



## HOPE

Rithvik Marri, a confident 18-year-old, gave us all a moment of pride and joy this month. Rithvik took up chess during the pandemic and in 2025, began building a serious Elo score, a metric to measure relative scores in chess. Today he holds an Elo of 1847 placing him at an expert level (for context, a grandmaster has an Elo of 2500). In February 2026, he secured third place at a national chess championship organised by the All India Chess Federation for the Blind.

Rithvik first came to us as a 35-day-old baby nearly 18 years ago. Blind in one eye and with limited vision in the other his journey has been anything but easy. His only seeing eye has glaucoma, requiring lifelong monitoring and treatment. An only child to Bhikshapati and Komala, his parents quickly realized that his care would be all-consuming. Around his first birthday, they made the difficult decision to leave their farm and move to Hyderabad. Bhikshapati taught himself some accounting and found employment, but their son's care remained at the centre of their lives.

Rithvik's journey carries the imprint of so many of my colleagues: he was first treated by our celebrated pediatric glaucoma surgeon, Dr Anil Mandal, and later by Dr Ramesh Kekunnaya, the Head of the Child Sight Institute. Retinal detachment in his eyes required multiple surgeries by Dr Subhadra Jalali, Director of the Newborn Eye Health Alliance (NEHA) and a world-renowned pediatric retina specialist. Over the past 17 years, the glaucoma in his seeing eye has been managed by Dr Sirisha Senthil, who has developed a special bond with the family. Alongside them, our rehabilitation team has supported Rithvik over the years, helping him with screen-readers and magnifiers—tools that are now essential as he prepares for school exams and continues his journey in chess. Together, they have been helping the family navigate the many challenges of sight loss and its profound impact.

Some time ago, Dr Senthil shared Rithvik's latest achievements with our leadership group: he had qualified for an international chess championship, and he had also secured admission to one of India's premier law universities. Both opportunities were remarkable but financially out of reach for the family.

### Sight loss at birth

What caused Rithvik's vision loss? Eighteen years ago, when Rithvik first came to LVPEI, he had congenital cataracts in both his eyes. While cataract surgeries were performed, placing intraocular lens—the standard of care in adults—was not feasible in such a young infant. He remained 'aphakic', dependent on glasses from a very young age.

At the Champalimaud Symposium earlier this year, Dr Alex Levin, the chief of pediatric ophthalmology at the Flaum Eye Institute, University of Rochester New York, USA, spoke on one of the enduring mysteries of his sub-specialty: glaucoma following cataract surgery (GFCS). While rare in adults, nearly 1 out of every 2 babies undergoing cataract surgery develop GFCS. Despite many advances in surgical techniques and diagnostics, it remains unclear what drives this high incidence in young children. The causes seem to be multifactorial. The infant eye is small and still developing.

Removing the cataract allows light to enter, but the absence of the lens can disrupt normal eye growth: the drainage system of the eye—the trabecular meshwork—may be affected; the vitreous jelly may seep in, and inflammatory processes may play a role. In many children, these factors converge, leading to glaucoma.

Rithvik too developed glaucoma in his right eye a few weeks after his cataract surgery. A series of retinal surgeries were unsuccessful in saving his left eye. His right eye, however, came under Dr Sirisha Senthil's long-term care. Dr Senthil, Head of the Kalathur Venugopal Reddy Institute of Excellence in Glaucoma, introduced a valve in his eye to drain the fluids out, and then made a few more surgeries to clear his vision. Rithvik, now a teenager, has had that valve doing its job for nearly 17 years! While his vision remains limited, Rithvik continues to use glasses and low-vision aids effectively.

## Bright Future

LVPEI's founding philosophy—that no one in need of care will be turned away due to their inability to pay—has enabled many kids like Rithvik to receive treatment. However, healthcare cost is only one aspect of the obstacles they face.

Rithvik has shown exceptional determination. Through education and chess, he has built a path forward. In February, he qualified for the IBCA World Team Chess Championship 2026 in Montenegro. While his participation was funded, his support staff expenses were not covered. At the same time, he secured admission to NALSAR, Hyderabad, a top legal university in India. Both commitments had deadlines in April and posed a substantial financial burden.

When Mr Atmakuri Ramam, former Vice-Chair of LVPEI and a trusted adviser, learned of Rithvik's situation, he reached out to find support. Soon after, Ms Swati Nannapaneni of NATCO Trust responded: she was moved by Rithvik's story. The Trust has agreed to support his father's travel to accompany Rithvik for the IBCA championship and to fund his five-year law course at NALSAR.

The saying that it takes a village to raise a child comes to mind when I heard about Rithvik's journey. When care extends beyond the clinic, and when compassion meets action, extraordinary things become possible. I have often observed that in times marked by uncertainty and distress, LVPEI's friends and supporters step in to help, bringing out the best in humanity. Individuals like Dr Senthil, Mr Ramam, and Ms Nannapaneni are a model of the humanity we should all strive to become. I thank everyone – my colleagues, supporters, and donors--who continue to come forward to make a difference to Rithvik, and many others with vision impairment.

As we move forward, may we continue to build not just systems of care, but ecosystems of hope.

I am delighted to share that many of my colleagues have been felicitated at the All India Ophthalmology Conference in Jaipur, India: India's premier eye care event. My congratulations to Dr Subhadra Jalali, for delivering the *AIOS - P. Namperumalsamy Lecture 2026*; to Dr Vishal Raval for receiving the Col. Rangachari Award for Best Free Paper; and to all others who were felicitated at the conference. In addition, Dr Pavan Verkicharla received OCI Jaggi Best Optometry Contribution Award in recognition of his outstanding and impactful work in the field of myopia. Onwards and upwards!

-Prashant Garg