



PIGS: SATISH MALAVALDE

Dr Bharat Vatwani (left) with Gangadhar Vinode at Worli

God, my parents, and Dr Vatwani

Back in 1991, Gangadhar Vinode was one of Magsaysay awardee and psychiatrist Dr Bharat Vatwani's first patients. Today, he runs his own construction firm in Pune

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This story begins with an end. In March of 1991, after a three-month stay at Dr Bharat Vatwani's Shraddha Nursing Home in Borivali, Gangadhar Vinode, then 17, returned to his village near Wakad, in Pune. Earlier that year, the schizophrenic had been found lying by the side of a drain in Kandivali, and had been picked up by staffers of Missionaries of Charity, in Borivali.

When Dr Vatwani, who used to help the Missionaries of Charity with their work, saw him at the centre, he decided to take him under his wing. "He was not in good shape; I told them I wanted to try and cure him," Dr Vatwani says. Towards the end of his stay at the nursing home, Vinode provided Dr Vatwani his address in Wakad, and the doctor rode down to Pune to inform his parents about their son. The next day, Vinode's parents and grandfather arrived at the nursing home with tons of sweets,

performed an 'aarti' for Dr Vatwani, and left with their son.

"His mother used to send me a rakhi every year for a long time, but, after his follow-up treatment, he drifted out of my life." Then, in 2005, Dr Vatwani got a call from Vinode. He told his doctor that he was not doing too badly in life, and asked if there was any way in which he could help the man who had cured him and restored his dignity. Dr Vatwani told him that the nursing home, and his upcoming Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation, in Karjat, needed an ambulance, something like a Maruti Omni. The car was arranged within a month, and last week, when Dr Vatwani's name was announced for the Ramon Magsaysay award for his singular focus on rehabilitating what he calls "the mentally-ill destitute on the streets of

India", one of the first congratulatory messages he got was from Vinode. It read: "So proud of you, sir."

Vinode, who has a shy smile and a childlike excitement about him, has just completed his third housing project in Pune. After being successfully treated by Dr Vatwani, he would go on to ignore suspicious glances and furtive talk and resolutely got back to work on his family's farm, set up a brick kiln and a service centre for cars before eventually moving into construction about six years ago. He says he has no recollection of what happened to him that winter 27 years ago. All the 46-year-old wrestling buff remembers is going to Kolhapur to spend some time at an akhara, and preparing to return after a month there.

"I had boarded a bus bound for Pune, but somehow I found myself in doctor

“There are reportedly about four lakh mentally-ill destitute in India, and there could be many more. How many have we rehabilitated? 7,000. Now you tell me, if Sunil Gavaskar scores just 70 runs and the target for victory is 400, would that qualify as an achievement?”

— Dr Bharat Vatwani

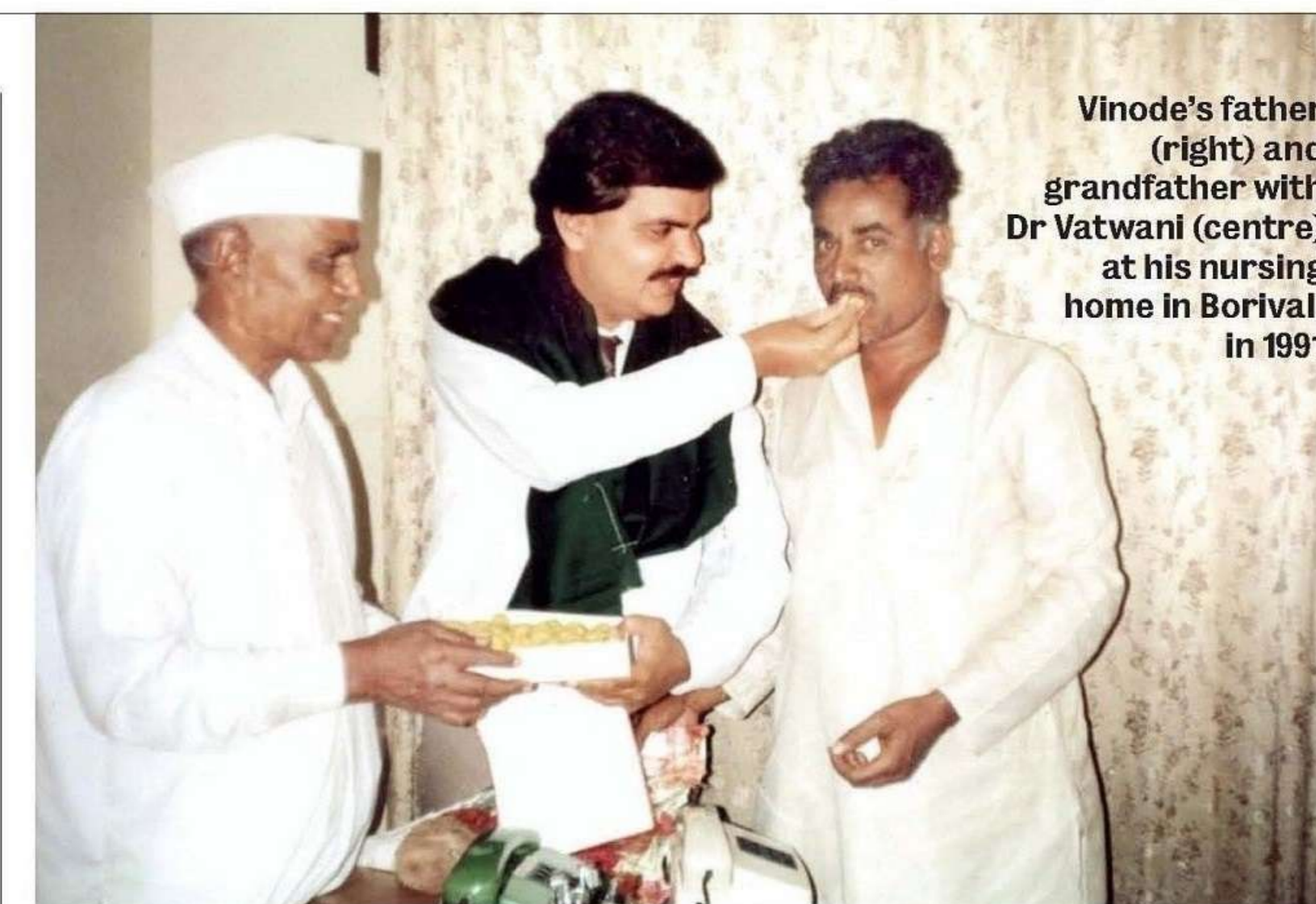
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 14

