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Soothing shade

Priya Menon, TOI Crest Jan 2, 2010, 01.29pm IST



Eighteen years ago, when a woman, half naked and with matted hair, ran down a crowded Chennai street, people did little but stare at her. Except college student Vandana Gopikumar and her friend Vaishnavi Jayakumar. They pulled the woman to safety and got medical help for her.

Today, Vandana and Vaishnavi run The Banyan, an organisation that works to rehabilitate mentally-ill women, ensuring that they get not just clinical care but the strength and determination to go on and lead independent lives. A measure of their success is the number of women the duo has rescued from the streets till now - more than 1,500. And about 1,000 of them lead productive lives today.



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The journey, though, has been far from easy. Vandana, who has a degree in medical and psychiatric social work from Madras School of Social Work, and Vaishnavi registered The Banyan in 1993. But it took the two friends, then 22, six months before they could find a place of their own. "Landlords were worried we wouldn't be able to pay the rent," says Vandana. Finally, they found an apartment in Chennai. "But neighbours were suspicious about two women living on their own. When we began taking in homeless women, people cast aspersions on our character."

But family and friends helped. The two of them soon began pooling resources to support themselves and the women they took off the streets, providing them with food, shelter and medicines. But as numbers rose and funds ran low, they were forced to rethink. "We approached the media and people who could help create awareness, and began doing fundraisers," says Vaishnavi.

Slowly, The Banyan began getting help from corporates, actors and individuals. In 1995, [Sushmita Sen](#) did a charity show for them and J Jayalalithaa, who was CM then, gave them land. In 1998, funds came in from the Sir Ratan Tata Trust.

Their living room wall, peppered with black-and-white photographs of women they have helped and forged bonds with, bears testimony to their mission. Like Anu, who came for

treatment in 1995 and now supports herself by block-printing saris.

It doesn't end there. The Banyan also tries to reunite these women with their families. Ramkumari, one of the rescued, turned out to be from Pratapgarh in Uttar Pradesh. "We took her back home, and reached on the day her daughter was getting married," says Vandana, recalling the emotional reunion.

Vandana and Vaishnavi say there is need to build a caring society as the incidence of mental illness is only going to rise with the stress of modern-day living.

"We need access to more than healthcare," Vaishnavi says. "People should be sensitised as you cannot treat mental illness in isolation," That, and the fact that there aren't too many banyan trees giving such shelter.

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