

# The Indian EXPRESS

NAI CHANDIGARH COIMBATORE DELHI HYDERABAD KOCHI KOZHIKODE MADURAI MUMBAI NAGPUR PUNE THIRUVANANTHAPURAM VADODARA VIJAYAWADA VISAKHAPATNAM ■ LATE CITY ■ MUMBAI ■ SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12, 1998 ■ 16+8=24 PAGES ■ Rs 2.00

## Haven for the homeless

Nivedita Gowda visits Shradha Rehabilitation Centre, where mentally ill patients with no place to go find shelter

**A** dishevelled Sudhir Phadke was found wandering aimlessly at Yogi Nagar in Borivli, muttering to himself. His clothes were in tatters and his hair badly matted. Sudhir believed he was a journalist with The Washington Post. After a traumatic 15 years at the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation, Sudhir, who found himself a misfit there, fell prey to schizophrenia.

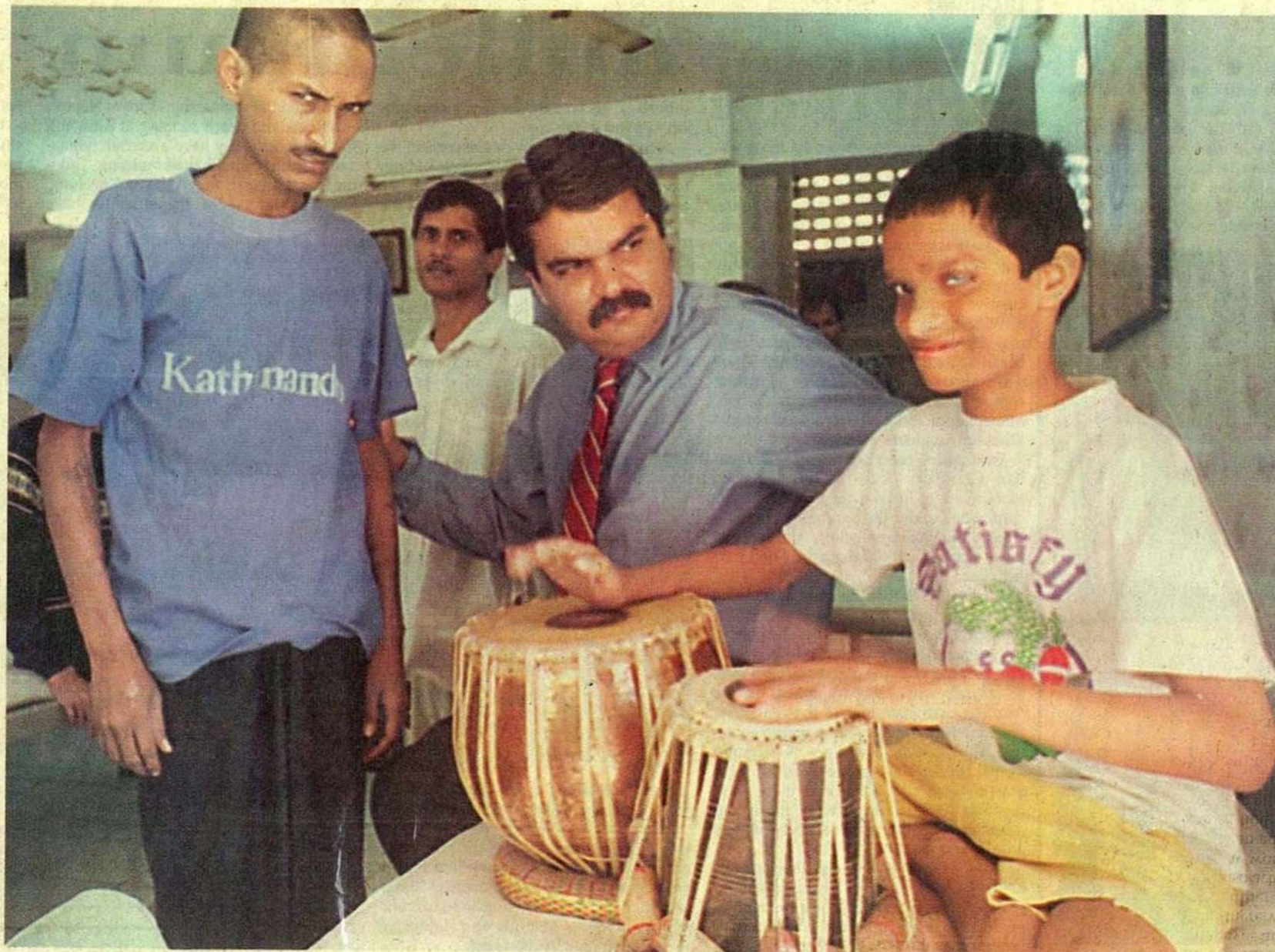
His wife left him, and his friends fleeced his money and inhabited his house. Now, Sudhir roams the streets of Borivli, at the mercy of strangers.

