

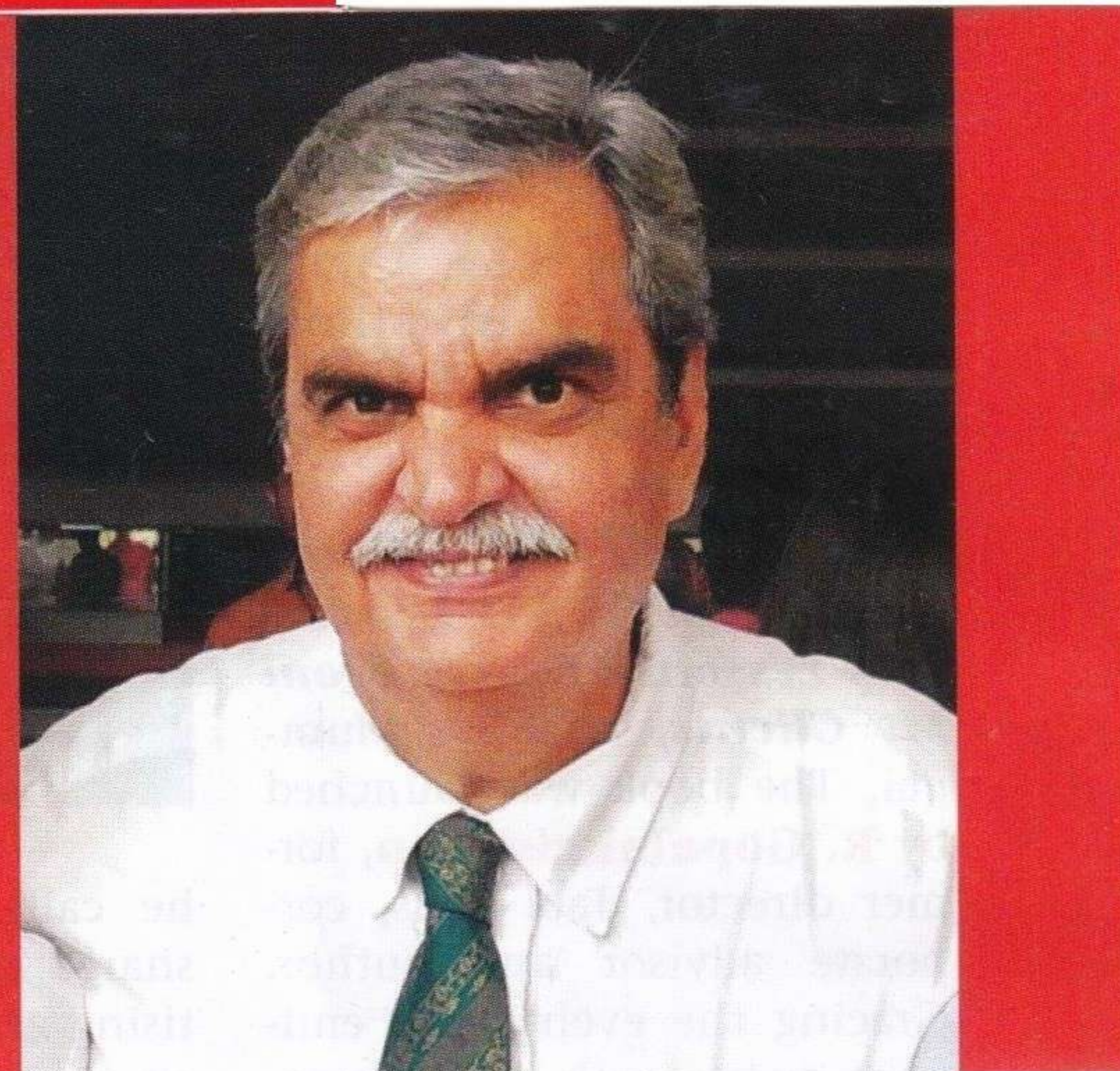
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'Enhance awareness about mental illness'

Bharat Vatwani, 60, has been awarded the Raman Magsaysay award for treating the mentally ill, destitute and schizophrenics found by the roadside and rehabilitating them with their families. This is done through his NGO, Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation, based in Karjat, Maharashtra. Aply supported by his wife, Smeeta, also a psychiatrist, the NGO, founded in 1988, has successfully rehabilitated 7,000 people till date. Just after the announcement, Vatwani spoke to Daksesh Parikh



How do you feel about the award?

