

By Sulekha Nair

A unique painting exhibition was on at the Jehangir Art Gallery from October 18-24. Over a 150 eminent artistes from all over the country had got together and donated some of their creative artistic works towards the cause of the mentally-ill destitutes wandering aimlessly on the streets. The response to the exhibition was tremendous. Organised by the Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation, on the third day itself 50 paintings were sold from the exhibition.

A painting exhibition for a cause is not unnatural in this city but to get artistes with varied interests and affiliations together for a common cause is perhaps a rare event. Artistes have always been in the forefront of charitable work and this particular one too was no exception. They will be paid only 30 per cent of the selling cost of their paintings which too some philanthropic souls have let go.

What could be the motivation and the inspiration behind such a noble act? Dr Bharat Vatwani, and his wife Dr Smita Vatwani alongwith their colleague Dr Ghansyam Bhimani, all M.D. in Psychiatry set the ball rolling for such an event. Dr Bharat Vatwani says, as students, the Vatwanis saw people on the streets hunting for scraps of food from garbage cans. "We were greatly disturbed to see them and the apathy of the general public towards these unfortunates was terrible. In fact it still is."

The Vatwanis have their own private practice which they set up seven years ago. They have their clinic at Borivli. Five years back, when they were financially stable they decided it was about time they started doing something to alleviate the plight of the mentally ill on the streets.

It all began with a young man they saw scrounging for food from a garbage can while they were on their way to a restaurant. On their way back they found the young man still at the job. Talking to him was pointless as the man would not utter a word in reply. "We somehow convinced him to accompany us by offering him a cup of tea and biscuits," recalls Dr Vatwani. "They are always hungry so they almost never refuse our offer of food. And are too emaciated even to resist."

Taking the young man to their clinic, the first job was to give him a bath, shave, cut off his matted hair, give him clean clothes and begin medical aid soon after. After the doctors began counselling and medication, they found the boy was called Vijayan Phareas and was a diploma holder in medical laboratory technology from Cuddapah in Andhra Pradesh. After one and a half months of treatment, a telegram was sent to his father, a zilla parishad superintendent who was overjoyed to see his lost son. After being fully cured of his illness, Vijayan went on to do one year of higher studies and is now working. Are the Vatwanis in touch with their first street patient? He smiles. "Yes. He keeps in touch with us."

The Vatwanis' aim is to help the mentally ill who are primarily destitute, treat them and relocate them in their homes. Four years ago, a patient who was getting treated privately at the Shraddha clinic was once accompanied by a relative who was an artist. Seeing the good work done by the Vatwanis, the rela-



The Vatwani couple: 'The mentally ill too have a right to live in dignity'

Let sanity prevail

tive told them about the mental illness of his teacher, Hemant Thakre, an ex-lecturer of J. J. School of Arts, Bombay. Thakre, a gold medallist was so good a student that his painting was presented as a gift to the minister Ramrao Adik.

Due to his mental illness Thakre had through his writings on the wall abused the then dean of the J. J. School. Not surprisingly, he lost his job and was soon thereafter on the streets. The Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation picked up Thakre and after four months of treatment, he was on the road to recovery. "Curing him of his illness wasn't as problematic as getting him back the job of a lecturer," says Dr Vatwani. The Secretary of Education, Kumud Bansal intervened and was instrumental in helping Thakre get his job back. And the fact that the dean had changed eased matters further.

"If the self-confidence of a person cured of his mental illness is not restored, he will surely have a relapse. To prevent such a thing from happening to Thakre we requested the J. J. School authorities to let Thakre 'lecture' to his students for two months for which period we paid him his salary. His confidence shot up." The new dean called up the Vatwanis and told them of their ward's progress. From the time Thakre was on the streets to the time he was reinstated into his profession, it took one year.

