

Lessons in caring

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Bapida and Sanjay. Photo : Jayati Saha

Man or woman perched on a dump. Covered with grime. Matted unkempt hair. Nearly naked. Name forgotten. Family forgotten. Muttering inscrutable words. Wandering aimlessly. Solitary. Profoundly lost to the world.

We see many such people in cities we inhabit. What do they inspire in our hearts? Revulsion? Fear? A fleeting passive pity? Or most likely, just indifference?

Sarbani was different. Heading an international NGO, walking the streets of Kolkata with a psychiatrist friend, she asked him what the fate of such people would be. The answer: probably a lonely, early, anonymous death. She asked him what they would die of. His reply: because they lose the idea of self-care, they may simply die of dehydration, of thirst.

Sarbani quit her well-paying job, formed a group of caring young people to work with, registered an organisation Iswar Sankalpa, and looked for answers to what appeared an unsolvable human tragedy. The answers they found hold extraordinary life-lessons for all of us.

A few decades back, such gravely mentally ill persons would have been incarcerated in high-walled mental hospitals and sometimes in jails, naked and chained, subjected to daily indignities and therapy including electric shocks. Today it is recognised that these patients should best be cared for in open hospitals and within families. But what happens to abandoned mentally ill persons who have no family? They endure a double whammy of mental illness and homelessness.

Today medical science still has not found a **cure** for severe psychoses but medicines can control nearly all debilitating symptoms, limiting confusion and chances of self-harm. But who could provide medicines daily to homeless mentally ill patients?

The answer that Sarbani and her colleagues proposed was that surely there are caring people in every community, who could become proxy families for these lost and forgotten souls. They first surveyed the city and found 466 such homeless psychotic patients. They found also that homeless mentally ill people often have a sense of belonging, such as to a particular stretch of pavement.

Eight fine young men and women then set about looking for caring people in the stretches frequented by each of these patients. They found them mostly among working class street vendors, but a few even among the middle classes.

During a night round through the streets of Kolkata in 2007, the team met a near-naked man beside a garbage dump near Khidderpore. Investigating further, they learnt that a grain shopkeeper Mohammed Nihal gave this man lunch every day. Nihal readily agreed to become his caregiver, and persuaded him to attend a medical camp, where he identified himself as Abdullah. The team members bathed him, a barber cut his hair. The doctor diagnosed him with hallucinatory schizoaffective disorder.

Within a month, Abdullah appeared more relaxed. He still communicated in sign language; after five more months, began to speak. He also started to help Nihal in his shop. As time passed, he recalled that his name was Suresh Kamble and he had worked as a radiologist Mumbai's Nanavati Hospital. But he insisted that he didn't want to return to his family.

I met them seven years later. I found that Suresh was now like a member of Nihal's family, his friend and most trusted shop assistant. Nihal insisted that his children give Suresh the respect due to a family elder. Nihal only worries what will happen after Suresh's death. Suresh insists he should be buried as a Muslim. But Nihal feels he is still a Hindu and should be cremated with Hindu rites. It is one argument that the friends have not resolved.

I met another caregiver: Sanjay, an 18-year-old pavement tea-seller in Dhakuria. A middle-aged mentally ill man roamed his pavement, and Sanjay agreed to give him medicines with his tea twice a day. As he recovered, he refused to return to his home. Sanjay spoke to an acquaintance who hires out cycle-rickshaws to rent a rickshaw to Bapida, as he called his new friend. The rickshaw-owner was doubtful. However Sanjay stood guarantee for him, and had to mollify the owner when there were early damages to the rickshaw. But in time, Bapida settled down. He drinks tea with Sanjay, and sleeps on the pavement near his hand-cart at night.

I spoke with Sanjay while he was boiling and pouring out steaming tea expertly to his many customers. I asked him why he did what he did. He smiled a little and said, "*Bhalo lage* (I just like doing this)."

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