I am ecstatic about this award as the award committee has highlighted the cause of the roadside mentally ill, providing it with the urgently required attention that it immensely deserves. The award will highlight this paradoxical situation, in India as well as globally.

Will the award see more attention being focussed on the mentally ill?

A big, YES. That is going to be the main benefit of this award. Everywhere, the cause of the roadside mentally ill is going to be highlighted with multiple gains. The awareness about mental illness, the dilution of stigma associated with it, the acceptance of it as any other treatable medical illness, the possibility of returning to normal life with regular intake of medications, social acceptance, inspiring other NGOs to take up this work, inspiring psychiatrists to contribute their expertise, inspiring governing authorities to establish similar models, etc, etc. The award will have a multidimensional impact.

What inspired you to undertake this journey?

Looking back, I believe Almighty God had his own design in this journey. This year I turned 60. The Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation was started in 1988, when I was 30 years old, halfway through my life's journey. Thinking retrospectively, the Almighty had stirred me up thoroughly for the first 30 years in such a manner, that I

lost my father at the age of 12, then, in extremely challenging circumstances, I maintained my interest in academics, while doing all kinds of jobs to survive financially. I thereafter qualified as a psychiatrist from public hospitals in Mumbai, treating the socio-economically disadvantaged. This enhanced my compassion and commitment, inspiring me to undertake this journey. The ultimate trigger was when I, along with my wife at a dinner in a hotel, saw a man sitting on the opposite side of the road, drinking gutter water scooped out with a coconut shell. While treating him, I, found out that he was a B Sc graduate. It made us realise the absence of any NGO dealing with the mentally ill.

Why are doctors reluctant to pursue psychiatry?

There could be multiple reasons for this. At a personal level, the basic issue is inclination. Once you join a medical college, I believe that, in the conventional training, there is inadequate exposure to psychiatry, compared to other clinical subjects and, therefore, it does not orient medical students to choose psychiatry.

What should the government do to mitigate the problems of mentally ill?

The government should basically enhance the awareness about mental illness in all the classes of society. Through popular media, the stigma related to mental illness should be thoroughly eliminated. It should publicise that mental illness is like

any other treatable medical illness. Patients and their relatives should be explained that normal life is possible with continuation of treatment. Social acceptance of mental illness could be enhanced through social media.

What is the success rate of Shraddha in treating patients?

About 95 per cent of cases are reunited with their families, which is due to the expertise gained over the years by the Shraddha Team of social workers. By now, from his dialect, they can make out, appropriately, the district of India from which the recovered mentally ill destitute hails. The capacity of the staff to involve local infrastructure such as Sarpanch, police and local media, has also increased exponentially over years of experience.

Any interesting patients you had treated?

In one case a lecturer from JJ school of Arts, and a Gold Medallist at that, ended up on the streets of Mumbai. His students approached us. The lecturer gradually improved after a long-drawn treatment phase. An appeal to the secretary of education, Kumud Bansal, saw him reinstated. His students and colleagues suggested a fund raising art exhibition, which was held at Jehangir Art Gallery in 1997. Celebrated artists, including Anjolie Ela Menon, Bikash Bhattacharjee, Raza, Manu Parekh and the like, donated one painting of their choice. From the funds raised through sales, we set up the first 20-bed rehabilitation centre at Dahisar in Mumbai in 1997.