

Afternoon

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Shraddha Nursing Home

Rehabilitating the destitutes



■ PROVIDING COMFORT AND HELP: The Vatwanis with Maniben and her grandchild.

By Sheetal Mehta

When Bharat and Smitha Vatwani first picked up Paeres, he was drinking water from the open gutters outside their nursing home in Borivali. His dirty, mud-caked body was full of scars and bruises, his clothes ragged, hair unkempt, speech slurred and unclear.

In that state, it would be difficult to imagine Paeres as anything other than a beggar who had gone mad. But two months of counselling and medication revealed that he was a pathologist from Cuddapah, Andhra Pradesh! He held a diploma in Medical Laboratory Technology (DMLT).

A telegram to his father who is a superintendent of the zilla parishad in that area brought him rushing to Bombay -- to take home a son whom he had given up as dead, after a traumatic separation of four long years.

That was the first 'road side' case treated by the Vatwanis three years ago. Since then this husband and wife team, both qualified psychiatrists have taken over 100 such road-side patients under their wings and cured them.

"When we were students," says Dr. Bharat, "we used to see people on the streets, lying near garbage dumps, hunting scraps from dustbins. They are usually passed off as beggars, but we could make out that they were not just beggars -- they were people who were ill, mentally ill, who needed medical help and attention -- people who could be cured and rehabilitated if they were looked after."

Mentally-afflicted

It was with this mission of rehabilitating the mentally-afflicted destitutes on the streets of Bombay that the Vatwanis set up the "Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation", housed within their nursing home also called "Shraddha" in Borivali.

Right now there are four "road side" patients undergoing treatment along with other private patients. Among them is the frail, forlorn, Maniben. She tries to put up a brave front with her shy smile, but her eyes give away her hopelessness and anguish. Maniben was picked up by the Vatwanis when she was feeding gutter water to her four year old granddaughter.

Her other grandchild had died a few days ago from acute malnutrition and her granddaughter was in a serious state when Shraddha stepped in. "The child has fully recovered

now. But the problem is that Maniben does not recollect her exact address. She keeps repeating Baroda all the time," explains Dr. Smitha.

Last week, her husband, Dr. Bharat accompanied by a Shraddha volunteer escorted Maniben to Baroda, in the hope that when she reached there, she would be able to find her house. But she couldn't.

"We have had cases when we have traced the patient's address through just the name of a city or a village," points out Dr. Bharat. "Like, there was this young boy, Shivkumar, who only knew that he was from Benaras which is a huge city. When our escort took him there, we had no hope. But as soon as he landed at the station, it clicked. Once he was in the rickshaw, he took it right upto his house. In Maniben's case also we hoped that the same would happen."

Since she was a Marwari, they took her to all the areas predominantly inhabited by Marwaris. They also travelled to the surrounding villages with high percentage of Marwari population. But it proved a futile trip.

However, for every disappointment, the Vatwanis find solace in the cases where they have managed to reunite the family with their lost, loved one. Though they usually pick up patients from in and around Borivali, they have traced their original addresses to places as far flung as Kashmir in the North and Nagaland in the East. And a large number of their cases though when picked up were in a state worse than that of beggars, come from backgrounds that are economically and academically sound.

"We picked up a chap called Shakeb while he was eating rubbish from a garbage dump," recounts Dr. Smitha. His appearance told us that he had been on the road for a long time. After two months of rigorous treatment, he was a changed man. Shakeb had done his B.Sc in Agriculture and Horticulture from Poona University and yet if you were to see him on the day we picked him up, you wouldn't expect him to be a graduate."

Neither did they expect



■ MISSION OF CHARITY: The Vatwanis outside their nursing home in Borivali. Pics: Anthony Azavedo.

24-year-old Dilip to be a son of a rich army officer from Nagaland, who had been missing for over two years. Dilip was also found near an open gutter drinking mucky water, muttering gibberish to himself. Dr. Smitha offered him biscuits and persuaded him to sit in the vehicle and whisked him away to the nursing home. "You see, it is very rare that they try to run away because they are physically so

unfit and under nourished," explains Dr. Bharat. "They are always hungry so they almost always never turn us down. If they run away we do not chase them. It's their luck."

The Vatwanis do not charge their "road side" patients anything. In some cases, where they come from poor families, they continue to subsidise their medication even after they have been reunited with their families. "But there are people who are insistent on paying. Like the Poona and the Nagaland cases both paid us because they could afford it. In such cases, we accept because it provides us with the much needed funds to help others."

They usually pick up destitutes between the ages of 20 and 30. Their reasoning: the chances of younger people having one of their parents, if not both, alive, are higher. "Which

and began directing us-left, right, left."

For Padma's mother it was a moment that she had waited for seven long years. She couldn't believe that she was actually seeing her lost daughter alive, right before her. "The mother was not aware of our coming, so it was a complete shock for her. Soon the whole village had gathered around us. Her mother refused to let go of my feet. It was such an emotionally charged scene. Whenever we have accompanied our patients the response that we received has been terrific. The blessings, the thank yous and most of all the gratitude and affection in the eyes of the parents makes it all worth it."

'Complaining to the police is useless. They (the family) will keep him in the house for a few days, inflict mental pain on him and throw him out at the first opportunity available.'

father or mother would not want to have their child back?" asks Dr. Bharat. "The patients having living parents is important. Close or even blood relatives are often no substitutes," he adds.

And he speaks from experience. Twenty-five year old Unmesh from Rajkot was roaming the streets of Bombay for the past three years. Shraddha cured him. Since in his case, as in the case of Maniben, the address was not clear, a volunteer accompanied him. Unmesh's own sister who runs a beauty parlour in Rajkot refused to accept him. It came as no surprise when his cousin brother too closed the door on him.

"Complaining to the police is useless," points out Dr. Bharat. "They will keep him in the house for a few days, inflict mental pain on him and throw him out at the first opportunity available. And when that happens he is bound to have a relapse."

When such a situation arises, the Vatwanis either take them to Mother Theresa's home where all are welcome or they are rehabilitated within the foundation itself. Unmesh was admitted to Mother Theresa's home

while Maniben continues to stay with the couple. Her granddaughter's schooling responsibility has also been taken up by the Foundation.

"We usually accompany patients who are not sure of their address. When they are sure, we send a telegram to their parents or relatives who come here and pick them up. In the case of women patients, either my wife or I personally accompany them."

Padma was one such case that Dr. Bharat personally escorted. All that she could remember of her past was that she was from Mulugu. "Mulugu is a big town in Andhra Pradesh. But we decided to take the chance. When we reached Mulugu, we made some inquiries and there was one person who had heard that such and such a girl was missing in such and such a village. So we proceeded towards that village and five kms from the village Padma took charge

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