

# Bombay Times

## Shraddha Foundation brings schizophrenics back to reality

**Alex Fernandes**

MANIBEN would have been just another homemaker had it not been for her mental illness. As a schizophrenic who was also the victim of wife-

beating, she came to Mumbai a decade ago with her two children, abandoning her spouse in Mehsana in Gujarat. Lost in the labyrinth of this callous city, with no one to turn to for help, Maniben slumped it out, sometimes surviving on contaminated water and eating leftovers. She lost one of her children before psychiatrists Smita and Bharat Vatwani of the Shraddha Foundation at Dahisar admitted her in their institute for treatment.

The Shraddha Foundation is dedicated to the care of

persons afflicted with schizophrenia. Dr Smita Vatwani expands on the illness, "Schizophrenia is a major mental illness in which a person's thinking is impaired due to chemical changes in the brain. The schizophrenic loses touch with reality, smiles, laughs and talks incoherently to himself. Schizophrenics live in a world of make-believe in which they are completely delinked from reality." Dr. Bharat Vatwani adds, "For instance, the patient imagines himself to be a VIP or a close associate of a well-known personality." Clinically, schizophrenia is an abnormally-elevated level of dopamine, a chemical in the brain.

Prakash Gokhale, 50, a management graduate from IIM was working in a senior capacity with a pest control firm when he was afflicted with schizophrenia about 15 years ago. Prakash was picked up from the roadside in Dadar by volunteers of the Shraddha Foundation. Today, Prakash has no recollection of how the course of his life turned from the cozy comforts of his office and home to the streets. Shunned by his wife and children, he does not even know their whereabouts today. "They have moved away from the house where I once lived," he says with a blank expression on his face.

For Prakash, his earlier life is a forgotten dream. Now he is rewriting his life with the help and care of the Shraddha Foundation.

Indeed, care and love is what a

schizophrenic needs most. "But people often beat up and ridicule patients, treating them as though they were the scum of society," says Dr Smita. "They are often tagged as 'insane' and 'mad' and the hackneyed attitude is to shun them," adds Dr Bharat. "The social ostracism stems from a lack of awareness and a misconception which needs to be dispelled," he feels. Dr Bharat Vatwani rues that while other underprivileged sections of society are often given a fair chance to live life, we have

chosen to blindfold ourselves to the mentally challenged.

Contrary to this discouraging response, Shraddha Foundation is a saviour for schizophrenics, thriving

purely on donations and contributions from well-wishers while a major part of the funds are chipped in by the Vatwanis from their personal income. The treatment which often lasts for a considerable period of time comprises hospitalisation and anti-psychotic medication which assuages the level of dopamine in the brain. "Occupational rehabilitation goes a long way in treating the patient as much as love and care from the family," reveals Dr Smita.

Despite the fact that the trust operates on a shoe-string budget, "Shraddha Foundation also provides financial aid to patients and helps them reunite with their families once memory floods back. "It is a satisfying experience to see them in communion with their family after years of wandering away from home," says Supriya, a social worker attached to the foundation.

"Our first patient was a young graduate of microbiology who was picked up from near a garbage can. After three weeks of treatment, he spoke in perfect English and was able to tell us his address," recounts Dr Bharat. "He had come to Mumbai from Andhra Pradesh and is today married and has a child," beams Dr Smita. "At the end of the day, we feel satisfied that we've contributed our mite to society, though it's not adequate enough given the number of schizophrenics in the city," she concludes.

**Schizophrenia is a major mental illness which requires immediate and definite medical attention. The patient's thoughts and emotions are disjunct and split off from reality.**

### **SYMPTOMS:**

- Gibberish talk.
- Patient sits in one position for hours or even days without any sleep.
- Walks without clothes and exhibits other forms of uninhibited behaviour.
- Smiles, laughs, talks to himself without any reason.
- Prefers remaining unhygienic and unpresentable in appearance.
- Suffers aural and visual hallucination.
- Is suspicious about friends, neighbours.