

OUTLOOK

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■ SOCIETY

The Road to Tranquility

IN what may be considered a landmark judgement, a much-abused section of society found its lawful place under the sun. The mentally-ill, roadside destitutes..., emphasised a Mumbai High Court statement, are as much entitled to medical help as any physically indisposed person. This ruling was in response to the case filed by the residents of Dahisar, a far-flung, western suburb of Mumbai, against the Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation, started by Dr Bharat Vatwani, a psychiatrist by profession.

Founded a decade ago, Shraddha is the only institution of its kind; it picks up roadside destitutes and helps rehabilitate them. "Mental illness has a taboo attached to it," feels Vatwani. Add to that patients "picked from the roads" and the neighbours found enough to complain about. They believed that such 'anti-social elements' would be a threat to their families, besides being a bad influence:

The court, however, was concerned about the laxity in the implementation of the Mental Health Act 1987, where institutions like Shraddha do without mental health clinic licences. It directed the government to appoint an inspection committee to take stock of Shraddha and issue the required licence.

The judgement has come as good news for Vatwani who, along with his psychiatrist-wife and staffers, have been engaged in this unromantic enterprise. While

some patients respond within a few days, the average treatment period ranges from a month to two. Over 500 patients have been rehabilitated in the last ten years. Patients from areas as far off as Nagaland have been found and treated.

Shraddha has, in the process, gathered sufficient goodwill from others in the medical fraternity. Doctors from all disciplines ranging from gynaecology to skin-specialists offer their services voluntarily. Today, at any given time, there are about 20 inmates living and working together. That's when the doctor bought the premi-

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ses in the hub of the case. Help from organisations like the Lions Club—which is paying for the construction of the double-storey structure—has been forthcoming, but none from the government yet.

The problem is widespread, which is why Vatwani has had to set a criterion for choosing patients. Shraddha takes young people who have been ill for short periods and have a greater chance of recovery. This choice may seem a poor commentary on our society's current values: Older patients are rarely accepted back by their family members whereas the older willingly accept their young ones. ■

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