

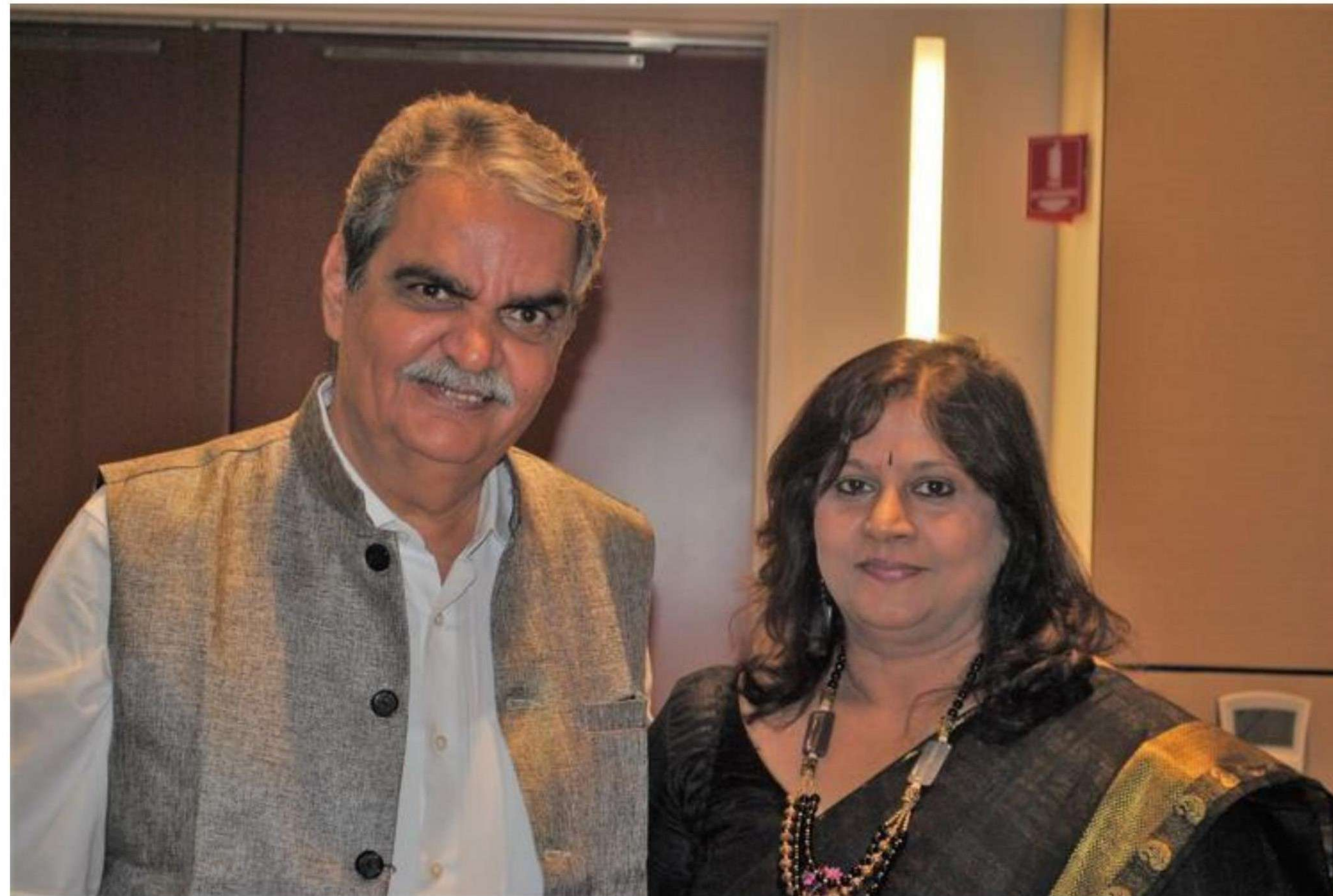
# INDIAWEST

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FEATURED

## Psychiatrist Bharat Vatwani, Winner of Prestigious Magsaysay Award, Aims to Erase Stigma of Mental Illness

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Psychiatrist Bharat Vatwani, recipient of the 2018 Magsaysay Award, is shown with his wife Smitha, who is also a psychiatrist. In 1988, the Vatwanis founded the Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation to help reunite mentally-ill homeless people in India with their families and to provide rehabilitation and support. “Mental illness is a biochemical response, just like any other illness,” Bharat Vatwani, who is hoping to erase the stigma associated with mental illness, told India-West in an interview during Indians for Collective Action Golden Jubilee celebration Oct. 20 in Santa Clara, Calif. (Sunita Sohrabji/India-West photo)

