

Mind Balm on Streets

Psychiatrist couple treat people with mental disorders wandering on streets, reunite them with families

NEERAD PANDHARIPANDE

BHARAT Vatwani is no ordinary psychiatrist. He is one with a golden heart, a fact 3,000 families would vouch for. The Borivali-based psychiatrist Vatwani has been reuniting disoriented people with psychological disorders, wandering aimlessly on the streets, with their families.

He vividly remembers the first mentally ill person, a schizophrenic, he had picked up from the streets and treated.

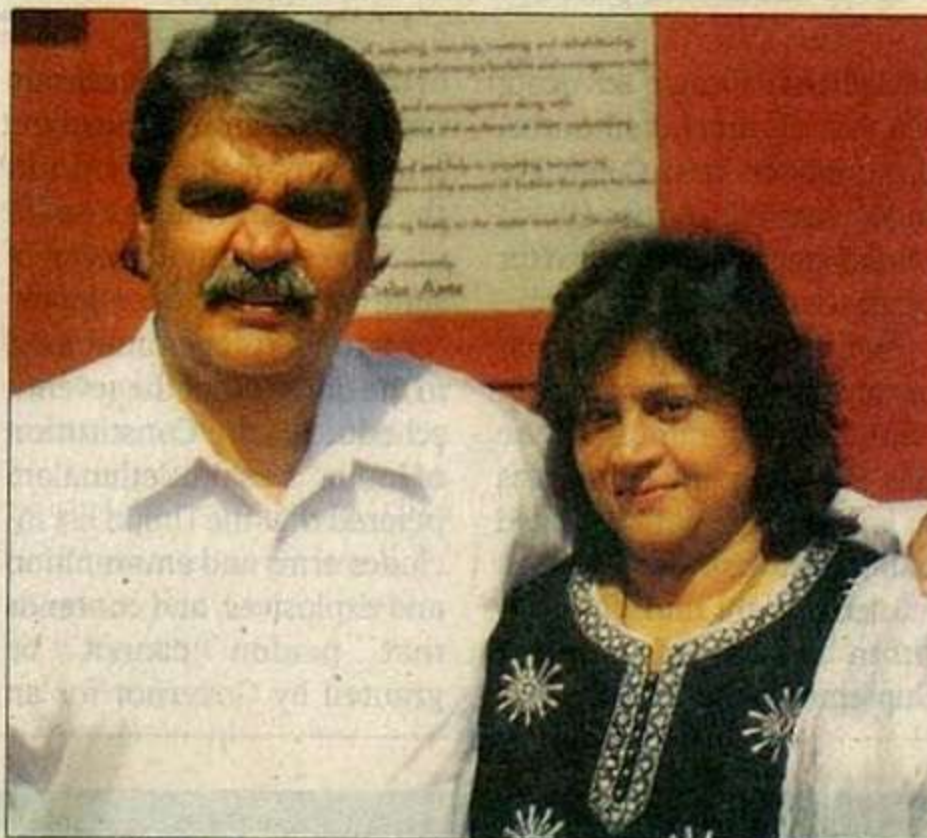
"When I saw him, he was on the roadside drinking water from a gutter using a coconut shell. He was a schizophrenia patient and had run away from home. Later, it turned out he was from Andhra Pradesh and was a science graduate. I started working for such people," Vatwani said.

For the past 25 years, Vatwani has been working for the mental health of people who are often described in dismissive terms like "vagrant" and "tramp".

So far, Vatwani says he has treated about 3,000 such people and reunited them with their families. He also has a private practice as a psychiatrist. His wife Smitha is also a psychiatrist and helps him treat such patients.

"The general perception about such people is that they act in strange ways deliberately and voluntarily. However, they may have genuine psychological problems, which can be treated," he says.

The work of helping mentally ill persons found on the streets is mostly funded through donations from people.



Bharat and Smitha Vatwani have reunited 3,000 people.

In several cases, Bharat and Smitha's NGO Shradhha Rehabilitation Foundation has faced difficulties in reuniting mentally ill people with their families. "Especially in the case of people from remote tribal areas, some patients could not recollect the name of the village or even the state they come from. However, we have a team of social workers and counsellors from across the country. They help us get an idea of where the patient could be from and try to contact their relatives."

In one case, about two years ago, a man from Orissa was rescued and reunited with his family by the organisation after he spent 16 years on the streets. He was schizophrenic and had wandered away from his house.

Vatwani says families of patients are generally co-operative and understanding and accept them back.

Most people rescued are found to suffer either from schizophrenia or bipolar mood disorders. Bipolar

mood disorder is characterised cases where patient fluctuate from extreme depression to hyperactivity.

He says as far as awareness on such disorders and empathy of people towards them are concerned, it has improved.

"Awareness has definitely increased as compared to when we started our work. People come forward and tell us about cases where persons on street suffer from psychological disorders and need treatment. That is certainly a good thing," says Vatwani.