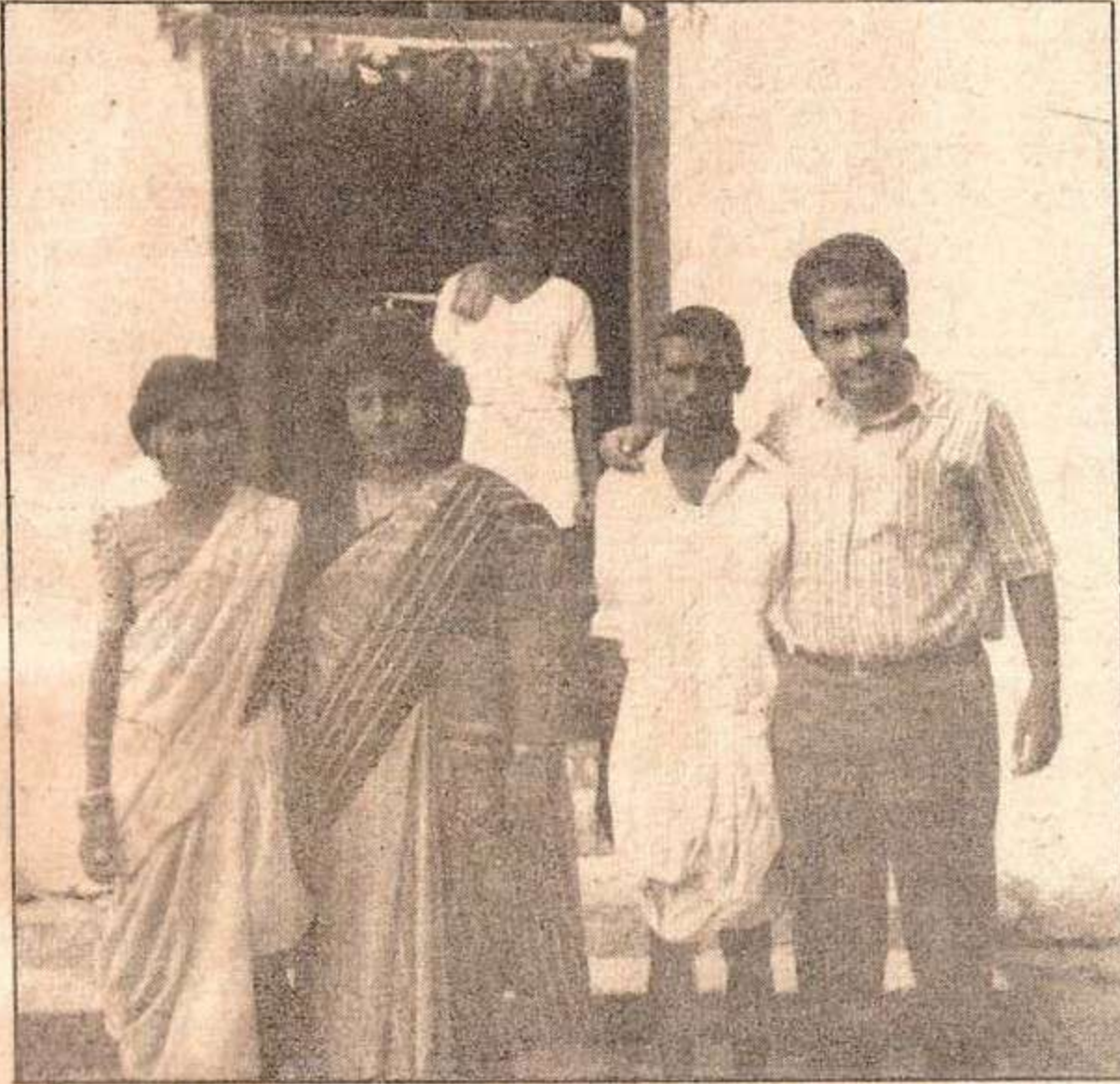


Even in today's selfish world, there are people like Smitha and Bharat

The Good Samaritans



HEALING TOUCH: DR SMITHA WITH ONE OF HER PATIENTS

By Daksesh Parikh

KHALID was a boy walking insane on the streets of Bombay. He was dishevelled, muttering and laughing to himself. Lost in his own dream world, in tattered and ragged clothes, unable to make any headway in the surrounding world of sanity, he had been on the cruel roads under the scorching heat for 45 days.

To the lay person he would have looked like another beggar amongst the countless beggars thronging the streets of Bombay. But he was different. Mentally different.

To the psychiatrists Bharat and Smitha Vatwani, who happened to be on the roads at that time, the beggar presented a classical case of schizophrenia, a mental illness which temporarily makes a person lose touch with reality.

LOVING CARE

Immediately, without wasting time, they picked him up, brought him to their Shradha Nursing Home in Borivli in Bombay, gave him a bath, clean clothes, food and shelter, and started appropriate psychiatric medication on him.

