



ISLAND

BOMBAY AT ITS BEST

HUMAN INTEREST

Mending Minds

HE WOULD HAVE SPENT HIS LIFE ON THE ROADS, HUNGRY AND OUT TO TOUCH WITH REALITY, IF A GROUP OF PSYCHIATRISTS HADN'T TAKEN IT UPON THEMSELVES TO REHABILITATE HIM

HE was a reporter from the *Washington Post* and the pavement was his beat. He pounded the pavements, tirelessly, searching, straining to find something. Possibly a story. Where it mattered, deep in the recesses of his restless mind, he really believed he was a reporter for the famous American newspaper. Sometimes he imagined he was George Bush but for the greater part he was a hotshot scribe with a story to file. People looked at him pityingly. Unkempt, straggly hair, dishevelled clothes, a crazed look in his eyes. They thought he was mad. He didn't care.

But some one obviously did. Dr Bharat Vatwani, psychiatrist with an unusual mission, discovered Sudhir Phadke roaming the streets and instead of raising a professional eyebrow before turning his back on the unfortunate man, Dr Vatwani gently coaxed Phadke to come away with him.

The Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation is where the doctor took Phadke. Established by Dr Vatwani himself, in

association with his wife Smitha and Dr Ghanshyam Bhimani, also psychiatrists, the institution was dedicated to mentally ill destitutes wandering on the streets of India. Like Sudhir Phadke. It was their mission to rehabilitate such unfortunates and bring them back to reality. "People afflicted with mental illness are down with a tragedy not of their making. It is not like alcoholism or drug addiction where the person himself is contributing to it. This is a chemical disturbance in the brain and can happen to anybody," explains Dr Vatwani.

Sudhir Phadke's case is just one of over 300 that the Foundation has helped to rehabilitate but the success of this particular case has been particularly heartwarming to his mentors, the results have been so tangible. Phadke, a sub-engineer with the Bombay Municipal Corporation, was an ordinary educated worker, devoted to his family and job. He discovered a flair for writing and tried his hand at freelancing for publications like *Dinank*, *Kridangan*, *Lok Prabha* and *Sbatkar*.

He aired his views on education and pollution and the state of sports in the country. Sports was a field he enjoyed, he even represented the BMC in cricket matches. He might even have taken to writing full-time but realised that his job at the BMC was more stable, it would at least bring him a regular income.

Somewhere along the way, Phadke began to get delusive. His family history caught up with him. His first wife had been discovered to be schizophrenic and the marriage was declared null and void. His second wife developed a thyroid problem that plagued her for eight long years before it was cured. If that was not enough, his mother was assailed with cancer, he watched her undergo four operations in ten years before finally succumbing to the disease. Earlier his father had lost the battle against abdominal cancer — he died on the day Phadke graduated from VJTI.

"We were under severe mental and financial pressure," remembers Phadke,



FROM HELPLESSNESS TO HELP TO HEALING: SUDHIR PHADKE



and he exhibits not a trace of his previous illness. It's as if his bout with mental illness never took place. "I asked my wife to look after my mother but she didn't bother. When my mother finally died, my wife decided she couldn't get along with me, so she left, taking with her our daughter. That's when my problem began."

Phadke chucked his job with the BMC. Some colleagues realised he was showing signs of mental illness and tried to get him admitted to the KEM Hospital. The hospital authorities refused to admit him because he didn't have any relatives with him. "I went to meet Nikhil Wagle of *Mahanagar* and he asked me to join *Mahanagar* but that didn't work out. Meanwhile some so-called friends suggested I rent out my flat at Borivli on leave and license terms. The tenant paid Rs 25,000 as deposit which was intercepted by the agent and I was out on the roads," recalls Phadke.

He was on the streets for nine months, he went without food for days, boys would throw stones at him, people called him mad. That's when Dr Vatwani found him. "He was lying on the road in Borivli, his head was full

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of pus and lice. He was talking to himself, imagining himself to be someone big. We took him in and within three months he began to show improvement," says Dr Vatwani.

Phadke recalls his days on the road with distaste. "I vividly remember those days. I used to sleep on the roads and when the police came looking for criminals at night, they would pick me up. I went to a senior police inspector at the Borivli police station and told him I had nowhere to sleep. He gave me permission to sleep where I wanted and asked me to use his name if anyone asked. The police never harassed me after that. I had no food and I contracted malaria which got worse everyday. But I kept on writing."

When Dr Vatwani found him, he made arrangements to pay the tenant his deposit and acquired Phadke's flat for him again. "Once he was rehabilitated, we tried to get his job back for him," informs Dr Vatwani. "We went to meet the then deputy municipal commissioner and director of technical services, P.N. Kale. He was very impressed by Phadke. He took an on-the-spot interview on civil engineering and was very happy with Phadke's replies. After a long bureaucratic procedure which took almost six months, Phadke was reinstated."

Today Phadke is back at work, drawing a comfortable salary again. His faith in humanity, so buffeted at one time, is almost restored again. He wasn't completely out of touch with reality even at his worst, he still re-

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members the traumatic times. But he's willing to look ahead. "I live in the present. I try not to think about the future. I want to forget the past. Six months ago my wife filed for divorce. The divorce is almost through. I try to avoid meeting my daughter, I don't want any emotional tangles."

The doctor is proud of his role in the rehabilitation. The fact that the rehabilitation is complete, that Phadke has come full circle, back to a job he was doing, is very heartening. Phadke of course is grateful. In his eyes, Dr Vatwani is the only person in the world who has the right to light his funeral pyre. He's the one who gave him another chance at life after all.

In a city where time is not a luxury for most, there are still some people who take the time to stop and notice the less fortunate; and when they've seen them, they take the time to stop and help. The Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation has recently been able to expand their activities to include facilities to house, shelter and rehabilitate about 30 mentally ill destitutes at any given point of time. Sudhir Phadke is certainly not the last of the beneficiaries of the institution. There is hope for many more like him.