

REVIEW



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GENTLY INTO DAYLIGHT

THE psychiatrists, Bharat and Smitha Vatwani bent over the derelict sprawled under the pitiless sun in the asphyxiating street. "Come with us," they said.

They gave him food, a wash, a change of clothes, a bed in their clinic and a new lease of life. A restoration of dignity to Vijayam, 25.

"Come with us." These three words have transformed the lives of 13 homeless, mentally afflicted persons in the past year, pulled back acute psychotics from the depths of their miasma.

Why do Smitha and Bharat Vatwani do it? Merely the uncoiling of an urge to reach out

mission of helping the homeless insane. "Out of 13 persons we've rescued so far," said Bharat, "ten have been restored to society. Three, unfortunately ran away."

One of their recent cases Hemant Thakare, 35, a 'brilliant' ex-student of the J.J.School of Art, who was knocked off the rolls last year due to a mental breakdown. This led him to take to the streets, and collapse outside the Jehangir Art Gallery, where he stayed till his friends finally managed to hear of the Vatwanis.

They not only pulled him back but also helped get him readmitted to the J.J.School, where he later became a staffer.



The Vatwanis help the mentally insane off the streets

WAY-OUT

REVATHI SIVA KUMAR

and help those too sick to ask for help.

"The wandering insane have a right to treatment, as much as others" said Smitha. And we try to give them the best therapy possible. Patient 'consent' is not necessary, for he is clearly harming 'self' or others."

For instance, Vijayam was found near a gutter, subsisting on garbage. His recovery was fast, and a month's treatment later, he dredged out his identity and address—to which he was speedily restored.

"It was like a dream when I received a telegram from a far-away, unknown place, that my son was safe and well, "his father, a zilla parishad superintendent in Andhra Pradesh commented. His son whose illness had flummoxed local medics for years, is on the road to recovery—even Vijayam can write back to his saviours. "I can't forget you all my life."

The Vatwanis are no dream merchants, though, but a no-nonsense, down-to-earth couple quietly tackling their self-imposed, unglamorous

The dean reports that he is among the most punctual and professional of teachers. One of his paintings sold for Rs 8,000 at an exhibition two years ago. He has put up a brave and spirited fight against his affliction and has proved his capacity for a 'normal' role, in society," says Bharat.

The Vatwanis work in tandem with a social worker, who usually locates the patient and then helps in the cleaning and housing of the patient in their sprawling clinic in suburban Bombay.

It is no coincidence that the patients they take in are relatively young, confesses Bharat. They deliberately choose persons who have some hope of social acceptance and rehabilitation. "Otherwise we would be saddled with recovered patients who have nowhere to go. In one instance, an elderly man was cured, but did not wish to return to his family. At a loss, they almost connived at his 'escape'."

However, 56-year-old Pillai was an older man helped and rehabilitated by the couple. A

Kerala migrant he was found in a post office writing letters to Indira Gandhi two years after her death. His relatives were overjoyed to have him back.

Usha Rani 40, is a similar exception. Though the Vatwanis usually don't take women in, to avoid getting into legal bottlenecks, they took pity on her emaciated, broken condition. Drawn out by a Punjabi friend, her home was traced out and she was escorted to Panipat.

All the others too have been ensconced in the family life again, their antecedents painstakingly discovered by the coordinated efforts of the entire staff at the nursing home. Sharif Mohammed, a schizophrenic meandering through a dingy street, was 'taken over' by the Muslim staffers, who probed the recesses of his memory by taking him on periodic visits to a nearby mosque, finally sparking a remembrance. He recalled his home in a remote pocket of Deoriya, Uttar Pradesh.

"When we undertake a task like this, everybody cooperates," said Smitha. "The

chemist supplies free drugs, the staffers help to establish a link with the patients, the police tap their sources."

A CID officer of Purulia West Bengal, helped the Vatwanis find the address of Bimal Kumar Acharya, 26. Having run away from home nine years ago after failing the 10th standard, the return of Bimal was like the redemption of a forgotten promise for his incredulous parents.

Often they get little by way of financial compensation from relatives, but they say that they can 'afford' one free bed for every seven patients who 'pay' for their treatment.

Quietly efficient, unassuming, ideally cut-out for the samaritan role, the couple seems an anachronism in today's corporate-doctor age. Their sprawling clinic takes medicare to a new dimension. For Smitha and Bharat Vatwani are not merely skilled doctors, they are practitioners in the forgotten art of healing.