After some days of gentle persuasion and loving care, all that they could elicit from Khalid was that he was from Srinagar, Kashmir. One week of further treatment saw Khalid

suddenly remembering his neighbour's telephone number in Kashmir. It was a golden opportunity which Bharat did not want to let go. An urgent trunk call to Srinagar confirmed Khalid's whereabouts and within 48 hours, the boy and his parents were reunited. The parents were overwhelmed with joy and thought of Bharat and Smitha as messiahs serving deliverance.

BASIC RIGHT

But to the two doctors, it was another chore for the day. For they had got into this habit of picking up mentally-afflicted destitutes wandering on the streets of Bombay and giving them treatment until they could get back to their senses, and hence give forth their address. Then they would find out their native place, their original home from which they had wandered out in a schizophrenic condition and help relocate them.

Why do they do it? "Because we believe that the wandering insane, who have no place to go, no shelter or roof over their head, no doctor or friend to turn to, do have a basic intrinsic inherent right to live life with dignity," says Bharat. "And we believe that as psychiatrists and as decent human beings, we should contribute towards this basic human right of the schizophrenic person," continues Smitha.

And they are well justified in

their cause, because today, five months later, Khalid is back with his parents in Srinagar pursuing further education and living a normal life.

Another recent case was that of Rane, a woman of 35 malnourished to the bone, who was found semi-conscious on the streets of Juhu in Bombay. There was her child of four sitting and sobbing morosely by her side. They were picked up by Mother Teresa's organization and kept in their homes for destitutes. But there, after a week or two, on recovering consciousness, she suddenly turned violent. This is where they turned to Bharat and Smitha, with whom they were in regular touch, for psychiatric help.

NOBLE TASK

The Vatwanis were more than willing to help out, Rane

The Vatwanis carry on their mission undaunted, in their self-imposed laborious and unglamorous task of tending to and fending for the mentally-afflicted destitutes on the streets of Bombay

was shifted to their nursing home and intensive psychiatric treatment was started. Eight weeks of vigorous treatment saw Rane regain her sanity but still she was unable to speak about the whereabouts of her husband. Until one day, in the nursing home, she came across a facial cream pack of Nivea and suddenly jumped up to say that she remembered everything and that her husband worked in the company which made Nivea. Her husband traced. The tragic paradox of her situation was highlighted when her husband was found to have gone to Madras on the previous evening, because he had been told that a lady and a child were found to be sitting on the railway platform of Madras and that they could be his own.

When the Vatwanis undertake such a noble task, others do help out. Social workers, social organisations, the police, medical colleagues, and above all their ex-patients do contribute their worth and chip in.

REHABILITATION

In one instance, during the Ayodhya turmoil, three of their ex-patients volunteered and escorted Rajendra, a boy who hailed from Bihar, all the way to his native place in Bhagtiarpur. They did this without any financial considerations and despite the grave personal risks involved.

In another instance, Bharat undertook a trip to Pune to trace the antecedents of Gangadhar, a boy of 20, who had been picked up on the Bombay-Pune highway in an utterly emaciated condition with a broken leg and mentally in a

seeing him and wept unashamedly.

Often Bharat and Smitha get nothing by way of financial compensation. But this does not impede their burning desire to continue. "We never started this for financial gains and we want to continue our work as we have so far, on an absolutely charitable basis. Our only considerations and guiding force are the humanitarian aspects involved," they say.

How many mentally-afflicted derelicts have they picked up so far? "Thirty-two. Out of which four have run away, three are with us and 25 have been relocated to their parents and are living a normal life," is their modest claim.

LABORIOUS

"But this is only a drop taken away from the ocean of insanity wandering out there," says



THE ENTIRE VILLAGE GATHER TO THANK THE CRUSADER

deranged psychotic state. This time again he was picked up by Mother Teresa's workers and handed over to the Vatwanis for rehabilitation.

The local police of Bombay have also got wind of the social service activities of the Vatwanis and have given encouragement and a helping hand wherever possible. In Kishen's case, an appeal by them saw Kishen and his escorts being given lodging in the police quarters in Yavatmal in Maharashtra. Official police vehicles were lent to trace the location of Kishen's native place, a remote village called Yenidongre 46 kms away from Yavatmal. Kishen's incredulous parents and brothers could not contain their happiness at

Bharat grimly. "The lay people never care to bother or even look at the schizophrenic woman with her mud-caked face, stinking clothes, hair all matted up, lying half-naked on the street. Nobody seems to give a damn. There is so much to do that we are awed by the enormity of the situation," adds Smitha feelingly.

Nevertheless, the Vatwanis carry on, undaunted, in their self-imposed laborious and unglamorous task of tending to and fending for the mentally-afflicted destitutes on the streets of Bombay.

And when reminded of the magnitude of their task, they have the words of Robert Frost to look up to "Miles to go, promises to keep, dreams to fulfill, before we sleep..."