

The Banyan

.....*She calls out to the man on the street, 'Sir, can you help me? It's cold and I've nowhere to sleep, is there somewhere you can tell me'...* so goes the poignant lyrics of a timeless classic which we have heard a countless times. And in our mind comes Nirmala. Nirmala's story is one of hope and will surely touch the hearts of all, as it touched ours.

Nirmala, a woman in her late twenties, lived with her parents in a small town in Madhya Pradesh. Suffering from schizophrenia, she experienced frequent bouts of hallucinations. One day, in a mental state of turmoil, she wandered away from home. After eight months of roaming aimlessly, lost to herself and the world, Nirmala found herself in Chennai, far away from home in Madhya Pradesh, alone in a cruel city that refused to acknowledge her presence. Delusional, lost, and penniless, she wandered the streets of Chennai in her tattered rags and matted hair. She slept on the roads and ate what little she could scavenge. And then hope stepped into Nirmala's world of apparitions, in the form of an organisation called The Banyan. And within its sanctuary, over time, Nirmala healed. At times she was tormented by voices and figures no one else could see, however, medication, time and unstinting love brought her succour. After four months of care at The Banyan, Nirmala was able to communicate a clear address to their social workers.

Meanwhile, Nirmala's parents had searched the entire northern countryside, desperately looking for their daughter. Her mother had taken to feeding and clothing any person she saw living on the streets, in the hope that someone, somewhere, would show the same kindness to her daughter. One day, a phone call from Chennai was the miracle that a family suffering the pain of losing a child for the past one year, had been praying for.

April 26, 2003, saw a touching reunion take place at The Banyan. Mother and daughter remained locked in an embrace that could not be broken. The father, overcome with emotion, could only watch numbly, as tears continued to flow.

The Banyan has many more stories of homeless women, drawn from the depths of despair and mental delusion, who after appropriate intervention and treatment, are rehabilitated with their families and lead an edifying and productive life. The strength that each woman carries within her, the joy of each impossible reunion, of a mother who never thought she could see her daughter again, of each father who cried silently as someone he cherished so deeply was reunited with him... these are the moments that keep the souls behind The Banyan going.

The genesis of The Banyan goes back to 1993 when the organisation was founded by two young women, Vandana Gopikumar and Vaishnavi Jayakumar, to identify and provide shelter, care and psychiatric and medical services to mentally ill destitute women in Chennai. The early days were difficult. Money was scarce and not everybody was convinced about the efficacy of the idea. Many scoffed it off as being too idealistic, impractical, and expensive, in short – impossible. The *Adaikalam* (meaning shelter) started off in a very modest, rented bungalow to house the destitute women. The initial years were tough and fraught with hurdles. There were shadows all along. But the team at The Banyan, with their never-say-die spirit, learnt and taught the sceptics not to fear the shadows, but seek that light shining somewhere nearby. And the candles with their gentle light kept the *Adaikalam* alight with support and good will. The *Adaikalam* grew with every passing year and in 2001, moved into its own premises, now providing a home away from home to over 300 mentally ill women

with nobody to turn to, and no place to go for help. This new building has specific areas like counselling rooms, dormitories, prayer room, common room, growth labs, workshop, kitchen, etc. The Banyan team comprises 46 residential employees, two psychiatrists and three general physicians. The exemplary work carried out by them has inspired over 125 people, from all walks of life, to volunteer and lend expertise in their own special way.

The Banyan works for a section of society that has largely been ignored – destitute, mentally ill women. It is its firm belief that these women need the same, if not greater care and concern that any 'normal' individual receives from her family. Within the limitations of an institutional setup, The Banyan has tried to communicate this feeling of being wanted and being cared for, to women who are otherwise ostracised by the very same society that has led them to their state of despair. Behind this guiding principle, The Banyan has been a success story all the way. Over the past decade, it has managed to rehabilitate nearly two-thirds of the 750 odd women that have taken shelter under it. The Banyan also touches the lives of hundreds of families and communities all over India through its awareness, intervention and outreach programmes.

Providing quality health care to each and every citizen has been the goal of the State since Independence. However, despite all the advances made in the fields of science and technology, the benefits of modern medicine have been unfortunately restricted, by and large, to the urban populace of India, necessitating a fresh outlook towards quality health services, and preventive health programmes, focussed towards the poor, excluded and vulnerable groups, and to strengthen their access to low cost health care. To deal with these challenges, the Sir Ratan Tata Trust falls upon its health strategy to focus its efforts to support innovative strategies for institutions reaching specialist care for the mentally ill.

In view of the paradigm shift from rejection of the mentally ill, towards their acceptance from isolation to integration, the Sir Ratan Tata Trust has initiated a rapid assessment of the mental health needs and available resources in terms of prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation.

The Trust has supported the activities of The Banyan since March 2001, by committing an amount of Rs63 lakh, spread over a period of three and a half years, towards the part operating costs of the *Adaikalam*. Till date, Rs40 lakh have been disbursed to the Banyan, of which Rs16 lakh were disbursed in the last financial year. As part of a comprehensive initiative focusing towards mental health, the Trust also supported three more institutions reaching out to the mentally ill, with disbursals of over Rs21 lakh, during 2002-03. Support from the Sir Ratan Tata Trust, coupled with the goodwill promulgated by The Banyan has spurred several other corporate bodies and funding agencies, besides individuals, to loosen their purse strings and support this pioneering institution.

In February 2003, a review evaluating the mental health care services and rehabilitation of homeless mentally ill women carried out by The Banyan was conducted, by a team of professors from the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurological Sciences (NIMHANS), Bangalore. The review stressed the urgent need to appoint additional psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses, psychiatric social workers and clinical psychologists. The review also hinted at a need to decentralise the follow-up care, to organisations close to the residence of the discharged individuals, by strengthening linkages.

The Trust hopes that its support, along with The Banyan's unstinting efforts, would put a smile back to the faces of several such Nirmalas all over India, giving them a life beyond the confines of mental illness, so that their laughter stems from the happiness within them and society would accept them once again as normal women.