



Drs Smita and Bharat Vatwani bring hope to deranged destitutes.

It was triggered off by a dirty, mad man in rags who lived next to a garbage bin near a gutter — his sources of food and water. Psychiatrists Drs Smita and Bharat Vatwani saw him and immediately realised that he was a schizophrenic. They took him to their clinic and treated him. The recovery of the patient, Vijayan, was dramatic and he was immediately escorted back to his village in Andhra Pradesh. Vijayan was a diploma holder in pathology.

This was the turning point in the lives of Drs Smita and Bharat too. "The seed of interest in helping others was always there in us. Even as students in psychiatry, when we used to see the mentally ill on the road, we used to wonder why nobody was helping them out. With treatment, people like Vijayan can be useful members of society. However initially, we had neither the infrastructure nor the resources to support them. After we set up our own private practice and our treatment on Vijayan yielded very quick and positive results, we decided to devote our energy to helping others like him."

Their 'Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation' in Borivali, a western suburb in Mumbai, was registered in 1992, though the couple started their good work much earlier. Currently, they house and treat at least 20 mentally ill destitutes totally free of cost, at any given point of time. Most of their patients are schizophrenics and manic depressives.

The destitutes at 'Shraddha' are referred by concerned individuals and organisations. The staff too bring in such persons from the roads and railway stations. They are given medication and injectable treatment which gives quick results — crucial for those who are violent or suicidal. Treatment can last for about two to three months, depending on the seriousness of the illness.

"After the person is back in touch with reality, we ask him/her for the home address and escort the person back," says Dr Smita. This is often a very satisfying experience as, "the entire village turns up to receive the person. Their emotional bonds are very strong," says Supriya Sinha who has been working with them for more than seven years. 'Shraddha's' services are free. The

staffers follow up on cases through letters and send medicines if they are not locally available. Most of the rehabilitated patients settle in well but there are a few who fail to take the medicines and have a relapse. Drs Bharat and Smita finance all the activities of the 'Shraddha Foundation' by their earnings from private practice and private donations.

That mental illness is a grave spectre haunting society, is undeniable. Says Dr Bharat, "There is a 50 per cent chance in every person's life of undergoing some form of mental illness. One per cent of the population suffers from schizophrenia. In spite of these facts, mental illness is not on anybody's priority list."

Paucity of funds and volunteers hampers the activities of 'Shraddha' a good deal. Says Dr Bharat, "Mad people don't evoke sympathy. There is still a great deal of stigma attached to psychiatric patients."

Adds Dr Smita, "After a patient becomes well, no volunteer comes forward to take the patient back home. We have to divert our own trained staff to take him back to his village." To solve this problem, the couple are planning to form a corpus of funds to employ more qualified staff.

Drs Smita and Bharat are equally passionate about their cause. They divide their time between their home, private practice and the work of 'Shraddha'. Of course, it is an uphill battle and Dr Bharat often finds himself frustrated. "The magnitude of the problem is gigantic and our coverage is too little in comparison." Dr Bharat poured out his despair in a book of poetry entitled, 'Alone. Isolated. And Lonely'. He penned,

"There has to be an end,
vision at the end of the tunnel,
redemption..."

Over 800 patients have recovered with the help of Shraddha Foundation. They are probably a part of the redemption.

('Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation' can be contacted at 022-8954333/8918321)

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PHOTOGRAPH MUKESH PANCHAL