From the roadside to mainstream

Mini Pant Zachariah reports on the efforts of the Shradhha Rehabilitation Foundation to resettle mentally-affected destitutes.

A 35-year-old disheveled man with a head full of lice, incongruous speech and a vacant look in the eyes was picked up in December last year by Shradhha Rehabilitation Foundation from a Borivli roadside. Suffering from schizophrenia, he fancied himself to be a Washington Post correspondent.

Surviving on alms and savouring his delusions of grandeur, oscillating between psychotic breakdowns and brief spells of near sanity, he would have continued as a vagabond but for a chance happening.

After watching a video clipping of the foundation on cable TV, a resident of Yojnagar, from where Sudhir was picked up, informed Bharat and Smitha Vatwani, psychiatrists at the foundation about him.

A month later, when he was taken to hospital, it was learnt that he was a Zilla Parisad official's son from Andrha Pradesh. He had wandered around and probably boarded a train which brought him to Bombay.

His parents who had lost hopes of finding him were thrilled when the Vatwansis reunited them. "The boy who holds a diploma in medical lab technology is working at his native place," said Bharat.

Most of these cases are of people who have strayed from their parental care. Their parents are willing to go back to the treatments if they are Shivani and Smitha Vatwani, psychiatrists at the foundation, and they have been treating them successfully for some time. These medicines are available at the local government hospitals,” said Smitha adding that most people follow their instructions. She, however, admitted cases of relapse.

Most pathetic was the case of Santoshi, a young woman from Ambawadi, whose photo is on the foundation's advertisements displayed on suburban trains.

"She was a sight to see when we brought her here. Her tight garments had cut into her skin. She had lice and ulcer. After months of treatment, we located her family. She is at home and visits the clinic occasionally for therapy," said the Vatwansis.

The foundation spends up to Rs. 1,000 per month on medication and food of each patient. At any point of time, there are five or six such patients accommodated at the 20-bed private clinic of the Vatwansis in Borivli. The money for their upkeep comes through donations from institutions, public and former patients. A major art exhibition auction is being organised by the trust from October 18 to 24, 1993 to raise funds.

The idea of the exhibition was spotted by Hemant Thakare, a lecturer at J.J. School of Arts who was once in Vatwansis care. A gold medalist, Thakare was struck off the faculty rolls of the school when he had a mental breakdown.

"Jobless and mentally unstable, he took to streets, collapsing one day outside Ichangir Art Gallery. The foundation which took him under its aegis only treated him but also took up his case with the Education Secretary and got him reinstated.

Well known artists - Anjolie Ela Menon, Bikas Bhat-charya, J Swaminathan, Manjit Bawa, Jatin Das, Manu Parekh, G R Santosh, Akbar Padamsee, Prabhaker Barve and Badrinath among others - have agreed to participate in the auction.

"Artists are very sensitive to the cause of the emotionally disturbed," says Smitha.

The Vatwansis who have treated up to 150 deranged destitutes so far, pick up only psychiatric cases now and avoid all drug addicts, alcoholics and the old. "Our aim is to help those whose tragedies are not of their own making."

Psychosis is an illness which impairs the thinking of the patient. Unable to meet the daily expenses, he draws down withdrawing into a world of make-believe which does not pose threats to him. Once cured, rehabilitation of the patient is necessary not only to give him a sense of usefulness but also to ward off disturbing thoughts.

"This is why we made great efforts to get Sudhir back on his job," said Smitha.

"Although P M Kale, Director engineering services at BMC, was most sympathetic, Sudhir is still to be reinstated. His file has been pending at BMC for the last four months," said Bharat.

Well-groomed, Sudhir assists the Vatwansis with odd-jobs at the foundation waiting for the BMC to clear his papers. With Kale retiring on August 1, his wait could prolong.