On finding Thakre cured of his illness, thanks to the Shraddha Rehabilitation Centre, many artistes decided to get together and contribute for the Centre. Dr Vatwani was delighted when he heard of their suggestion of a painting exhibition for the mentally afflicted. "I don't know ABC of art," admits Dr Vatwani frankly. "But the idea appealed to me. For the past three months I have been involved in it. This is the first time we are coming in the open for aid. The response to the exhibition has been tremendous. Artistes from all over the country have contributed freely. We have some paintings here which are still wet. Like Gurcharan Singh's and Suruchi Chand's for example. S. S. Reza

made a painting especially for the exhibition and titled it 'Compassion'. Bikash Bhattacharjee could not make it here due to the rain but called us when his painting was ready. Our man flew to Calcutta and got his painting for the exhibition."

Bhupen Khakkar who dropped in at the Jehangir Art Gallery to see the exhibition was very pleased. "I would not have given my painting if I was not pursued to do so by Vatwani," he says. "He came to Baroda and was so keen about his cause. One gives for a cause. Many of



Prafulla Mohanti's artistic gift to the exhibition

my colleagues too have given him their paintings because we felt it was worth giving."

Prafulla Mohanti who has given two of his works to the Centre, "Please treat both these works as gifts. I can well imagine how it must be feeling to be mentally ill and destitute." A young artist who came to see the exhibition asked Vatwani whether she could send a painting of hers for the exhibition. This is the kind of feeling that the Vatwanis and Bhimani are instilling in persons.

Dr Vatwani hopes to create public awareness for his Centre with this exhibition. "At least then I won't have to ask for charity. I know of several people in Borivli and Malad who want to

donate beddings, mattresses, food and other items for the Centre. But I cannot accept them as I do not have a separate institution for the mentally-ill destitutes. We hope to buy at least a 1500 square feet ground floor structure which will be sufficient to put up 40 beds. This exhibition should generate Rs 12 lakhs. We will be supplementing it with Rs 5 lakhs from our pocket and from some donations should be able to achieve our aim. I have got donations of Rs 1000 from many unknown hoteliers and restaurant owners in Delhi for my cause," reveals Dr Vatwani.

Their aim is to "help whom we treat to be self-supportive. Our maid at home is an ex-patient. Two of our ayahs are ex-patients. When the people we treat have no place to go, we employ them so as to make them feel useful." All their volunteers are ex-patients. "We find them more empathic towards others who are suffering from the same illness."

It is surprising to know that in a country which has homes for practically all categories of illnesses, be it for the dying and the orphans, or those afflicted by leprosy, poliomyelitis or cancer or for the destitutes, there is no charitable home for the mentally ill. "Getting the mentally ill admitted to general hospitals serves no purpose as they are not taken care of. Ultimately they land up back in the streets and are left to fend for themselves," says Dr Vatwani.

The Vatwanis personally meet all the expenses of the mentally ill patients they pick up from the streets. "We do not discriminate between these patients and those that can pay and are in our care. The only compromise we have to do when there is no choice is to let them sleep on floors when there are no beds available." Not only that, when they are cured, volunteers accompany the males to their homes and the females are personally reached to their destinations by the Vatwanis. Not all of them are welcomed back and some do not remember their homes. Such unfortunates are then housed at Mother Teresa's Home.

The Shraddha Rehabilitation Centre hopes to hold another painting exhibition one year later. "By then we will have set up a small institution and convinced the public of the cause," hopes Vatwani. Subsequently they would like to host a film premiere which too will help in garnering some funds.

Dr Bharat Vatwani strongly feels people should change their attitude towards people who are afflicted by mental illness. "They are so unlike the movie concept of a mad man which shows them as homicidal and moving with a knife in their hands. I have never in my seven years of private practice and charitable work ever come across such a man. I wish people would realise how lonely is a man affected with mental illness. He is not like a beggar. He cannot ask for anything. Though he may have money on him, he cannot fend for himself. I wish people would donate generously for their cause as they are doing for others. They too have a right to live with dignity." Will some humanitarian soul in this busy city stop for a while and minister to a mind diseased on the street like the Vatwanis?