

SPECIAL FEATURE

FAR FROM THE MADDING STREETS

A psychiatrist couple in Bombay restores the dignity and sanity of destitute schizophrenics

MUD-CAKED and clad in tattered clothes, Vijay was a familiar sight at Berrivi in suburban Bombay. As familiar as the dustbin he lived next to and ate out of, often fighting for leftovers with stray dogs. Most passersby did not give him a second look. A few paused, to laugh at the 'mad man' who spoke gibberish. Only one man stopped.

"I had seen him every day for two weeks. Once I saw him scooping water from the gutter into a coconut shell and drinking it," says Dr Bharat Vatwani, a psychiatrist. Dr Bharat asked Vijay to join him for a cup of tea. They then hopped into an autorickshaw which took them to Shradddha, his nursing home for the mentally disturbed. After an overdue bath, the malnourished Vijay was fed glucose, calcium and vitamins generously for a few days. He was suddenly, noticeably put on a course of anti-psychotic drugs. Vijay had been driven to the pits not by poverty but by schizophrenia, a mental disorder marked by disconnection between thoughts, feelings and action. In common parlance the disorder is called 'split personality.' After two weeks of treatment, Vijay started speaking coherently and behaving normally. And he poured out his story. A science graduate, he was a resident of Cuddapah in Andhra Pradesh and had come to Bombay in search of a job. He was staying at an uncle's house in Chembur. One fine day he strolled out and did not go back.

"Sometimes a victim of schizophrenia may be staying just a few blocks away from home but is unable to make his way back," says Dr Bharat.

He believes that Vijay became a schizophrenic because of the ignorance of his family and lack of proper medical treatment.

After getting Vijay's postal address, Dr Bharat contacted his father, an ex-zilla parishad superintendent, and asked him to take his son home. "Initially, he was reluctant because he believed Vijay would continue giving problems. But we reassured him that his son was all right. When he came, he was very happy to see the improvement in Vijay," says Dr Smitha Vatwani, Dr Bharat's wife. A gold medalist in psychiatry, Dr Smitha was a lecturer in Cooper Hospital before she married Dr Bharat.

"Psychiatry still has a stigma attached to it. Very few private hospitals and nursing homes admit such patients. Nurses are afraid of the patients



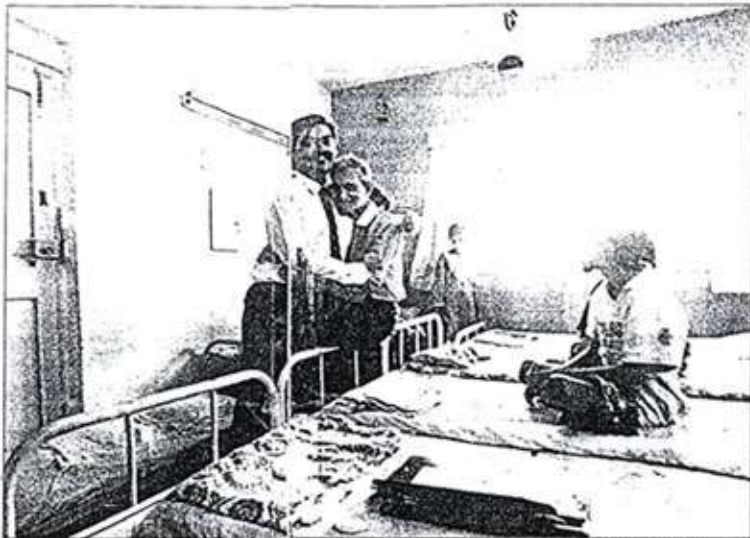
The hug and smiles say it all. Dr Bharat with a patient (top), a recovered Vijay with his father (below)

of beds. Patients are often refused admission if they are not accompanied by relative. Private hospitals that do admit psychiatric patients place many restrictions on them.

Realising that there really was no place for the mentally-disturbed destitutes, the Vatwanis decided to set up Shradddha. Vijay was the first patient to be admitted. In the two years since it was founded, around

and refuse to give them injections. Even doctors are not willing to take care of psychiatric patients. They feel it will upset other patients," explains Dr Bharat. Admission is difficult even in the government hospitals owing to lack

200 patients have been treated at Shradddha. However, it cannot accommodate more than eight patients at a time. The Vatwanis also treat other psychiatric patients separately. While both categories of patients are housed



PICS: SANJAY PANDEA

in the same building, they are kept in separate wards. "Relatives of other patients do not like destitutes to be kept in the same ward," explained Dr Bharat.

SCHIZOPHRENIA could happen to anyone. Like it did to Hemant Thakare, 32, a gold medalist from the prestigious J.J. School of Art. A brilliant student, one of his paintings was presented to the Maharashtra minister of education. Hemant joined his alma mater in 1986 as an assistant lecturer in fine arts. His warmth and commitment made him a favourite with the students and the staff.

Gradually, however, the confident young man became psychotic. "I don't know what happened. I couldn't teach," recalls Hemant, whose family is in Amravati. In 1989, his service was terminated. Hemant had been sharing accommodation with another person in Vashi. Taking advantage of his mental state, his roommate slammed the door on Hemant's face and he found himself on the streets. Scared and lost, he drifted to the Jehangir Art Gallery and started living on the steps outside.



Wedded to the cause, The doctor-couple outside Shradddha

The Vatwanis usually approach a potential patient with a warm smile which is accompanied by a friendly gesture like putting an arm around the person's shoulders and offering him or her a cup of tea. If the offer is accepted, he or she is brought to Shradddha.

Some of his students who visited the place brought him food and clothes. The workers in the gallery who found him harmless if a trifle strange, always got him released when he was picked up by the police. But once he spent eight days in jail. They used to take me to court. The magistrate used to ask me something, then they would let me go," remembers Hemant. His family is not bothered about him. "Not even one member of his family has come to meet him," says Dr Bharat.

Hemant's students who had heard of Shradddha, took him there. "I don't remember coming here," says Hemant. "He refused to eat the first few days. We had to sedate him and give him IV," says Dr Bharat.

Hemant's condition improved gradually. His colleagues and students visited him often to cheer him up. After he had recovered completely, the Vatwanis went to the education secretary and requested that Hemant be reinstated. "We knew he loved teaching and was very good at his work," says Dr Bharat.

Their efforts paid off and Hemant was back in J.J., a year after he had been sacked. Now, he is due to be promoted again. Hemant loves to spend time at Shradddha, helping the doctors. He has escorted around 15 people to their homes in different parts of the country, after they recovered. "It is wonderful to see the joy of the family when they are united. I understand what they are going through," says Hemant. "I don't feel different from anyone else now. Yes, I want to get married," he adds with a smile.

It hasn't always been smiles though at Shradddha. Recently, a phone call was made to the institution asking someone to go and pick up a young woman from Wadala railway station. When they saw her, the doctors realised that she was the same patient they had sent to Mother Teresa's Home in Santa Cruz, two years ago. She was first picked up from Dabhan where she walked around stark naked with a pack of stray dogs at her heels. After 20 days of treatment she revealed that she belonged to Vellore in Tamil Nadu. But no more information was forth-