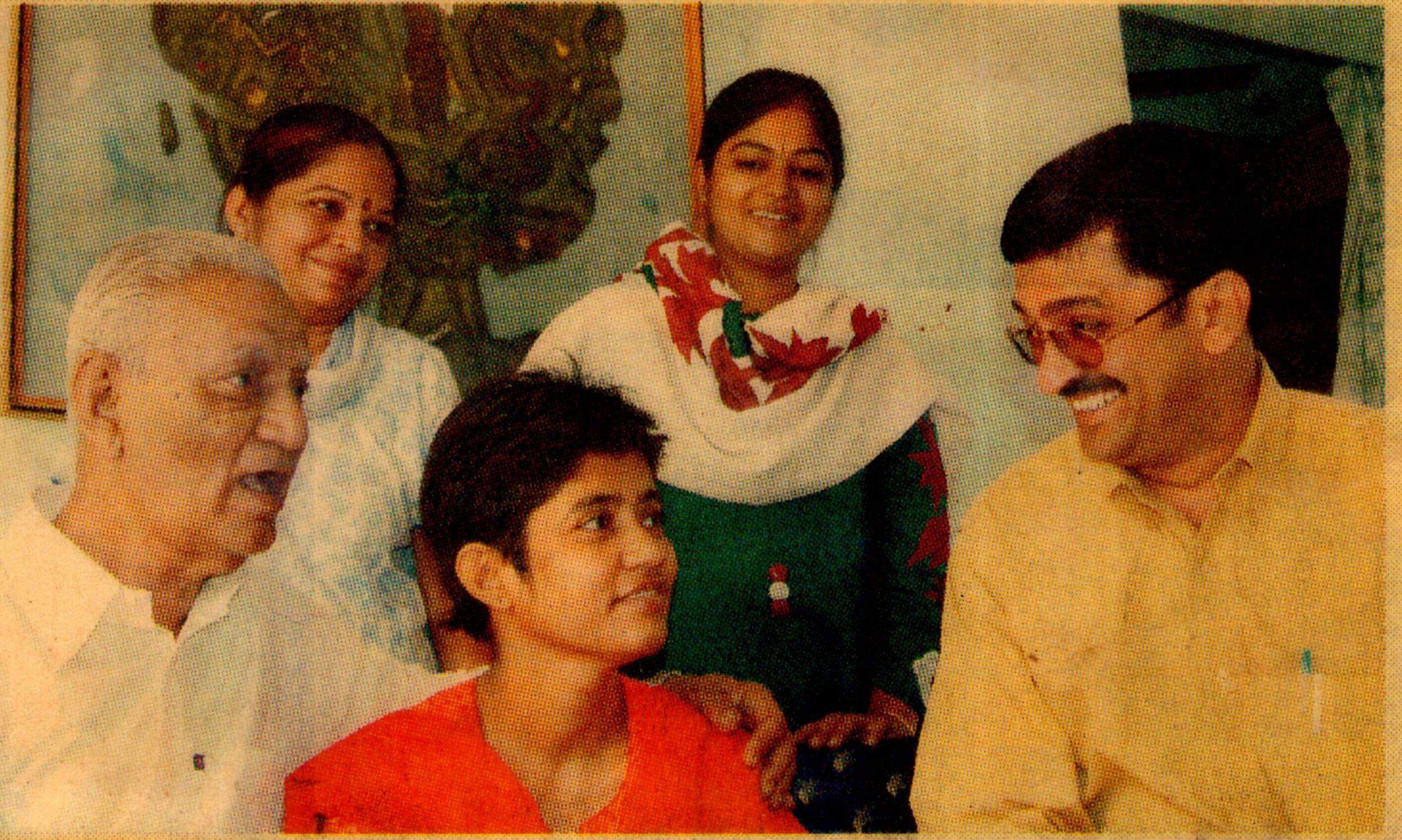


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Lost in the city for a year, runaway reunites with dad



Neeldhara and Deveshkumar with **Arvind Shenoy** (on right) and Girija Rajan (second from left). Neeldhara was reunited with her father on Sunday, after 13 months — Dilip Kagda

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

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NEELDHARA Purohit's eyes were sparkling when she saw her father on Sunday. It was an emotional reunion, 13 months after she ran away from home.

"All for a job," says Neeldhara (35), defending herself to a tearful Deveshkumar Purohit. At the suburban rehabilitation centre, he couldn't stop thanking the good samaritans who looked after her. That his daughter is schizophrenic had only deepened the 78-year-old retired under secretary's anxiety.

"On January 24 last year, we had gone for a walk. I left her for a minute, to recheck the lock. When I returned, she was gone," says Deveshkumar, choking back tears. The Purohitis are residents of Ahmedabad.

Neeni, as he calls her affectionately, had it planned. She had withdrawn a grand sum of Rs 2,000 from her bank account. She remembers boarding the Gujarat Express, but not how she landed in Andheri.

Her money ran out quickly, she says. "Somebody in Andheri directed me to Colaba. My dream was to work for the Taj Mahal Hotel," she says. But before she knew it, she was trawling the streets in Colaba, sleeping on pavements and eating free temple meals. Her mental state continued to

worsen.

A Colaba resident, Girija Rajan, found her an odd candidate for destitution. "I saw her wandering aimlessly. She couldn't remember her name. She spoke to herself, but in impeccable English," says Rajan.

Rajan approached the police and civic hospitals; nobody would take her in. Finally, Rajan learnt about Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation, a non-governmental organisation run by a psychiatrist couple, the Vatwanis. In February 2003, Shraddha took Neeldhara in.

Meanwhile, Deveshkumar had approached the police, the Home Department and various NGOs, but nothing came of it.

"After months of treatment, Neeldhara began recollecting details," says Dr Smita Vatwani. She finally revealed her father's name and address. "Then it was a cakewalk," says Arvind Shenoy, an active member of Shraddha. Deveshkumar was contacted on Friday.

He's a proud father, reeling off details of her perfect academic record. She had cleared the Industrial Training Institute's stenography course and is proficient in MS Office.

Neeldhara says shyly, "It's god's grace that nothing bad happened."

She wants to go back and find a job. After all, it's been "all for the job."