

# THE WEEKEND OBSERVER



A couple with a conscience: Drs Bharat and Smitha Vatvani talking to a young patient at their Bombay nursing home

## PSYCHIATRY WITH SHRADDHA

**T**HE tiny waiting room is crowded in the early evening hours, but Mickey and I manage to find some seating space. It is our first trip to distant Borivli, and I happen to have come along only because her confidence in local area geography is rather shaky. Also, she is a bit nervous, this being her first interview as a journalist, a rookie maybe, but nonetheless a genuine card-carrying member of the press.

"Can you help him?" was the agonized appeal of some students of the prestigious J J School of Art. Their favourite teacher, Hemant Thakare, had slipped deeper and deeper into the throes of schizophrenia and had eventually lost his job. Worse, he had wandered from his home and had ended up living on the pavement near Jehangir Art Gallery in ritzy downtown Bombay. It is from here that his former charges took charge of him and delivered him to the Vatwanis at Borivli.

Today, Hemant, a former gold medallist at the School, is back on the faculty at JJ, thanks to the personal interest shown by the Maharashtra education secretary, Mrs Kumud Bansal, in his reinstatement. Hemant is the living proof of a miracle that the Vatwanis bring about frequently enough to make us wonder at their patience, their perseverance and, above all, their passion for psychiatry as a medium for their message. Love conquers all. Even schizophrenia, a disorder that reduces human beings to levels of existence hard to fathom unless one deals daily with the phenomenon.

"Without adequate training, one cannot distinguish a schizophrenia from other derelicts on the street," says Dr. Bharat Vatvani.

Michelle "Mickey" Mathews had sought out the remarkable Drs. Bharat and Smitha Vatvani at Shraddha Nursing Home, Borivli, in order to explore their fascinating work of bringing back people from the edge of sanity to normal existence. A recent fatal motorcycle mishap prevented this young *Observer* reporter from ever having a chance to file the story. Anjan Ray, who accompanied her to Shraddha, recalls that evening and articulates the tributes she wished to pay the dynamic doctors

"But if one knows what to look for, they're fairly easy to spot. Unlike the other homeless, they do not fight for food. Often, they are found talking and laughing to themselves, lost in a world of their own. Time and space have little meaning for them. Little, insignificant events can intimidate them and turn on their latent aggression, which can make them difficult to handle." But that has not deterred this amazing couple from taking on the challenge of rehabilitation for those cases where a chance may exist, however slim. They generally do not attempt therapy outside the age group of 14 to 40, preferring to concentrate their energy and limited resources where the likelihood of success is greatest.

Apart from those whom they themselves detect and bring back from the streets of Bombay, patients are brought in by concerned citizens who are aware of the Vatwanis' mission. The Mother Teresa Home at Borivli also refers cases on occasion. In their 15-bed nursing home, four to five are usually available free to the destitute; the rest are allotted to private patients who are the primary source of funds for the psychiatrists. Much of their administrative work is handled by an M.Tech. engineer whom they brought back from the brink and

who stayed on with them as their amanuensis after he was pronounced cured.

While I'm taking notes, Mickey has started up an animated conversation with Hemant, whose shyness diminishes gradually. He takes her to the room adjacent to the doctors' consultation chambers. The Vatwanis and I follow. What unfolds is a wall full of some exquisite art, the creative output

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of Hemant during and after his recovery. He, too, has stayed on with the Vatwanis. Shraddha is not his nursing home any longer; it is simply his home.

"People often fail to recognise the onset of mental disorders in their near and dear ones," says Dr. Smitha Vatvani. "In some extreme cases, they wish the problem away and try to pretend that it doesn't exist. The social stigma of

a 'mental case' in one's family can be devastating." Many of those who have found succour at Shraddha were turned out of their homes when the situation got out of hand. Several others, like Ms X, wandered away of their own accord. X strayed to Bombay from Asansol, on the Bihar-West Bengal border; it is only after the therapy took effect that she was able to recollect her address and a message was sent to her home for her folks to come and take her away.

The Vatwanis are both young. I'd guess in their mid-30s. Their idealism is laced with an understanding of the reality that they cannot possibly aid every schizophrenic on the city sidewalk. They have had to turn away cases in some instances where they didn't think a cure was possible. And once in a while, they have failed. But not without trying. And sometimes they have beaten steep odds, as in the case of Ms Y from Jalgaon who will be returning to her home tonight, personally escorted by Smitha.

A new patient has just been brought in. His strange behaviour was noticed by the watchman of their building and the Vatwanis have persuaded him to come inside with some effort. For an 18-year-old, his eyes are ageless and untamed, his hair tousled,

appearance unkempt. I can tell Mickey is apprehensive, but she does a good job of keeping up the flow of conversation.

The doctors speak to him gently and he seems willing to eat something and go to bed for now. Tomorrow, his treatment will begin. At Shraddha, the emphasis is on medication, supplemented by lots of tender care and a clear understanding of the nature of the disorder. Trained male nurses work in shifts round the clock. The convalescent patients chip in to run the kitchen and take care of the newer arrivals to some extent; they are already on the road to regaining their rightful places as productive elements of society.

"What are your ambitions?" Mickey enquires of Smitha. "We dream of having our own hospital for the destitute, a place where they can help each other get better even as they undergo therapy. A place large enough that we can multiply the present level of rehabilitation several times over." On the way back home, Mickey's eyes are brimming; the stern simplicity of the Vatwanis' sincere and unflagging efforts have touched her to the extent that she will end up writing and rewriting this feature article several times, never being quite satisfied with the result, never considering it equal in standard to the ongoing magnum opus that she has just experienced.

And thus it is that I have to finish the piece for her. I wish it were otherwise; that she were still around to do this last rewrite. But not all wishes come true. I fervently hope that the Vatwanis, at least, will have theirs fulfilled.

Mickey would like it that way. On her behalf, I dedicate this to the Vatwanis, humble heroes in our midst, with respect. With Shraddha.