

Mid Day

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THE SMILE SAYS IT ALL: Mridula with other patients of Shradddha Nursing Home, which specialises in helping destitute who need mental help

Samaritans to aid of destitute principal

Scholar beggar now in Dahisar nursing home. Several others come forward to help

Shallesh Bhatia

"MY world is about to change," says Mridula Bose, former principal of Ramkrishna Mission High School, near Kolkata, who has been singing songs for money on Juhu Beach for the past four months. The beggar was discovered when she walked into Santa Cruz Police Station to complain about the other beggars on the beach harassing her.

Now, after a story in Mid Day about the beggar woman who could quote Kalidas and Shakespeare, Sanskrit shlokas and Wordsworth, several people have come forward to give Mridula the assistance she needs.

"I have received more than 15 calls, from people and institutions who want to help Mridula. Some came personally to the police station to meet her," said Senior Inspector Vilas Tupe, of the Santa Cruz police.

For now, help has come from the Shradddha Nursing Home, Dahisar, which is run by Dr Bharat Vatwani. Mridula is being treated for mental problems at the centre. Shradddha, which offers its services for free, specialises in the psychiatric treatment and rehabilitation of mentally afflicted destitutes.

Vatwani sent Dr Sheetal Bhandari, an occupational therapist, and Neha Mehta, a social worker, to the Santa Cruz police on Wednesday evening.

Tupe arranged for Bhandari and Mehta to go to the beach and find Mridula. Mehta said, "She was just lying on the beach, clutching her small bundle of belongings and a copy of Mid Day in which her story had appeared. She readily agreed to come with us to the nursing home."

Vatwani, who has examined Mridula, said, "There are some



COMFORT AMONG FRIENDS: Sheetal Bhandari (left), an occupational therapist, and Neha Mehta, a social worker, who were sent by Dr Bharat Vatwani (below) of Shradddha Nursing Home to find Mridula at Juhu Beach on Wednesday

signs of psychological imbalances. Such bio-chemical disturbances can be treated with medicine. There are very, very good chances of her recovering in four to eight weeks."

He added, "Normally, in such cases, when the patient starts responding to medication, she may want to rise back to her earlier social status. Whether she wants to go and stay with someone, or return to her family in Kolkata, will depend on her at the time of her discharge."

Yesterday afternoon, Mridula seemed at ease at the nursing home. "This place reminds me of Mother Teresa's Ashram back in Kolkata," she said. "Everyone is kind to me. All the fussing over me is giving me an inferiority complex. I like it here, but I feel like a bird in a golden cage. I will truly be happy when I am free to lead a normal life."

Vatwani said, "This is a common case of people not diagnosing a mental problem and treating it on time. People run to a doctor for a common cold, but tend to ignore mental health."

If Mridula decides to not return to Kolkata, she would have several options. Those wanting to help include Amrita Ahluwalia, an Air India flight attendant, who was in the news a decade ago for rescuing Ameena, a minor from Hyderabad. Ameena was about to be put on a

plane at Delhi airport and sent to Saudi Arabia to be sold as a child bride.

"I want to take Mridula with me to Hyderabad. She can live in my flat for the rest of her life. After all, my mother used to be a teacher too. I will not let her spend another night on the beach," Ahluwalia says.

Due to her flight schedule, Ahluwalia was unable to meet Mridula, but she said, "I have psychiatrist friends in Hyderabad who will be able to give her the best of help she needs."

Mridula was happy to know that Ahluwalia had offered to take her to Hyderabad. "I would like to be in the company of decent people who stimulate me intellectually."

Offers to help have also come from Mahua Chanda, who works in a financial firm and has compiled a list of institutions that could treat Mridula. Chanda also personally volunteered to be of assistance.

Nalini Shetty, of the Shradddhanand Mahila Sangh, Matunga, is also willing to treat and rehabilitate Mridula at the institution. "Since she has a degree in music, and a fabulous voice, she can teach music," she said.

Mridula, while on leave as principal, had received 30 per cent burns on her face and body in an accident. She never recovered



from the trauma, and was sent to Mumbai on a holiday by her brother to help her get her mind off her problems. But on her first day here, she was robbed of all her possessions on Juhu Beach. After that, she made the beach her home, returning there even after being sent back to Kolkata by the police, who had donated their own money to buy her a ticket on the Gitanjali Express.



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— Mridula Bose