

# Afternoon

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## A refuge for the damned

The Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation, Bhayander, is a haven for mentally ill destitutes who roam the city's streets

By Sulekha Nair

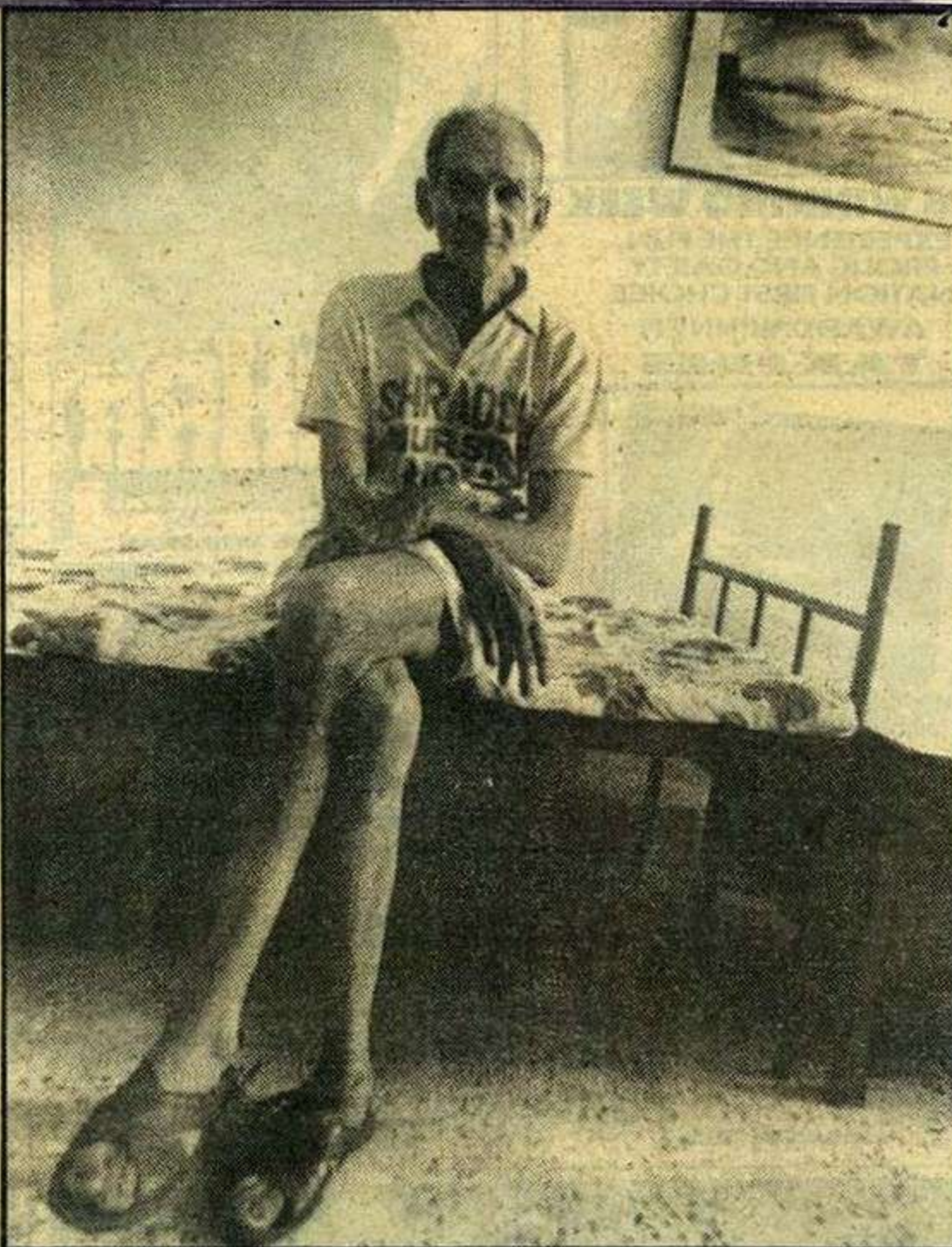
**W**HICH is more painful — losing control over one's body due to no mental control or losing control over one's mind and letting others manhandle one, as is the trend in our society?

