

Business Standard

CALCUTTA THURSDAY 14 OCTOBER 1993

Art of heart

An art show for the mentally deranged by a former patient

Page 12



Growing pressure

Tobacco Board gives in to the demand for raising the crop limit

Page 4



Painting for a good cause

WHEN Bharat Vatwani rescued a deranged man from the pavement outside the Jehangir Art Gallery in Bombay two years ago, he didn't expect any reward for it. Vatwani and his wife, Smitha, both psychiatrists, treated him and then helped him to get back his job at the JJ School of Art.

Well, one good turn deserves another. Hemant Thakare, the man who was once picked up from the pavement, is today putting out a giant art show to aid the Vatwanis in their work with the mentally deranged. Thakare has worked round the clock to get more than 139 artists to take part in the show, Shradha Samarpan, an exhibition of paintings, etchings and sculptures, which opens at the Jehangir Art Gallery and the Artist's Centre on October 18. The proceeds from this exhibition will go to the Vatwanis' Shradha Rehabilitation Foundation.

The list of artistes who have contributed to the cause reads like a veritable who's who of the Indian art world. There's S H Raza, Sakti Burman, Ganesh Pyne, Paritosh Sen and Akbar Padamsee. Besides that there will also be Manu Parekh, Krishen Khanna, Krishna Rao, Arpana Caur, Anjolie Ela Menon, Bhupen Khakhar and Vivan Sundaram.

Not all the paintings will be auctioned. About 20 odd paintings will be up for auction while the others will be sold at predetermined prices. Prices vary, but the average is estimated to be around Rs 20,000.

The money raised by the show will be used by the Vatwanis to open a 50-bed hospital-cum-vocational training centre to rehabilitate mentally ill destitutes. For several years now they have run a small centre, the Shradha Rehabilitation Foundation, where they cured beggars and other destitutes picked up from the streets. Now, thanks to Thakare they may be able to enlarge their vision.

Although the Shradha Rehabilitation Foundation was officially registered two years ago, the Vatwanis have been rehabilitating the 'wandering insane' since 1987.

It all started when the Vatwanis chanced upon Vijam, a young man, who constantly haunted the garbage cans near their nursing home. Both Bharat and Smitha Vatwani decided to treat him. To their surprise they found that this man who had subsisted on waste from the bin was, in fact, highly educated. The successful rehabilitation of an educated person was a positive reinforcement, says Smitha, and soon the Vatwanis were on the look-out for their next patient.



Vijam (top) and paintings at the show (above): aiding the mentally ill

Today, they have cured nearly 200 such cases. The Vatwanis have derived inspiration in their efforts from Mother Teresa. Says Bharat: "Just as Mother Teresa's Shanti Daan is for the destitute and dying, Shradha Rehabilitation Foundation is for the destitute and mentally ill." Often the two institutions have collaborated in the past by referring cases to each other.

The destitutes the Vatwanis pick up are mainly psychotics with a majority suffering from schizophrenia. According to them, it is easy to distinguish the psychotic from an ordinary beggar. Says Bharat: "Unlike the normal beggar who will grab you if you offer money or food, these people are fearful. Also, you will find them laughing or talking to themselves, or conducting imaginary conversations. If one extreme is

violent behaviour, at the other extreme, they may not speak at all and display extreme paranoia."

So cut off from reality are some of these people that they just wander out of their houses, getting on to trains or buses. Which is how they end up in urban centres or terminus points.

The treatment for these cases primarily consists of a course of anti-psychotic drugs along with nutritional inputs. The first step, however, is to clean the patient since invariably they are in an unkempt condition. Also, most of the patients picked up suffer from skin diseases or from diarrhoea and have to be treated for these too. Sometimes the mental illness is so acute that the patients have to be tied down or locked up.

"It is only after two to three weeks,

when their physical and mental health has improved that we question them about their whereabouts," says Smitha. The facts divulged are reconfirmed after a month when the patient's condition has further stabilised.

The rehabilitation programme includes getting the patient back home and uniting him with his relatives. Alternatively, they try to find their patients jobs. It is only when the patient has recovered that the relatives are contacted, as otherwise they could stop the treatment midway. This itself is a difficult task since the destitutes don't always remember a proper postal address.

Very often the cured patient has a relapse as they fail to take the prescribed medication. Apart from medication, counselling has an equally important role. Most of the patients lack the confidence to go back to society, says Smitha. Thakare, for instance, initially refused to go back to his teaching job and had to be pushed to accept the month's trial offer that the dean of J J School made. Even today, he is on mild medication and lives at the nursing home where he helps out by escorting destitutes back home.

Another success story for the Vatwanis is Sudhir Phadke, who worked as a sub-engineer with the Bombay Municipal Corporation for 16 years. Bharat and Smitha have not only helped Phadke recover the flat he was duped of but have also helped him get back his job.

Of course, there are plenty of failures and these cost a lot. It needs at least Rs 3,000 for a minimum of two months treatment. And usually the treatment costs much more as patients can take a long time to recover. Escorting patients back to their homes is an additional financial burden. At present, the Vatwanis rely on donations from Rotary and other organisations as well as from the families of patients they've treated.

Although initially, the Vatwanis only took on one destitute at a time as they had only a five-bed clinic, they now house eight to ten destitutes in their 20-bed clinic. The remaining beds are kept for private patients. Bharat also prefers to pick up destitutes in the age group of 20 to 30, since it means a higher turnover.

But once the new clinic materialises, there will be no bar on age. The plan is to set up a separate clinic here for mentally ill destitutes while the present clinic will be only for private patients. If the show is a success, Hemant Thakare, in his own small way will have done his bit for the mentally ill.

AARTI DUA