into a hospital in 1995 (Wikipedia), and an opening on 9 March 1996 (eNewsroom), so the story gives 1993 and 1996 as differing reports. Beds are 35 (eNewsroom, 2018) or 45 (Wikipedia), so the story gives no number. Unsung says she bought one acre for Rs 10,000 in 1992; another line on the same site says half an acre, so the story says only “land”. The Better India says she was forced out of her home within a month of her husband’s death; the others do not, so the story leaves it out. The quote is from Unsung. The 150 outpatients a day and the Rs 50 fee are from eNewsroom in 2018 and may have changed. “One account” of the hospital staff ignoring her husband is Unsung’s. The pin shows the village area, not the exact hospital. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.