Walk into any mental asylum or any home for the mentally ill or for that matter into the house of a family that has one member who is mentally deranged, and chances are that 99 per cent of the time the kaleidoscope of that unfortunate man/woman's life is constantly being shaken up, rearranged by another person in so rude a fashion that it revolts the onlooker.

Mental illness is not so much the inability of a man who has lost control over his mind than that of society to handle his illness. The natural offshoot is that the man is allowed to wander around out on the streets where he simply loses his way forever or is put into institutionalised care from which, in most cases, death seems to be the only way out.

Not all are so uncaring. The Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation, for instance, has made caring for the mentally ill of the streets the aim of its existence. Conceptualised six years ago by three professionals — Bharat Vatwani, Smitha Vatwani, Ghanshyam Bhimani — all MDs in psychiatry, the Foundation has picked up and rehabilitated over 300 such roadside destitutes and pulled them back from the brink of insanity. All this, mind you, in the Vatwani's clinic where they were housed and financed along with the help of Dr. Bhimani.

Seven philanthropic souls recently gave the trio free use of their 2,000 sq. feet flat at Bhayandar where the doctors have now set up a 20-bed hospital. The hospital, inaugurated recently by Sunjay Dutt, is located in the first floor of a residential building. It does not boast of any trappings of a mental hospital. The doors to the hospital are barricaded but when opened, no screams or knife-lunging hysteric



■ **LOOKING AHEAD:** life is not a blank space anymore for Robinson.

shows up. The hospital is clean and all the furniture is in one piece. Some of the patients, numbering seven males and one female, lie or sit around in one large room.

Handsome, light-eyed Munir Khan attracts one's attention. Khan was found on the streets of Borivli eating garbage. He says his father owns a carpenter shop in Riyadh. "Will you help me," he asks. "My passport is with Mr. Amitabh Bachchan. Will you please ask him to give it back to me?"

Within two months of treatment, Khan swam back ashore to the sane world. "He is not yet 100 per cent fit but he can join the mainstream very

soon," says Dr. Vatwani. Then there is the kind, genial Mr. Robinson who hovers around. He was found outside the Jehangir Art Gallery last year. He was picked up by the Foundation and later recovered completely. His brother took him to Baroda. But Robinson ran away from Baroda and came back to his customary place at Jehangir Art Gallery.

"Apparently he does not want to leave us. His brother finances his stay here. Hence he will remain with us for some more time."

Ashok, who has been here for the past one-and-a-half months, is recovering but cannot get rid of some of his past habits like smoking.

— He keeps snooping for dust and dirt below the bed sheet, the bed and the corners of the room until he is firmly reprimanded.

The Foundation picks up the mentally ill from the streets, treats them, rehabilitates them at their own expenses and when they recover, reach them back to their homes where mostly they are accepted with open arms. In the rare cases, where they are not accepted, they are either sent to Mother Theresa's homes or any social institution that helps them to retain their hold on sanity.

"We are unhappy that we have only eight patients over here," says Dr. Vatwani. "We would like to use the hospital to its full capacity. We would also like some occupational therapists to come here and offer their services to the patients so that they can learn some skills which will help them in getting usefully assimilated into society when they recover."

The Vatwanis and Dr. Bhimani have their own private practice. Money earned through private practice is pumped back to serve the mentally ill on the streets. What keeps them going? "We have often been asked, over the past few years, as to why do we do all this? There are thousands of destitutes out there on the streets, walking insane; will treating a few make a difference? How long can we cope with the financial burden of food, clothing, medicines, shelter and the travel expenses involved in reaching the patient to his native place?"

"These are soul-searching questions to which we do not have complete answers. Maybe one, maybe two, maybe ten or twenty have been helped by us, but our work will continue irrespective of the odds."