

Dr Bharat Vatwani set up a foundation to rescue and rehabilitate mentally-ill people

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By Manasi Mathkar Special to Weekend Review



Dr Bharat Vatwani and his wife Dr Smitha set up a facility to treat mentally-imbalanced individuals in 1988 Image Credit: Supplied

A simple statement on the website of Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation reads – “reaching the unreached population”. It states a lot more than merely being the organisation’s area of expertise.

Most people, upon running into a mentally-ill, dishevelled person on the streets either quickly change tracks or hand over loose change, often fearfully. But not Dr Bharat Vatwani. Staying true to his profession, the Mumbai-based psychiatrist has managed to understand and heal the minds of these destitute men and women often found wandering on the streets, lost in their own world.

Vatwani and his psychiatrist wife Dr Smitha have since long put in relentless efforts to treat mentally-imbalanced individuals and eventually reunite them with their families.

Vatwani was honoured with the 2018 Ramon Magsaysay award, regarded as the Asian version of the Nobel Prize.

“I lost my father when I was only 12 years old. My brothers and I took up odd jobs, like even peddling books door-to-door. Thus, over the years, I naturally identified with people who faced hardships and struggle for survival,” he says.

Since the foundation’s inception in 1988, we have rescued, treated and reintegrated more than 7,000 destitute in India. - Dr Bharat Vatwani

After earning a degree in MD Psychiatry from GS Medical College and Hospital in Mumbai, Vatwani was destined to work in a corporate setup when a chance encounter with a mentally-ill person changed the course of his life. “I was dining with my wife at a restaurant when we saw a thin, dirty-looking man across the street. We realised he was a schizophrenic. Just then, he picked up an empty coconut shell next to him and drank some gutter water from a canal flowing nearby. We brought him to our nursing home and treated him with appropriate psychiatric medicines. Slowly he improved and was able to share his details.

He was a BSc graduate and his father worked as a Superintendent at a Zilla Parishad in Andhra Pradesh.”

The story had a happy ending when the young man was reunited with his family. A few more successes gave the Vatwanis confidence to formally establish a centre providing psychiatric care and rehabilitation to the mentally ill who were also homeless.

What still sets Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation apart from many other such organisations is that it is not only helping the patients to fully recover but more importantly, reunites them with their families which at times had given up hope of ever finding their lost loved one.

“In 2017, we reunited 920 patients. Last year, just until June, the number was 485. In fact, since the foundation’s inception in 1988, we have rescued, treated and reintegrated more than 7,000 destitute in India and lately even in other countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh, and as far as Iran,” says Vatwani.

Vatwani takes pride in relating the incident with the Iranian destitute. “In this case, our Urdu-speaking social worker, my wife, and I had to put in a lot of ingenuity. After much persistence, he actually drew a telephone, an aeroplane and a home in a child-like art form on blank pieces of paper. And we joined the dots. He could write his name in broken English. Since we knew he could speak a language which sounded close to Arabic, we started telling him names of different countries around the globe with majority Arab Muslim population. Finally, on hearing Iran, his face lit up.

“We wrote an official letter to the Iran Embassy, sent the latest photographs and took him to the embassy. They took his fingerprints and finally traced his relatives.”

Phone calls established contact with the man’s father but he could not afford to pay for his son’s return. He was eventually deported from India after a collaboration between Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation, the Mumbai Police and the Iran Embassy. “Our social worker, the Mumbai Police, and an official from Iran Embassy saw him off at the airport. Three months’ worth medicines were sent with him. His father received him in Tehran,” says Vatwani.

It has been an arduous journey but the couple has managed to keep their faith. “We began with a two-room tenement that could house only three patients at a time. One day, we rescued and treated a person who turned out to be a respected lecturer at a Mumbai art school who had inexplicably disappeared. As a token of gratitude, the school organised an art exhibition with 141 leading Indian artists participating. The proceeds from the event allowed us to have a 20-bed facility in Dahisar, a suburb of Mumbai. This was in 1996.