a court case. The courts would eventually rule in his favour, but it was a meeting with the late social activist Baba Amte in the 1990s that would change his life.

Dr Vatwani was driving down to Hemalkasa, in Gadchiroli, where the Amtes worked among the Madia Gond tribe, when he spotted a mentally ill man, his hands and feet bound in chains, walking by the road. He drove on, but, as darkness fell, he turned back, found the man again, and coaxed him to come with him in the car.

"That was how I first met Baba Amte and Prakash (Amte's son). I landed up there with an unwashed, bedraggled man in chains, and told them that we needed to get those chains off him." Prakash Amte, says Dr Vatwani, took a hammer and started striking the links in the chains, while Baba Amte lay silently on a cot, looking at the man. The next morning when Dr Vatwani woke up and walked into the courtyard of the Amtes' home, he found Baba Amte crying.

"He said that he had always empathised with the plight of wandering mentally ill people, but had never been able to do anything for them. He told me that while I was doing good work, it was not enough. He said I was the chosen one, and that fired me up," says Dr



Vinode's father (right) and grandfather with Dr Vatwani (centre) at his nursing home in Borivali in 1991

Vatwani, who set up the 120-bed Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation, in Karjat, in 2006, and has since then helped engineers, doctors and chartered accountants, among others, from across the country reunite with themselves and their families.

Dr Vatwani's mission is purely an emotional one. He says he does what he does because of the emotional fulfillment it provides. "I'm sure the government can do more, but in a country beset by hundreds of other

problems, the mentally ill on our roads are probably way down on the priority list. But their lives are horror stories, they are the lowest of the low. They are the ones who can't fend for themselves. If they could, they would not live on the streets."

That is why, says Dr Vatwani, he chooses to reunite patients with their families only when they are fully cured, and his staff always make it a point to drive down to each of their patient's village or town. "It makes a huge

difference when they see that the person, who was considered mad, has returned and is now normal."

He is also aware of his advancing age, and hopes that the Magsaysay award will help him find people whom he can hand the baton over to. "Yaar, I'm pushing 60, how long can I keep up with this? If it can get more NGOs, bureaucrats and society to talk about the mentally ill destitute, that would be good, especially in a country where religion and black magic are still supposed to cure mental illnesses. If it were not his family's support, Vinode would have taken much longer to be the man he is today." Baba Amte, says Dr Vatwani, ignited the spark in him, and now he is looking for others with the "same spark".

The award and the awareness it generates might not work miracles, but Dr Vatwani's work has, in its own quiet way, greased the wheels of compassion and understanding. Many of his former patients, including Gangadhar Vinode, regularly donate funds to NGOs and organisations involved in mental health care, and each time he spots a mentally-ill destitute, Vinode says that he makes it a point to bring him home and bathe him, or if he is violent, call up local organisations to take care of the person. It might just be the glimmer of a beginning, but it is a beginning all the same.

But Dr Vatwani has been battling the odds since he was a child. After his father, a high ranking government official, died an untimely death, he and his brothers, who were then still in school, took to selling photos of movie stars such as Rajesh Khanna to their classmates, and books and gramophone records to the residents of Bandra, where they lived, to keep the home fires burning. He would simply ring the door bell, say that he was hard up, and proceed to offer his wares.

He has been on the other side as well. About a decade after he started his nursing home along with wife Smita, he slipped into severe depression when his desire to expand the scope of his work with a bigger set-up at Dahisar met with resistance from locals and was mired in

CONTINUED ON PAGE 16