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Published: May 1, 2012 11:45 IST | Updated: May 16, 2012 15:31 IST

The Banyan: providing hope, not just shelter

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Vaishnavi Jayakumar and Vandana Gopikumar

Special Arrangement

The determined duo from upper-middle class, had to change a lot, but did not change their outlook

When others moved on with their daily chores, indifferent to what was happening to fellow human beings, young Vandana Gopikumar (23) stopped to provide shelter to a mentally-ill, half naked woman who was running down the street. When she found that there was little help and care for such women, she, along with her friend Vaishnavi Jayakumar, sowed the seeds for The Banyan in 1993. Since then, there has been no looking back. The Banyan is now a home and a rehabilitation centre, providing not just psychiatric and medical services to mentally-ill destitute women, but also empowering them with an identity when they get back to the society they belong.

Seventeen years ago, it was a challenge that these two women volunteered to shoulder with a spirit of adventure like any other youngster but later on it turned out to be a huge responsibility which they fulfilled with conviction. "Our focus was to restore self-esteem and work on their life beyond mental illness," say Vandana Gopikumar and Vaishnavi Jayakumar.

To achieve this, the determined duo from upper-middle class, had to change a lot, but did not change their outlook. Looking back, Vandana says, "Right from getting a home to accommodate mentally-ill women, changing our lifestyle, asking people for money, it was baptism by fire." They rented an apartment to provide shelter to the women, much to the suspicion of the neighbours.

"We had no model to look up to. We then sketched out a strategy for ourselves," Vandana explains. Psychiatrists, psychologists, counsellors, care takers and other workers were roped in. Mentally-ill women, battered, abused, both physically and sexually, ignored by family, reach The Banyan. They are given treatment, rehabilitated and offered skill based training and once recovered are united with their family.

With help from family and friends, the institution grew up to house 100 inmates. Things progressed when the then Chief Minister Jayalalithaa gave a third-of-an-acre in Chennai's suburbs to put up a modern facility in 1995. But there was a pressing need to raise funds to construct a building and to feed the residents.

Vandana Gopikumar and Vaishnavi Jayakumar put their communication skills to best use to conduct fund raising events, started approaching people for money and sought the help of media. Slowly they started getting help from various people. "All sorts of people turned out as volunteers. We saw the rising of a people's movement," recollects

Vandana.

Their focus widened to a broader view. From working just for the institution, they started working on 'society and mental illness'. Many institutions started emerging in various parts of India and these two women have been offering their guidance. It was inspiring to see the transformation. "We saw people close to death rising to a life of hope," says Vandana. As many as 2,500 women were treated and merged with their families. Regular follow-ups are also being done. "We are now networking with other NGOs and Government organisations to do an effective follow-up as the residents were from different parts of the country."

As far as the attitude of people is concerned, it has been only negative, regrets the duo. "People and media consider mentally-ill people to be dangerous or to be laughed at," they say. They started BALM in 2007 to work on this perception. The Banyan Academy of Leadership in Mental Health (BALM) was initiated to increase active stakeholder participation in the mental health sector, to positively affect prevalent trends through research, networking and advocacy. It equips human resources in the mental health sector with appropriate knowledge, skills and competencies.

"We can see a change only when we talk and think more about mental health issues. We need to unlearn what we learnt and reach a society where people accept each other despite disabilities," says Vandana and this has been her vision.

These women have shown great deal of confidence, by pioneering the cause with little help, have been positive even when they had Rs.3.50 to feed 13 residents and have come a long way by creating space for the invisible sufferers in the community.

Keywords: [The Banyan](#), [destitute women](#)

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