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For those alone, isolated and lonely

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Following a report published in the *Bombay Times*, Shradha Rehabilitation Foundation, dedicated to looking after and treating mentally ill roadside destitutes, has been flooded with calls from relatives of mentally-afflicted patients. The callers wanted to know if the institute would take care of the patients on a permanent basis. In other words, they were to be abandoned.

Not surprisingly, Bharat Vatwani, who runs the centre with his wife Smita, is an unhappy man, despite the satisfaction of seeing hundreds of his patients getting cured and returning to normal family and professional lives.

Not having mastered the art of clinically distancing himself from his patients, Vatwani undergoes deep depression each time he comes upon a lonely, isolated human being roaming the streets, totally de-linked from reality. Each time he becomes more acutely aware of the essential loneliness of man.

To maintain his own equilibrium, Vatwani started putting down his angst-ridden thoughts in words. The result: a compilation of poems, *Alone, Isolated and Lonely*.

Crossword released the book with a reading of some of the poems by actor-writer Tom Alter, gastro-entriologist Dr Rodrigues and actor and rehab inmate Uday Chandra. Poet Gulzar formally launched the first copy and observed in his soft well-modulated voice, "When the pain became unbearable, he (Vatwani) wrote poetry. Poetry makes pain

bearable. Whatever the pain, the agony, life has to go on and go on with a smile. That is what poetry helps us to do."

As Gulzar proceeded to read a poem in Urdu, it did just that — introduced a note of optimism to the evening. It was about the blades of grass that spring back to life after being crushed and trampled upon, about a determined blade that finds sustenance in the tiniest of cracks, to grow, and grow upright.

It is sad that an actor with a voice as gifted as Uday Chandra's should still be trying to come to terms with life. His sensitive recitation of Vatwani's poems was accompanied by the beat of the table played by a young visually-impaired boy called Suresh who has been adopted by the doctor. As Uday recited one of the poems, Suresh interspersed it with a Hindi song: *Dhire Dhire Jago Zindagi*. It was a *jugalbandi* with a difference. Two human beings coping with two different handicapes, singing and reciting in two different languages, simultaneously, to the gentle beat of the tabla and creating music together.

Though the leitmotif of the evening was about lonely, isolated, abandoned human beings, the mood was not despondent one. As Alter pointed out, "A bookshop is a lovely place to spend time together if not money."

It was, indeed, an evening well-spent, with doctors, poets, writers, actors and rehabilitated patients coming together to share their talent, their thoughts. A cathartic experience not just for the writer but for all those present.