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From the roadside to mainstream

Mini Pant Zachariah reports on the efforts of the Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation to resettle mentally-affected destitutes



A 35-year-old dishevelled man with his head full of pus and lice, incongruous speech and a vacant look in the eyes was picked up in December last year by Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation from a Borivli roadside. Suffering from schizophrenia, he fancied himself to be a *Washington Post* correspondent!

Surviving on alms and savouring his delusions of grandeur, oscillating between psychotic breakdowns and brief spells of near sanity, he would have continued as a vagabond but for a chance happening.

After watching a video clipping of the foundation on cable TV, a resident of Yoginagar, from where Sudhir was picked up, informed Bharat and Smitha Vatwani, psychiatrists at the foundation about him.

After two months of treatment with anti-psychotic drugs, Sudhir was ready to receive psychotherapy. The doctors helped demolish his grandiose ideas and build his self-confidence. By April, Sudhir was ready to face reality. He wanted to go back to BMC, his work place.

The Vatwanis and Ghanashyam Bhimani, Psychiatrists from Bombay University and trustees of the foundation,

started providing free medicare to mentally unstable people on the roads seven years ago.

"As students we realised the dearth of institutions for the care of the mentally afflicted. We started providing free medicare, food and shelter to these destitutes diverting funds from our private practice," said Bharat.

The first patient from the roadside was a youth who was laughing and muttering to himself. Months later, when his condition stabilised, it was learnt that he was a Zilla Parishad official's son from Andhra Pradesh. He had wandered and probably boarded a train which brought him to Bombay.

His parents who had lost hopes of finding him were thrilled when the Vatwanis reunited them. "The boy who holds a diploma in medical lab technology is working at his native place," said Bharat.

Most of these cases are of people who have strayed from their native places. Disoriented in time and space, they board any train and get off at the terminus.

Shakil Alam, a native of Patna lost his mental balance and landed up in Bombay. He was studying B Sc (agriculture) in Pune. He was picked up from Borivli station by the Vatwanis and reunited with his family 18 months later.



Sudhir and Santoshi before and after treatment at Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation.

Fucho Sau from Barauni in Bihar was another person found by the psychiatrist couple on the streets in tattered clothes, a sock in one hand and stinking a mile away. Alam's relatives helped locate Sau's family which took the boy back after five months.

"We counsel the relatives that the patient will have to continue medication for some time. These medicines are available at the local government hospitals," said Smitha adding that most people follow their instructions. She, however, admitted cases of relapse.

Most pathetic was the case of Santoshi, a young woman from Ambawadi whose photo is on the foundation's advertisements displayed on suburban trains.

"She was a sight to see when we brought her here. Her tight petticoat had cut into her skin. She had lice and ulcers. After months of treatment, we located

her family. She is at home and visits the clinic occasionally for therapy," said the Vatwanis.

The foundation spends up to Rs 1,000 per month on medication and food of each patient. At any point of time, there are five or six such patients accommodated at the 20-bed private clinic of the Vatwanis in Borivli.

The money for their upkeep comes through donations from institutions, public and former patients. A major art exhibition-cum-auction is being organised by the trust from October 18 to 24, 1993 to raise funds.

The idea of the exhibition was mooted by Hemant Thakare, a lecturer at JJ School of Arts who was once in Vatwanis care. A gold medallist, Thakare was struck off the faculty rolls of the school when he had a mental breakdown.

Jobless and mentally unstable, he took to streets, collaps-

ing one day outside Jehangir Art Gallery.

The foundation which took him under its wings not only treated him but also took up his case with the Education Secretary and got him reinstated.

Well-known artists - Anjolie Ela Menon, Bikas Bhattacharya, J Swaminathan, Manjit Bawa, Jatin Das, Manu Parikh, G R Santosh, Akbar Padamsee, Prabhakar Barve and Badrinarayan among others - have agreed to participate in the auction.

"Artists are very sensitive to the cause of the emotionally disturbed," says Smitha.

The Vatwanis who have treated up to 150 deranged destitutes so far, pick up only psychotic cases now and avoid all drug addicts, alcoholics and the old. "Our aim is to help those whose tragedies are not of their own making."

Psychosis is an illness which impairs the thinking of the patient. Unable to meet the day-to-day stresses of life, he breaks down withdrawing into a world of make-believe which does not pose threats to him.

Once cured, rehabilitation of the patient is necessary not only to give him a sense of usefulness but also to ward off disturbing thoughts. "This is why we made great efforts to get Sudhir back on his job," said Smitha.

"Although P M Kale, Director engineering services at BMC, was most sympathetic, Sudhir is still to be reinstated. His file has been pending at BMC for the last four months," said Bharat.

Well-groomed, Sudhir assists the Vatwanis with odd-jobs at the foundation waiting for the BMC to clear his papers. With Kale retiring on August 1, his wait could prolong.