



THE HINDU

BusinessLine

Building safe havens for the wandering mind

How Magsaysay Award winner Vatwani and his team help heal mentally-ill destitutes

PT JYOTHI DATTA

Walking down a muddy path after interacting with women inmates at the Shraddha centre, Dr Bharat Vatwani makes his way to meet the resident men.

The intermittent drizzle and grey clouds threatening another downpour do not distract him as he walks, focussed on responding to a query made to him — has the understanding of mental health changed in India since the Erwadi incident in Tamil Nadu? In August 2001, over 25 inmates at an institution for the mentally ill died in a fire. The gut-wrenching revelation here was that the inmates were chained.

“Has the understanding of mental illness changed in the country from those chaining incidents? I feel yes,” says Vatwani, adding that sporadic incidents may show up, in rural areas. However, the understanding of the many hues of mental health is still quite poor, he says, as people don’t understand schizo-

phrenia from bipolar. “Often they label these two as depression,” he says, adding that anxiety is better understood by individuals and their families.

The conversation is interrupted by visitors to Shraddha in Karjat (about two hours away from Mumbai), wanting to greet Dr Vatwani. Late last month, Vatwani was named as a recipient of this year’s Magsaysay Award for his work with mentally-afflicted destitutes. Between the many people demanding his time, Vatwani squeezes in an interview.

Vatwani and wife have been rescuing and rehabilitating mentally-ill destitute people wandering the streets or housed in other institutions, for about three decades now. Shraddha was started about 12 years ago after an interaction with Baba Amte and his son Prakash and an incident involving a mentally-ill man. “Possibly he must have had violent tendencies and someone had chained his hands and legs and he was walking with the



Sweet moment Vatwani cuts a cake with inmates at his centre, Shraddha, in Karjat, to celebrate winning the Magsaysay Award. SHRADDHA

chains. It was a macabre sight, given the fact that the road was through a dense jungle and there was not a soul in sight,” Vatwani writes on his website of this poignant incident, when he took this man to the Amtes.

“Prakash personally sat down with a chisel and hammer and gently removed the chains,” he says, adding later that Baba was in tears the next morning.

“Upon questioning him he said that he had not slept the whole night wondering how a

man could walk with chains, and in fact he had taken the discarded chains and had attempted to walk with them,” Vatwani writes.

Going home

Today, Shraddha’s team of social workers is the “USP (unique selling proposition) of the Centre”, says Vatwani, of his trained staff who hail from different parts of the country. “The effort here is to rehabilitate people,” he says.

As inmates improve with counselling, medication and care, they recount sketchy details of their homes in their native language. Having someone speak their language is important, says Vatwani, to build confidence with the inmates. The social workers verify information given by the residents and set about reuniting them with their families.

As Vatwani assesses some of the women being sent home to Andhra Pradesh, another sidles up to him, muttering under her breath that she too wants to go home. Holding each one’s hand while talking to them, he and the team assess if indeed they are ready to leave Shraddha.

There are instances of a man being reunited in Punjab after 54 years, but there are those who may not be as lucky. These recovered individuals are rehabilitated into non-government organisations, while Shraddha’s social workers go back to picking up mentally-ill destitutes from streets and other institutions to give them a real shot at getting their lives back.

India now has the Mental Healthcare Act (2017) that mandates access to healthcare,

among other things. Vatwani suggests that mental health be introduced to children in their teens. The dichotomy between increasing emotional awareness when hormonal changes take place and inadequate maturity at this age increases the risk of psychiatric illness, he explains, adding that schizophrenia onset is highest between 16 and 24 years.

The joy of that moment

Reuniting with the family plays a huge role in spreading awareness that mental illness is treatable, says Vatwani. Sometimes the entire village comes out to welcome their once lost and now recovered resident.

“Job satisfaction? There’s nothing greater than the joy of that moment”, he quips.

In another incident from the early days, he remembers reuniting a young, recovered girl with her family in Warangal, then known for Naxal activity.

Of the joyous moment at the police station at night, he says, “I could not understand a word of what they were saying, since they were speaking in native Telugu, their hearts said it all. I was over the moon.”

LEAD STORY