A refuge for the damned

The Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation, Bhayander, is a haven for mentally ill destitutes who roam the city's streets

By Sulekha Nair

It is more painful losing control over one's body due to no mental control or losing control over one's mind and letting others manipulate one, as is the trend in our society.

Walk into any mental asylum or any home for the mentally ill or for that matter into the house of a family that has one member who is mentally deranged, and chances are that 99 percent of the time the kaleidoscope of that unfortunate man/woman's life is constantly being shaken up, rearranged by another person in such a fashion that it revolts the onlooker.

Mental illness is not so much the inability of a man who has lost control over his mind than that of society to handle his illness. The natural offshoot is that the man is allowed to wander around on the streets where he simply loses his way forever or is put into institutionalised care from which, in most cases, death seems to be the only way out.

Not all are so uncaring. The Shraddha Rehabilitation Foundation, for instance, has made caring for the mentally ill of the streets the aim of its existence. Conceptualised six years ago by three professionals – Bharat Vatwani, Smita Vatwani, Champshyam Bhimani – all MDs in psychiatry, the Foundation has picked up and rehabilitated over 300 such roadside destitutes and pulled them back from the brink of insanity. All this, mind you, in the Vatwani's clinic where they were housed and financed along with the help of Dr. Bhimani.

Seven philanthropic souls recently gave the trio free use of their 2,000 sq. feet flat at Bhayander where the doctors have now set up a 20-bed hospital. The hospital, inaugurated recently by Sunjay Dutt, is located in the first floor of a residential building. It does not boast of any trappings of a mental hospital, but the doctors are barricaded but when opened, no screams or knife-lunging hysterics shows up. The hospital is clean and all the furniture is in one piece. Some of the patients, numbering seven males and one female, lie or sit around in one large room.

Handsome, light-eyed Munir Khan attracts one's attention. Khan was found on the streets of Borivali eating garbage. He says his father owns a carpenter shop in Riyadh. "Will you help me," he asks. "My passport is with Mr. Amitabh Bachchan. Will you please ask him to give it back to me?"

Within two months of treatment, Khan swam back ashore to the same world. "He is not yet 100 percent fit but he can join the mainstream very soon," says Dr. Vatwani. Then there is the kind, genial Mr. Robinson who hovers around. He was found outside the Jehangir Art Gallery last year. He was picked up by the Foundation and later recovered completely. His brother took him to Baroda. But Robinson ran away from Baroda and came back to his customary place at Jehangir Art Gallery.

"Apparently he does not want to leave us. His brother finances his stay here. Hence he will remain with us for some more time."

Ashok, who has been here for the past one-and-a-half months, is recovering but cannot get rid of some of his past habits like smoking.