Shraddha Foundation brings schizophrenia back to reality

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MANIBEN would have been just another homemaker had it not been for her mental illness. As a schizophrenic who was also the victim of wife-beating, she came a decade ago with her two children, abandoning her spouse in Mehsana in Gujarat. Lost in the labyrinth of this callous city, with no one to turn to for help, Maniben slumbered, sometimes surviving on contaminated water and eating leftovers. She lost one of her children before psychiatrists Smita and Bharat Vatwani of the Shradhha Foundation at Dahisar admitted her in their institute for treatment.

The Shradhha Foundation is dedicated to the care of persons afflicted with schizophrenia. Dr Smita Vatwani expands on the illness. "Schizophrenia is a mental illness in which a person's thinking is impaired due to chemical changes in the brain. The schizophrenic loses touch with reality, smilies, laughs and talks incoherently to himself. Schizophrenics live in a world of make-believe in which they are completely delinked from reality." Dr Bharat Vatwani adds, "For instance, the patient imagines himself to be a VIP or a close associate of a well-known personality." Clinically, schizophrenia is an abnormally elevated level of dopamine, a chemical in the brain. Prakash Gokhale, 50, a management graduate from IIM was working in a senior capacity with a pest control firm when he was afflicted with schizo- phrenia about 15 years ago. Prakash was picked up from the roadside in Dadar by volunteers of the Shradhha Foundation. Today, Prakash has no recollection of the course of his life turned from the cozy comforts of his office and home to the streets. Shunned by his wife and children, he does not even know whereabouts today. "They have moved away from the house where I once lived," he says with a blank expression on his face.

For Prakash, his earlier life is a forgotten dream. Now he is reviving his life with the help and care of the Shradhha Foundation.

Indeed, care and love is what a schizophrenic needs most. "But people often beat up and ridicule patients, treating them as though they were the scum of society," says Dr Smita. "They are often tagged as 'insane' and 'mad' and the hackneyed attitude is to shun them," adds Dr Bharat. "The social ostracism stems from a lack of awareness and a misconception which needs to be dispelled," he feels. Dr Bharat Vatwani rules that while other underprivileged sections of society are often given a fair chance to live life, we have chosen to blindfold ourselves to the mentally challenged.

Care to this discouraging response, Shradhha Foundation is a saviour for schizophrenics, turning purely on donations and contributions from well-wishers who alone are helping the foundation.

Despite the fact that the trust operates on a shoe-string budget, "Shradhha Foundation also provides financial aid to patients and helps them reunite with their families once memory floods back. "It is a satisfying experience to see them in communion with their family after years of wandering away from home," says Supriya, a social worker attached to the foundation.

"Our first patient was a young graduate of microbiology who was picked up from near a garbage can. After three weeks of treatment, he spoke in perfect English and was able to tell us his address," recounts Dr Bharat. "He had come to Mumbai from Andhra Pradesh and is today married and has a child," beams Dr Smita. "At the end of the day, we feel satisfied that we've contributed our mite to society, though it's not adequate enough given the number of schizophrenics in the city," she concludes.