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At Shradha, the mentally ill are taught farming, gardening and water harvesting

A psychiatrist for the sake of the forsaken

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AS psychiatrist Bharat Vatwani was snacking with his wife at a restaurant, he saw a man scooping water from a gutter with an empty coconut shell and drinking it. This was in 1988. To extend help to the homeless who have mental disorders, Vatwani with wife Smitha founded an NGO.

Shradha Rehabilitation Foundation, an NGO headed by the duo, is built on the lines of Baba Amte's Anandwan. It offers treatment, food and lodging to the homeless who are mentally ill. Around 30 people engaged with the NGO help the psychiatrist and his wife in their pursuits. "It all began in 1988 when I had just become a psychiatrist. As I ate with my wife at a restaurant, we saw a man who scooped water from a gutter using an empty coconut shell and drank it. We went over to him and asked him if he would come with us. Imagine our amazement when we learnt that he was a science graduate," said Vatwani.

This incident laid the foundation stone for Shradha.

It was started as a small project in Dahisar and registered as an NGO. The couple started working for the homeless who are mentally ill.

In 1993, the couple rehabilitated a man who earlier worked as a lecturer with the JJ School of Arts. "A personal meeting with the then education secretary, six months of bureaucratic paperwork and several rounds of Mantralaya got him his job back. A lot of awareness, goodwill and sympathy was generated for the work that our NGO was doing. Somebody suggested that we could have a fund raising art exhibition. And in a collective outpouring of goodwill, over 150 artists from all over India gave their paintings

and sculptures for the cause," said Vatwani.

Shradha was later shifted to a 6.5 acre plot of land in Karjat, from where it currently operates. Around 60 to 80 mentally ill people live in Shradha. In order to keep them occupied, they are

taught gardening, farming and water harvesting. Once they are fit to be rehabilitated, members of Shradha

set to reunite them with their families. "Once they can recall their residential addresses, our teams leave for their hometowns. With the help of the local police, the families are tracked down. It is a challenge, but it gets easier once you know how to go about it," said Vatwani.

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help at hand