Hemant Thakre, a gold medalist, and professor at JJ School of Arts used to behave and talk like Maqbool Fida Hussain. He would even refuse to wear slippers. Diagnosed a schizophrenic, he lost his job at JJ. He would often sit on the steps at Jehangir Art Gallery, muttering to himself.

Raja Kalid, son of a police inspector from Kashmir, was wandering naked on the streets of Borivli. He was very violent when taken in by social workers. He had to be drugged for many days before they started psychiatric treatment on him.

Apart from the fact that Sudhir, Hemant and Khalid were mentally ill with schizophrenia, they have another thing in common. They were all rescued by the Vatwanis, the doctor couple that founded Shradha Rehabilitation Centre for mentally ill roadside destitutes.

But for the timely intervention from the Vatwanis, Sudhir, Hemant, Khalid and the 20-odd patients at Shradha would have had no hope, left to die on



**WHERE THERE'S A WILL, THERE'S A PLAY: A mentally retarded child who was brought in by the Vatwanis became a master at the art of playing the tabla during his stay there.**

*Picture by Vinayaka Prabhu*

the streets of Mumbai.

At Shradha, Smitha and Bharat Vatwani pick up such people and rein-

state them back life. They even keep the odd patient who finds it hard to be accepted by society at their private

nursing home in Borivli.

Sudhir, who was reinstated at the BMC after he was cured of his illness,

opted for social service. He now engages his time gardening and managing the Shradha office.

because most of the patients are uneducated with little or no knowledge or memory about the place they come

from. "Sometimes," says Smitha, "they even wonder how they landed up in Mumbai. They have absolutely no recollection.

"These patients are mentally ill. They sit in any train and land up anywhere the train takes them. So it becomes very difficult trace their village," she says.

Shradha Foundation presently has three permanent patients. One of them is a woman who was found at Dahisar railway station.

His parents in Andhra Pradesh were contacted and the patient finally left for his home town.

There are scores of such inspiring examples at Shradha. Due to a financial slump, the Vatwanis are finding it extremely difficult to manage even daily expenses. But that is hardly a deterrent to the spirits of this couple.

Recently, they had organised an art exhibition and auction of paintings from some of the most renowned painters in India.

The tremendous response to the exhibition enabled the foundation to buy its own land at Dahisar and build a day-and-night care centre for the mentally ill.

A set of 10 greeting cards with picture of famous paintings are sold for Rs 8 each to further raise funds for Shradha.

But most of the funds for the foundation come from Bharat and Smitha Vatwani's private practice.

The doctors personally escort their patients to their native land and homes. Sometimes finding the correct address is the most Herculean task. This is

because most of the patients are uneducated with little or no knowledge or memory about the place they come

from. "Sometimes," says Smitha, "they even wonder how they landed up in Mumbai. They have absolutely no recollection.

"These patients are mentally ill. They sit in any train and land up anywhere the train takes them. So it becomes very difficult trace their village," she says.

Shradha Foundation presently has three permanent patients. One of them is a woman who was found at Dahisar railway station.

**"The satisfaction of seeing people reunited with their families is satisfaction enough"**

**- Smitha Vatwani**

She was violent and throwing stones at passerby. Her husband and family refused to take her home, even after she was cured. She now helps the nursing staff at Shradha.

Smitha Vatwani divides her time between the nursing home at Borivli and Shradha at Dahisar.

If that is not enough, she even has three adopted kids at her home in Borivli. Life is busy business for this unusually concerned couple.

"I used to find it difficult when I came in the mornings to attend to my patients. Now I come only in the evenings. That way I am free during the day to do whatever I please. And most of the time, I work," says Smitha Vatwani.