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Mumbai psychiatrist, Ladakh edu reformer win Magsaysay

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Mumbai-based psychiatrist Dr Bharat Vatwani, who cares for mentally ill destitutes, and Ladakhi engineer-turned-educationist Sonam Wangchuk, who inspired Aamir Khan's character in 'Three Idiots', were on Thursday named among winners of this year's Magsaysay Awards, widely regarded as Asia's version of the Nobel prize.

Vatwani (60), who lives in Borivli, and wife Smitha have in the last three decades trea-



Bharat Vatwani, Sonam Wangchuk

ted and reunited 7,000 destitute schizophrenics with their families—at times in neighbouring Bangladesh and Nepal. "We have always been moved by the plight of patients with schizophrenia," Vatwani told TOI over phone while travelling home from

his rehabilitation shelter in Karjat.

Wangchuk, 51, was honoured for "his uniquely systematic, collaborative and community-driven reform of learning systems in remote northern India, thus improving life opportunities of Ladakhi youth, and his engagement of all sectors in local society to harness science and culture creatively for economic progress, setting an example for minority peoples in the world".

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'Hope award will bring focus on destitutes & mentally ill'

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Youk Chhang from Cambodia, Maria de Lourdes Martins Cruz from East Timor, Howard Dee from the Philippines and Vo Thi Hoang Yen from Vietnam are other winners of the award.

The Vatwanis set up Shraddha Rehabilitation Home in Karjat where 120 "wanderers" stay at any given time. "Although we have helped around 7,000 people so far, we have proper records only since 2006 when our Karjat centre came up," said the Magsaysay winner. Since 2006, they have treated and reunited 5,489 patients. "This year so far, we have managed to reunite 485 people," he added.

Vatwani said he was ecstatic at the "international recognition" for his work. "I only hope this will bring the focus on the wandering mentally ill people on our roads." Schizophrenia, a mental disorder characterized by delusions and hallucinations and "hearing of voices", affects roughly one million Indians every year.

Vatwani said awareness about mental illnesses like schizophrenia was poor in India. People to this day ask him why a person hailing from a "good home" should live on the street. "People don't realise it's a condition that needs regular medication and attention. Ho-

pefully, the Magsaysay award will reduce the stigma as well."

Dr Vatwani has a 98% success in treating and reuniting patients with their families. The secret? "We have a great team of social workers from different parts of the country who manage to connect with the patient, and help trace the family."

It was a chance encounter in a restaurant that started the psychiatrist-couple on their journey. "We noticed a man whose behaviour and mannerisms left us in no doubt that he had schizophrenia." A few minutes later, the man picked up an empty coconut shell from the road, scooped out some gutter water with it to drink. They rushed to him and asked him if he would come with them as they could help him. The man did, and months later, the couple reunited him with his family in Andhra Pradesh. It turned out the man was a science graduate who had completed a course in pathology. The Shraddha centre does not admit people brought by kin or alcoholics and drug addicts.

Dr Harish Shetty, who worked with the doctor couple in BMC hospitals over two decades ago, said the doctor did what he believed in. "He didn't toe lines but went all-out to help patients. He never attended medical conferences or sought fellowship, but ceaseless-

ly did his work," he added.

Work at Shraddha is entirely funded through charity. "We get contributions through word of mouth and we get enough to help all our patients," Vatwani said, adding that "it is a formula that has stood the test of time." He is not keen to expand his operations either. "We need other doctors and NGOs to replicate this so that wandering mentally ill across the country could be helped," he said.

Psychiatrist Dr Bharat Shah, who has been Dr Vatwani's friend since MBBS days at JJ Hospital, said, "He took up the task of helping the homeless mentally ill at a time when he was himself struggling to establish a practice." Shah said his friend's commitment to the cause was unusual. "The destitute and mentally ill are not in a position to reward any one. It takes a lot of inner drive of a different kind to take up such a task," Shah added.

Ask Vatwani for his inspiration, and pat comes the reply, "I couldn't have done this without Baba Amte. I used to meet him and he has been my inspiration." Mother Teresa and Rabindranath Tagore are also his inspirations. The couple have a biological daughter, and have adopted three children—two boys and a girl—from the Missionaries of Charity, Vile Parle.