Painting for a good cause

WHEN Bharati Vatwani rescued an old man from the pavement outside the Jehangir Art Gallery in Bombay two years ago, he didn’t expect any reward for it. Vatwani and his wife Smita, both psycho-artists, treated him and then helped him to get back his job at the JJ School of Art.

Well, one good turn deserves another. Hemant Thakare, the man who was once picked up from the pavement, is today putting out a giant art show to aid the Vatwani in their work with the mentally damaged. Thakare has worked round the clock to get more than 100 artists to take part in the show, Shraddha Samarpak, an exhibition of paintings, etchings and sculptures, which opens at the Jehangir Art Gallery and the Artist’s Centre on October 11. The proceeds from this exhibition will go to the Vatwani’s Shradha Rehabilitation Foundation.

The list of artists who have contributed to the cause reads like a veritable who’s who of the Indian art world. There’s H. Raza, Sakti Burman, Ganesh Pyne, Parithosh Sen and Abhijit Panigrahi. Besides, there will also be Manu Parekh, Krishna Khanna, Krishna Rao, Anupam Caur, Anjali Ela Menon, Bishan Khurju and Vivan Sundaram.

Not all the paintings will be auctioned. About 20 odd paintings will be up for auction while the others will be sold at predetermined prices. Prices vary, but the average is estimated to be around Rs 20,000.

The money raised by the show will be used by the Vatwani to open a 50-bed hospital-cum-vocational training centre for mentally disabled persons. For several years now they have run a small centre, the Shradha Rehabilitation Foundation, where they cured beggars and other destitutes picked up from the streets. Now, thanks to Thakare they may be able to enlarge their vision.

Although the Shradha Rehabilitation Foundation was officially registered two years ago, the Vatwani have been rehabilitating the ‘wandering souls’ since 1985.

It all started when the Vatwanis chanced upon Vijaun, a young man, who constantly haunted the garbage cans near their nursing home. Both Bharati and Smita Vatwani decided to treat him. To their surprise they found that this man who had subsisted on waste from the bin was, in fact, highly educated.

The successful rehabilitation of an educated mentally handicapped youth is a positive reinforcement, says Smita, and soon the Vatwani were on the lookout for their next patient.

Today, they have cured nearly 200 such cases. The Vatwani have derived inspiration in their efforts from Mother Teresa. Says Bharat: “Just as Mother Teresa’s Shanti Dham is for the destitute and dying, Shradha Rehabilitation’s Foundation is for the destitute and mentally ill.” Often the two institutions collaborate in the past by referring cases to each other.

The destitutes the Vatwani pick up are mainly psychotics with a majority suffering from schizophrenia. According to them, it is easy to distinguish the psychotic from an ordinary beggar. Says Bharat: “Unlike the normal beggar who will grab you if you offer money or food, these people are fearful. Also, you will find them laughing or talking to themselves, or conducting imaginary conversations. If one extreme is violent behaviour, at the other extreme, they may not speak at all and display extreme paranoia.”

So cut off from reality are some of these people that they just wander out of their houses, getting on to trains or buses. Which is how they end up in urban centres or teeming points.

The treatment for these cases primarily consists of a course of anti-psychotic drugs along with nutritional inputs. The first step, however, is to clean the patient since invariably they are in an unclean condition. Also, most of the patients picked up suffer from skin diseases or diarrhoea and have to be treated for these too.

Sometimes the mental illness is so acute that the patients have to be tied down or locked up.

“It is only after two to three weeks when their physical and mental health has improved that we question them about their whereabouts,” says Smita. The facts divulged are reconfirmed after a month when the patient’s condition has further stabilised.

The rehabilitation programme includes getting the patient back home and uniting him with his relatives. Alternatively, they try to find their patients a job. It is only when the patient has recovered that the relatives are contacted, as otherwise they could stop the treatment midway. This itself is a difficult task since the destitutes don’t always remember a proper postal address.

Very often the cured patient has a relapse as they fail to take the prescribed medication. Apart from medication, counselling has an equally important role. Most of the patients lack the confidence to go back to society, says Smita. Thakare, for instance, initially refused to go back to his teaching job and had to be pushed to accept the month’s trial offer that the dean of JJ School made. Even today, he is on mild medication and stays in the nursing home where he helps out by escorting destitutes back home.

Another success story for the Vatwani is Sunit Phadke, who worked as a sub-engineer with the Bombay Municipal Corporation for 16 years. Bharat and Smita have not only helped Phadke return to work but they have also helped him get back his job.

Of course, there are plenty of failures and these cost a lot. It needs at least Rs 5,000 for a minimum of two months’ treatment. And usually the treatment costs much more as patients can take a long time to recover. Escorting patients back to their homes is an additional financial burden. At present, the Vatwani rely on donations from Rotary and other organisations as well as from the families of patients they’ve treated.

Although initially, the Vatwani only took one destitute at a time as they had only a five-bed clinic, they now have room to take in two destitutes in their 20-bed clinic. The remaining beds are kept for private patients. Bharat also prefers to pick up destitutes in the age group of 10 to 30, since it means a higher turnover.

But once the clinic materialises, there will be no bar on age. The plan is to set up a separate clinic here for mentally ill destitutes while the present clinic will be only for private patients. Bharat says if the show is a success, Hemant Thakare, in his own small way will have done his bit for the mentally ill.