

Keen and able

METTA FOOT SPA



■ Vidya Balachander

Jenny Figueiredo wants you to feel *metta*, Sanskrit for compassion — not pity — for the visually impaired therapists she employs in Metta foot spa.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that if you stumble in Bandra, you're likely to land in a foot spa. Going by the number of spas offering pedi-pleasures on Linking Road alone, you'd be forgiven for thinking you've arrived in Bangkok. Most of these spas offer abbreviated versions of the reflexology treatments you'd get in a stand-alone spa — at somewhat affordable prices. So, when Metta joined the melee in early January, there was little to suggest that it was different, except that all the therapists were visually impaired.

In the course of the last six months, the foot spa has developed a distinctive footprint. It's difficult to believe that it is located just a few paces from the noisy Bandra institution, Hawaiian Shack. On a weekday evening, you can hardly hear a sound as you walk down the winding lanes of Pali Village, where the spa is tucked away. Metta is set in a bungalow that oozes old-world charm: you can get to it by simply following the lamp posts on the street, until you reach the fifth.

Technique not frills

Inside, five reflexology chairs lie side by side in a small yet self-contained room. Four men and four women therapists bustle about, carrying towels and toiletries in and out of the room. If it weren't for some of their dark glasses, it would be difficult to tell that the therapists are all visually impaired.

The focus of the hour-long reflexology massage is on technique, not frills. You may not be able to choose from a selection of exotic essential oils, but you realise that good old coconut oil does the trick just as well.

Sunil Pilena, my therapist, is polite and self-assured. He has training in reflexology and massage from the National Associ-

ation of the Blind in Mahalaxmi — and it reflects in his confident and thorough technique. The foot massage lasts a little over an hour, but time seems to fly past. Pilena gives me a back-and-shoulder rub to wind up, and I feel a little lighter on my feet.

What sets Metta apart is the fact that it doesn't compromise on quality. The fact that the therapists are visually impaired is only secondary. What's of primary importance is that they are all skilled. Fittingly, Jenny Figueiredo, the proprietor of the spa, doesn't consider it a charitable venture. "I don't like anyone to feel sorry for [my therapists]," she says.

Mainstream resistance

In 2008, when Figueiredo, a former nurse-turned-yoga teacher, approached various spas to employ the visually impaired therapists of the NAB whom she had trained in reflexology and Thai massage, she was offered sympathy but little else. "Everyone said, 'It's OK to feel sorry for them, but don't get involved with all this'," she says. She decided to take on the challenge solo.

At first, she took on four therapists, whom she paid a salary of Rs 5,000 per month. In six months, the number of therapists has swelled to eight and the salaries have risen to Rs 8,000 per month. As far as Figueiredo is concerned, "this is an experiment that has gone fully right". Buoyed by the success of the Bandra branch, she hopes to start another branch in Worli soon. "My dream is to have Mettas all over," she says.

For the therapists, the spa provides the opportunity to overcome their challenges, and make a living. "When people first come in, they are a little confused about how to deal with a blind person," says Pilena, who started his career as a therapist at the Shantivan garden in Nepean Sea Road. "But by the end, they realise that we have the same strength as a normal person."

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