

Dear Friend,

This is a personal letter.

Having gone through the life stories of many legendary social workers, I have come to realise that at the heart of any good social work are strong deep rooted emotions, an inner outcry against injustice or social disparity, the associated intrinsic desire for change and last but not the least a perseverance of belief to outlast all beliefs that Good and God shall prevail.

Not sure whether right or wrong, I share the emotional genesis of our work with you.

I lost my father at a young age and came up the hard way. In the process I naturally identified with people who were hard up. Coincidentally my wife was a psychiatrist who also had a soft corner for people / patients who were hard up and down and out.

One day while sitting in a restaurant, we noticed a young boy who was horribly skinny, dirty, dishevelled and in a really bad shape. We realised that he was a schizophrenic and just while we were watching, he picked up an empty coconut shell next to him, dipped it into the nullah flowing nearby and drank the gutter water in a single shot. That was the turning point of our lives. Spontaneously we crossed the road, assisted him to come with us (which given his weak state was very easy for us) and brought him to our nursing home. We nursed him, treated him with appropriate psychiatric medicines and gradually he improved. He turned out to be a BSc graduate whose father was the Superintendent of a Zilla Parishad in Andhra Pradesh. Mental illness could affect the best of the best and reduce a person to pathetically inhuman conditions. And suddenly we realised that there was no organisation dealing with such people.

It has been 33 years since then. Sad to say that innumerable Psychiatrists and NGO's have come into existence after that, and while some NGO's other than us have sprung up over the years dealing with these wandering mentally ill, we continue to be the almost the only NGO in the whole of India run by qualified Psychiatrists that services these marginalized members of our society and treats/rehabilitates them professionally.

What started as one or two destitutes at a time gradually increased in number. Well-wishers suggested that we get ourselves registered as an NGO and thus was born Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation.

The next turning point came when we picked up an Ex-Lecturer from the prestigious J. J. School of Arts. Ending up on the roads because of neglected/untreated mental illness, he had literally been reduced to a caricature skeleton. One of the most difficult cases of our career, it took over 3-4 months for him to recover. He was a nice soul with a lot of well-wishers both in his colleague faculty members and his students. They suggested that we should try and re-instate him in his job. A personal meeting with the then Secretary of Education Smt. Kumud Bansal, and six months of bureaucratic paper work and rounds of the Govt. Mantralaya building saw him get 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 140 artists from all over India gave their paintings / sculptures for the cause.

Land was purchased at Dahisar and a separate institution was born, dealing with the plight of the mentally ill roadside destitutes. Though work was going on okay, somewhere we felt that what we were doing was not enough. In fact till today we feel that what we have done is not enough.

The next turning point which really was the genesis of the Karjat project came by fluke (or perhaps our unwritten destiny) when I spontaneously decided to go to Baba Amte's place for a visit. I had vaguely heard about him, though was not a hardcore follower of his work. I and my friends were in my car and en route dropped a recovered female roadside destitute at Wardha, and thence proceeded to Hemalkasa in the interiors of Maharashtra where Baba Amte was housed at his son Prakash Amte's project. Roughly 100 km away from his place, we came across a mentally ill schizophrenic roadside destitute who was in chains. Possibly he must have had violent tendencies and someone had chained his hands and legs and he was walking with the chains. It was a macabre sight given the fact that the road was through a dense jungle and there was not even a soul in sight. My social worker asked him whether he would like to come with us. He refused. In all fairness I was also in a double mind whether to take him in. We drove further down for 10-15 kms. when the gathering darkness and my conscience got the better of me. We drove back, and upon reaching him I got down and with all my psychiatric guile convinced him to sit in the car. He had been passing urine and motions in his clothes since God knows when and was absolutely filthy. We removed his clothes, put a chaddar (blanket) around him and put him in the car. Since I had no first hand interaction with either Baba Amte or his son Prakash, I was a little bit nervous as to what would be their reaction. When we reached their place, I explained to them the nature of our work, the peculiar circumstances in which we had found the destitute-patient and requested Prakash to relieve him of his chains, so that we could take him back with us to Mumbai.

Believe me, the greatness of the people whom I was meeting struck me when in all humbleness and humility, Prakash personally sat down with a chisel and hammer and gently removed the chains. It was delicate work given the fact that the chisel could have hit the bone if placed wrongly. But he did it and Baba Amte lying in his adjacent cot was watching the whole process silently. The next day when I woke up I found that Baba was awake and was in tears. Upon questioning him he said that he had not slept the whole night wondering how a man could walk with chains, and in fact he had taken the discarded chains and had attempted to walk with them. Such was the sensitivity of the man.

His sensitivity drew me to him and when he came to know in detail of our work, he was drawn to me. It was bonding at its emotional best. We were alone and had all the time in the world to interact, exchange thoughts and feelings. While appreciating my work he chided me to do more and when I walked out I knew that I had to do more. He disclosed that he had come across mental illness at close quarters and that it was his dream to do something for psychiatric illness, a dream which remained unfulfilled, a dream which he wanted me to fulfil.

I talked with all my other trustees and looking at my motivational level they went ahead with the expansion plans. Land was purchased at Karjat and brick by brick the project was setup. I was in regular touch with Baba Amte and he was so fired up about the project that he agreed to come for the inauguration. In fact he was all gung ho about coming. Unfortunately ill health caught up with him and he requested Prakash to do the honours of the inauguration, which Prakash graciously obliged, and thus on March 30th 2006 the Karjat Project became operational and was flagged off.

We have in the last 15 years reunited 7367 mentally ill roadside destitutes with their families. Some destitutes have been separated from their families for over 20 years, some more.

Our social workers have become real professionals at tracing out addresses and have by now travelled the length and breadth of the country. The poverty, lack of psychiatric awareness, and the abysmally nil facilities are numbing. Sometimes almost demoralising. How much can one NGO do, how much still remains to be done. And in all the depressing moments, if there is one inspiration which always comes to the fore, it is Baba Amte. Keep going was his mantra, it has now become our mantra.

As regards our future plans, we are now thinking that when the reunion is good/excellent, a lot of goodwill and curiosity is generated. It is the best time for awareness, as everybody is ready to absorb it. Our team hopes to spend an additional couple of days at the village level, gather Gram Panchayat organisational force, hand out simple language leaflets about mental illness, and the fact that we are dealing with treatable illnesses. Where we have majorly differed from all other NGO's dealing with destitutes of any kind, is that our main plank/focus/thrust all along has been that mental illness is a treatable entity. And that if awareness was created in society on this very basic issue, then a great deal of psychiatric morbidity could be prevented in society.

Unfortunately mental illness does not have many takers as far as donations are concerned, and occasionally because of paucity of funds, we have not been able to move on to this next level. But someday we will. As the Raj Kapoor, Mukesh song goes "woh subah kabhi toh aayegi". Until then we keep plugging away, with the sensitivity and resilience born of years of struggle.

Whether your kind self contributes or not, is a matter of conjecture and optimistic hope, but our work will continue, because by now, this is our unwritten destiny. There has to be a perseverance of belief to outlast all beliefs that good and God shall prevail.

Regards

Dr. Bharat Vatwani