

SUNDAY MID-DAY

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LIFELINE

SUNDAY MID-DAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 1993 IX

By RANJONA BANERJI

HELLO MAMA, hello papa, I'm very much fine here and happy... No, my name is Robinson. Burjor Rustomji Asli is my artificial name... My wife and family live in Scotland Yard...

'Robinson' was picked up by Smita and Bharat Vatwani, the husband-wife team of psychiatrists from Shradha Rehabilitation Foundation, outside Jehangir Art Gallery last week.

He is just one of the many mentally ill destitutes that the two, along with fellow doctor Ghanshyam Bhimani, have picked up from the streets of Bombay. And often cured.

In the short time that Robinson has been with them, his paranoia has lessened — he doesn't think that spies are after him, but there's still a little irrelevant chatter.

When they started out, the Vatwanis used to look after one destitute at a time. But as their private practise — and means of supporting destitutes — grew, the number increased. Today, they have about eight destitutes to 12 private patients in their nursing home at a time.

But while the private patients stay about a week — since they come at earlier stages in their illness — destitutes must stay at least two months. So, to look after them better, and separate the two types of patients, Shradha has embarked on a grand scheme.

"We have located about 3000 sq feet in Dahisar where we would like to open a nursing home only for destitutes," says Bharat. This would be cheaper in the long run as they would get kitchen facilities which they don't have here, and would also be able to set up rehabilitation workshops.

To pay for the nursing home, Shradha is organising a mammoth exhibition of the works of 130 Indian artists. "Right now, for every Rs 100 we spend, we get Rs 30 back," says Bharat, most of these through small donations.

The Vatwanis are overwhelmed by the response they have got from the art world: "We have got full support from the artists, we are filled with gratitude. Once they realised what the cause was, they gave from the hearts."

One sector which closed its



Smita and Bharat... at the institute

SHIRISH SHETE

PASSIONS OF THE KIND

heart was the corporate world. "I've been knocking on doors for months," says Bharat, "and I still haven't got past the PA stage."

And yet a simple letter to Sakti Barman in Paris resulted in an acquisition of three paintings, instead of just the required one. Raza, also based in Paris, has sent in a work.

These are big names in Indian art, and the Vatwanis had no prior acquaintance with them. But they felt for the cause. For the corporate sector's silence, though, the psychiatrist in Bharat comes out. "I'm sure that they are good people at heart, it's just that they haven't got the time."

People in the business add a

Bombay's mentally ill destitutes have a new home. And a psychiatric couple is playing host

few factors to that.

Says one industrialist ruefully, "I get about 25 to 30 appeals on my desk everyday. I can't reply to all of them, so I pick those who have addressed me personally." The ones which miss out are charities which just send a standardised sanitised letter all round.

Dilip De of Ranadip Shipping says that often, one person in a company is involved with a particular charity. As a result, all efforts are directed towards it, making it difficult for a new concern to break through.

But there is some hope for Shradha. The chairman of East West Airlines has given his blessings, so has Sherriff F T Khorakhiwala, owner of the Akbaralys stores.

Ceat's Harsh Goenka says, "Because this is art, and a good cause, I've written to Shradha to say that I'd like to be involved."

Of course, Shradha did have one foot in the art world's door through one of their first roadside patients. Hemant Thakare was a lecturer and gold medallist from the J J School of Arts. He was knocked off the rolls after a mental breakdown.

His students, who watched him wander the streets only to collapse in front of his alma mater, took him to Shradha. Today, Thakare is well and back on the art school's faculty. He now helps Shradha with their scheme, visiting artists, collecting their works, writing to them.

Like Thakare, many mentally ill people who wander the city's streets are intelligent and artistic. Often, they come from good homes. It is their disease which usually prompts them to leave.

Yet it is relatives who fail to realise the dangers of mental disease early enough. "In our culture, mental illness is not taken seriously," says Smita, "And factors like Hindi films, where madness is seen as a laughing matter, hardly help."

Adds her husband, "People will wait and wait and wait for some lunar eclipse to cure him, and when that doesn't work, bring him in one Sunday morning." It is also common in India for the mentally ill to be married off, and then exhorted to have children, in some bizarre belief that these are cures.

In fact, most of the mentally ill people that Shradha pick up are schizophrenics. Hounded by delusions, by voices that speak to them, they become increasingly unable to jump the gap between

reality and makebelieve.

Robinson, who had to be 'aap ka type ki aurat hamare building ke bahar khadi hai'. So we picked her up," says Bharat.

Then there's a lady from the Lioness Club of Borivli who just walked in with a donation. Or another local lady who sent a cheque for Rs 1500. "A lot of people like to donate in kind, but we have to refuse them," says Bharat.

Smita explains, "You see, if you give sugar, or rice, or bedsheets, you might feel that

HEART OF ART

FROM DELHI, Baroda, Calcutta, Santiniketan, Madras, Chola- mandal, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Pune, Visakhapatnam, Bhopal, the US, Paris, they have sent their works.

Moved by Shradha's cause of mentally ill destitutes, these artists have not stinted on their generosity. "We would like the artists to keep 30 per cent of the sale amount. But many have waived even that," says Bharat.

The names on the list include S H Raza, Manjit Bawa, Anjolie Ela Menon, Krishen Khanna, Bikash Bhattacharya, Paritosh Sen, K G Subramanyam, Laxma Gouda, Yusuf Arakkal, Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh, Akbar Padamsee, Badrinarayan... and that's only a sampling.

They were all asked to donate one painting, but several have sent more. Many refused initially, but later changed their minds. As Smita points out, "It is the artistic and intelligent, after all, who are more likely to get schizophrenia."

One factor, however, which many insisted on, was that their works must not be auctioned. This is hardly surprising, given the fact that most auctions in this country have hardly been unqualified successes.

In any case, if at all, only 20 or so works will be auctioned, perhaps only to pander to Bombay's thirst for an 'event'. The Shradha Samarpan exhibition shows at the Jehangir Art Gallery and Artists Centre from October 18 to 24.

sedated to be brought to Shradha, falls well into that category. "Yet, he tried to pay us for the sleeping tablets we used," say the doctors, "because he could not accept charity. He gave us a box of cheese."

"We also get psychotics and manic depressives," adds Bharat. Of the 200 roadside patients treated so far, Shradha has about a 70 per cent success rate. Of the rest, many relapse because they stop their medication too early. Since schizophrenia is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain, medication is vital.

Shradha has got a fair amount of support from the police and locals. "The other day the watchman from the building across the road came and said,

your donation is being used on private as well as charity patients. We don't want to risk that sort of dissatisfaction."

Former patients are also an excellent source — many return the service. "We get most of our old clothes from ex-patients," says Bharat. Of course, if the exhibition is a success, Shradha will be offering a lot more to the wandering schizophrenic than old clothes.

And perhaps inspire others too. "When, we went to the charity commissioner to register Shradha, he laughed that this was the first charity he had heard of that looked after street-side destitutes," says Bharat.

May be Shradha can change that.