

## BAPU TRUST FOR RESEARCH ON MIND AND DISCOURSE, MAHARASHTRA

*A world where healing is possible without cages and chains...where people follow their hearts and ideas and receive care not treatment.*

These catch phrases in the introduction of its website encapsulates the path-breaking approach of the Bapu Trust for Research on Mind and Discourse in Pune and its actions aimed at challenging the psychiatry-driven mental health system.

Managing director, Dr Bhargavi Davar's childhood experiences shaped such a vision. The organization is named after her mother – a woman who developed deep spiritual yearnings, wore the clothes of a sanyasin and wrote beautiful Bhakti poetry in Tamil that was published and read widely. Labelled a schizophrenic by the orthodox family in which she was married into and abused, she would wander away only to be brought back forcibly in chains. She spent several years on the streets, or in traditional healing centres and was placed in hospitals where she received shock treatment or was kept in solitary confinement.

From a young age, Bhargavi, who later received a doctorate in philosophy of psychiatry from IIT, realized that there was a yawning gap in the country's mental health policy and that this gap needed to be addressed. She along with Amita Dhanda who had done extensive work on the unconstitutionality of the Mental Health Act



*Art therapy in progress*

initiated the effort to set up data and generate research, perspectives and other material on mental health. The research and academic studies needed space to develop and to operationalize the ideas into action. From this vision and direction, the Bapu Trust was born as an agency aimed at bringing about structural reform and policy. Its key dimension is its involvement of the social sciences with mental health.

One of the first funders of this 'rebellion' against the conventional medical approach to mental health was the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust which gave a three-year grant that enabled the institution to be set up. Thereafter, a grant of Rs 8.10 million (spread over three financial years) was given to enable Bapu to develop its two arms – the research wing known as the Centre for Advocacy in Mental Health (CAMH) and Seher ('dawn' in Urdu), the service wing.

An important feature of CAMH is that it is the only documentation centre that provides information not just on medical aspects of mental health, but also on community-based research on issues such as gender and mental health development and mental health and its links with socio-economic factors like homelessness, violence, conflicts and trauma.

Unlike mainstream information, the emphasis is on self-help and the values of autonomy, participation and dignity. Information is provided on subjects like natural healing for schizophrenia, foods that can help support medication for depression, the relationship between thyroid disorders and depression, etc.

The second important area – the community publications – is another innovative feature in a nation where very few resources are available to raise public awareness on mental health. Bapu Trust publications like *Women and Mental Health*

...a *beginning* use positive illustrations instead of the stereotype stark images of disturbed persons and emotions. Wherever possible, case stories are used and a life approach instead of a symptoms-based one is adopted. The key note is one of offering hope.

The third area – that of research – provides unique linkages like social sciences and mental health, women’s issues and mental health, law policy, ethics and mental health.

CAMH’s 2003 mission report in which it worked with the Gujarat government and the IIM, Ahmedabad to understand the local needs in mental health directly impacted on policy with the Gujarat government using it as a draft for its mental health policy.

Another innovative research effort is to look at traditional healing systems, including those of tantriks and bhagats. Deepra Dandekar, who undertook the research in 22 centres in Maharashtra with 350 interviews, notes that

different paradigms of body and health have yielded a broader understanding than the confining definitions provided by pathology. One important finding was that traditional healing centres had a different value system that allowed patients to admit and discharge themselves. It also permitted the users and family members to live together unlike medical institutions.

CAMH has taken up advocacy issues at many levels to bring about social change. It has undertaken academic training programs (funded by SDTT) to inspire the mental health sector with a gender perspective and it has given training to jail officers and those in charge of beggars’ homes in Maharashtra where inmates may be suffering from a variety of socio-psychological disorders. It has worked to sensitize the judiciary in Gujarat where there were several instances of men obtaining easy divorces by declaring their wives mentally ill.

For hard-core advocacy, it has taken on issues head-on with the main stakeholders in mental



*Skill building for the future*



*The documentation centre and library at the CAMH*

health – policy makers, non-medical professionals, institution authorities and various NGOs. It is working at the regional level to create a dialogue so that a charter of rights for persons with mental illness can be drawn up.

Since there are not many organizations that think similarly or have taken up a patient's rights approach, the Bapu Trust has had to struggle with isolation 'incapacity'. There has also been a lot of resistance from doctors and other mental health authorities because of the non-medical approach. "We have tried to dialogue with them and involve them in our efforts so that we don't land up battling each other," says Bhargavi.

Seher, set up in 2004 as a three-year project, grew out of the need to develop a holistic and alternative framework to the medicalized field of mental health. Program coordinator, Ketki Ranade who is an M.Phil. and who has worked as a psychiatric social worker with the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS), Bangalore explains how the service promotion primarily looks at social issues like violence against women. Services provided are individual psychotherapy, family therapy, group therapy and referral services.

One of its new approaches is carrying out training and capacity building activities on mental health with community-based organizations like Snehdeep Jankalyan



*Care and counselling with sensitivity*

Foundation. Health workers of Snehdeep functioning in the slums of Kasiwadi received education in evolving mental health components. Interestingly many of these workers who are single and face dual challenges were able to benefit from sessions in which they could consider their own mental and emotional health.

In yet another interesting initiative Seher functions in the family court in Mumbai and has undertaken training programs for marriage counsellors in Mumbai. In its second year, Seher has been looking into rights violations in jails, mental hospitals and the beggars' homes. Training programs have been held with the staff in these institutions and there are counselling sessions for many of the inmates who have been picked up from the streets and have been leading isolated lives without any support systems.

Since talking has not been too effective, arts-based therapies have been initiated on an individual and group basis. These include drama therapy, paintings and drawing sessions or the play for peace in which games are explored as a method to break down barriers. For the first time in one such session the staff and inmates came together. One of the inmates confessed that she now looked forward to the days when the sessions are held, thereby illustrating how an unbiased society, sensitivity and skill-based treatment can empower a community to tackle its emotional distress and mental well being.