Centre for mentally ill at Dahisar upsets local residents

By Sophie Menazes

MUMBAI: The Shradha Rehabilitation Foundation's recently established rehabilitation centre for mentally ill patients at Dahisar has given rise to a controversy and become a cause for concern and anxiety among local residents, particularly women and children.

Says clinical psychologist Meeta Shah, who lives in the neighbourhood, "It is unfair to expose such patients to normal people as it makes them suffer from a complex. Besides, they have a tendency to be careless regarding their clothing. Considering that our high-rise buildings overlook their rooms, such acts could have an adverse effect on youngsters and children. Moreover, the environment provided for these patients should be spacious, open and environmentally friendly."

The centre's two-storeyed building, which is still under construction, presently houses nine inmates — two females, six males and a child — in one room. "The incomplete structure lacks proper water supply, electricity, medical facilities and food arrangements, which are prerequisites for any rehabilitation centre, nursing home or hospital," complain members of New Link Road Residents' Association, Dahisar.

"The absence of proper security measures (like a high compound wall with barbed wire fencing) could make residents victims of untoward incidents, for which the mentally ill cannot be held responsible," they add.

The residents said they appreciated the aim of the project but were against its location. They would welcome the conversion of the same structure into a nursing home for the aged, alcoholics or drug addicts. Alternately, they insist that the foundation should sell the property and buy more land at cheaper rates at either Mira Road or Naigaon for their mentally-ill patients.

However, psychiatrists Bharat and Smitha Vatwani, who founded the centre, say that such suggestions will remain mere suggestions unless the residents themselves contribute funds for the new centre.

Indeed, the need for better services and support for mentally-ill destitutes prompted the Vatwani's to launch the project. In the last seven years, they have picked up nearly 600 patients off the streets and brought them to their nursing home at Borivli for treatment.

But they felt that the existing facilities at the Borivli centre could not satisfactorily meet the needs of the mentally ill. They then decided to buy a 1,400-sq ft plot from the proceeds of an art exhibition titled, 'Shradha Samarpan', in 1993. The construction work, which commenced in January 1996, is expected to finish this month.

The nursing home plan was approved by the Brihanmumbai municipal corporation, according to the Vatwani. The rehab centre will provide for 40 beds — 20 for females on the first floor and 20 for males on the second. The Vatwani feel the 24-hour water supply from underground and overhead tanks should be adequate.

In addition to the grill work and locks on doors at the centre, doctors are willing to chain patients who are likely to cause a problem for the neighbourhood.