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — Psychiatrist Bharat Vatwani, one of this year’s winners of the prestigious Magsaysay Award — also known as Asia’s Nobel Prize — hopes to erase the stigma associated with mental illness in India.

“Mental illness is a biochemical response, just like any other illness. Mentally ill people have a right to treatment and should be seen in the same way we see all others,” Vatwani told India-West here Oct. 20 afternoon on the sidelines of the Indians for Collective Action’s Golden Jubilee celebrations (see India-West story here). Vatwani was a keynote speaker at the conference and received an award from ICA that evening at a gala marking the 50<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of the organization.

In 1988, Vatwani and his wife Smitha, who is also a psychiatrist, launched the Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation in Mumbai with the aim of helping mentally ill homeless people to be reunited with their families. Since its inception 30 years ago, Shraddha has reunited 7,000 mentally ill street people with their families after providing rehabilitation and support.

Shraddha’s army of volunteers find wandering mentally ill people on the streets and bring them in for the first line of rehabilitation, attending to their physical needs. Many are emaciated, suffering from other illnesses, and in need of hygiene care.

“We then slowly add in psychiatric evaluations and begin a course of medication,” Vatwani told India-West. He noted that many people who are found without the ability to speak slowly start talking after a few days of treatment and start to remember bits of their lives. Often, patients can remember mobile phone numbers after some treatment, which eases the search for family members.

Technology has helped immensely, said Vatwani, noting that Aadhar cards and biometrics can more readily identify a mentally ill homeless person. Police helping the organization use the WhatsApp mobile phone app to connect to police stations across the nation to convey information about persons found.

Shraddha has a 95 percent success rate of reunification with families. Those who are not reunited are given over to an NGO which will provide support and rehabilitation to the person throughout his lifetime.

The wandering mentally ill tend to primarily be men, said Vatwani, noting they are often migrant laborers who have left their villages and come to cities in search of work. Women are housed in their communities, often without getting help and treatment for their mental illness.

There is a marked lack of psychiatrists in India, Smitha Vatwani told India-West, noting there were fewer than three per 100,000 people. Speaking at the 22nd convocation of the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences last December, Indian President Ram Nath Kovind noted there were only 5,000 psychiatrists and 2,000 psychologists for a country with a population of 1.3 billion.

“India does not simply have a mental health challenge: it is facing a possible mental health epidemic,” he said.

Shraddha was launched after Vatwani met an unkempt young man on the streets of Mumbai who was drinking polluted water from a roadside gutter and eating garbage thrown on the street. The psychiatrist took him to his clinic and started to treat him.

After a few months, the young man — Vijayam — began to remember bits of his former life before the streets: he had graduated from college with a degree in medical laboratory technology and his father was a zilla parishad superintendent in Andhra Pradesh. “It was like a dream when I received a telegram from a faraway unknown place that my son was alive and well,” Vijayam’s father told The Times of India in 1990.

“The wandering mentally ill deserve attention. They have feelings and emotions,” said Vatwani in a keynote address at the ICA jubilee celebrations. He spoke about a boy found by Shraddha social workers. Through the process of rehabilitation, the organization was able to reunite the young man with his family in time to light the funeral pyre for his mother “so that her soul could go to heaven,” he said.

About 180 million people in India suffer from some form of mental illness, said Vatwani in his keynote, adding that overall, 20 percent of India’s population has some form of disability. “I stand before you as a representative of 250 million people who are under-represented.”

“Compassion is like a river, widening and widening until it reaches the sea,” he said.