“However, we faced severe resistance from the society. Citizens did not want a facility housing mentally-ill people near residential housing. Huge banners were put up against us and we were taken to court. Thankfully, we won the case. The judge pronounced that mentally ill were part of the society as well and deserved to be treated within that very society, thus granting them their rightful place in the sun. Slowly as donations started trickling in, we managed to acquire a 6.5-acre piece of land in Karjat, in the outskirts of Mumbai, where now our 120-patient full-fledged rehabilitation facility exists from 2006”, Vatwani says.

But even after moving to Karjat, several problems continue to plague the Shraddha Foundation not to mention the ever-increasing need for funds. Intermittent electricity supply, extreme weather conditions, snakes and scorpions found around the facility land, usage of boring water for consumption which at times leads to waterborne diseases, are just a few problems faced by the non-governmental organisation.

The medical infrastructure at Karjat is also inadequate which means that for complications such as heart attacks, patients have to be shifted to distant hospitals resulting in wastage of manpower and funds. Since the centre is located far from the main city, the Vatwanis also face lack of trained professional manpower ready to stay there. Then, there are other issues to tackle – presence of severe infections in the destitute ranging from maggots to HIV, difficulty in tracing addresses considering the existence of multiple languages, dialects and sometimes having a migrating population, illiteracy, and so on.

In spite of this, the founders continue to draw strength from their mentor Baba Amte and his son Dr Prakash Amte, noted social workers and Magsaysay awardees themselves. The daily challenges have also been consistently rewarded with happy reunions of the patients which push team Shraddha to further their cause.

One such case was that of a destitute whose speech, though not very clear, seemed close to being in Punjabi. Twice the social workers of the foundation attempted to find the person’s family with no luck. On the fourth day while on their third trip, when they were near Chandigarh, a journalist from a Punjabi newspaper came and interacted with the patient. He concluded that the patient’s accent was from Ludhiana. Fortunately, the patient too gave a clue of a place. The social workers took him to Ludhiana and reunited him with his sister after 12 years. In another case, a patient rehabilitated in 1991 now works in real estate, owns a Toyota Fortuner, and has even travelled to Thailand for a vacation.



Vatwani with his patients at Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation Image Credit: Supplied

Scouting the length and breadth of the country to locate a patient’s family, sometimes even in tribal areas, is no mean task. And yet, nothing is charged from the family – neither for the treatment nor the other arrangements. Right from going to pick up a roadside, mentally-ill person to the custodial care to reuniting him or her with the family anywhere in India or abroad, all services are free of charge.

For the rescue and later locating the families, local police, social workers, and referrals pitch in. Vatwani shares the treatment process. “We have a trained workforce of 40 staff members who interact with the patients in their mother tongue and native dialects. Since a patient stays with us for almost two months, there is ample time and scope for interacting and bonding. After taking care of a patient’s general hygiene and blood investigations and physical assessment for basic parameters like anaemia, tuberculosis, skin infections, emaciation, diabetes, hypertension, pregnancy, fractures, lice infections etc, he/she is subjected to appropriate psychiatric treatment post-detailed psychiatric evaluation. Medication is tailored and modified as per individual response. As a patient develops touch with his own senses, he realises that other recovered destitutes are being sent home. Hope and optimism get instilled into him, and the continuous cajoling by the social workers seal the transformation. Almost all social workers stay on-site at the Karjat centre, which helps develop bonding. Finally, the social worker prepares a reunion trip along with other escorts, and 3-6 recovered destitute belonging to a common state, for example, Bihar or Maharashtra, travel together.”

Vatwani regrets the fact that there is a huge lack of awareness regarding mental health in India. Mental disorders afflict 13.7 per cent of the Indian population and there are less than 4,000 psychiatrists practicing in the country. In rural areas neither medication nor psychiatrists are available. However, in a village, a patient suffering from schizophrenia is assimilated without much discrimination. It is when these villages become towns there is a decreased tolerance towards psychiatric illnesses. He says, “Sensitivity exists within the family members towards their mentally ill. It is the lack of scientific knowledge which is the stumbling block. When I visited a temple in Kerala apparently famous for curing mental illness, I witnessed 27 mentally ill being brought there in the span of 30 minutes. This reflects hope, concern and compassion for the mentally ill. Albeit misdirected”.

When he finally professes trust in the times to come by saying, “good work shall continue when there is inherent goodness in the work,” it feels like all is not lost.

Manasi Mathkar is a writer based in Manila.