

# Mental health through humane touch

**Vandana Gopikumar**

## **The Banyan & The Banyan Academy of Leadership in Mental Health**

Each of us would have encountered someone on the road, looking like a vagabond, unkempt and possibly exhibiting a behaviour which may not appear 'normal' to us. We may notice them, stop for a second look sometimes or offer some help, but often we carry on with our lives. Here's the story of someone who responded differently and in doing so forged a path none in India had traversed before. This is the story of Vandana Gopikumar, who with her friend Vaishnavi Jayakumar, embarked on a journey that has culminated in The Banyan and The Banyan Academy of Leadership in Mental Health.

### **The Banyan – a boundless shelter**

Established in 1993, The Banyan, is one of the largest mental health service organisations in the country. The Banyan's in-depth work over two decades, in the intersection between homelessness, mental illness, poverty and the resulting distress has led to the development of an adaptive mental health systems framework. It has been designed to respond effectively to an individual's evolving needs along his or her path of recovery.

The Banyan has developed a range of innovative, appropriate and comprehensive approaches to mental health care, particularly for those from an economically marginalised background. These are as varied as emergency and therapeutic care services in institutions and open shelters to preventive and promotive care services aimed at wellbeing. The Banyan's services operate across 13 service access points in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Assam, have reached out to over 10,000 individuals directly, and serve about 8 lakh people.

The Banyan's emergency and therapeutic care for homeless persons with mental health issues has looked after over 2,000 women through their Transit Care Centre (TCC). Of these, 1,402 women have been reintegrated with families or other inclusive institutions. TCC has a community clinic that offers short-term in-patient care for persons living in a state of poverty.

The Banyan's open shelter for homeless men helps men with psycho-social needs. The Banyan has also made significant strides in creating inclusive ecosystems for persons with mental health issues. Nearly 150 individuals with mental health issues have moved from TCC and other organisations to The Banyan's multiple inclusive living shelters including the Clustered Group Homes (CGH) and Home Again (HA). Assisting in their rehabilitation, The Banyan has helped some women start self-help groups, offered fellowships to some to

work as mental health peer counsellors and mental health activists. They now collectively reach out to over 120 individuals with mental health issues.

The Banyan's Rural and Urban Mental Health Programmes (RMHP & UMHP) cater to the well-being of clients through outpatient care services. The Banyan also supports children of parents with mental health issues.

The Banyan helps clients access vocational training and skills development training. About 250 non-specialist health workers have been trained and are active across The Banyan's programmes. Through placement support services offered at The Banyan, many have found employment.

The Banyan Academy of Leadership in Mental Health (BALM) was conceived in 2007 to consolidate knowledge and learning from the work of The Banyan and set benchmarks for mental health care particularly for vulnerable groups. BALM also aims to build human resource capabilities across multiple cadres, and use emerging evidence as a tool to drive positive policy change. BALM offers four MA level programmes in collaboration with TISS and a community mental health diploma programme in collaboration with the Rajiv Gandhi National Institute for Youth Development.

### **The paths that shape us**

Vandana, born in 1971, is the only child of Gopikumar P and Jaishree. Her father being a Wing commander in the Indian Air Force entailed transfers and Vandana spent her childhood living and attending school in different parts of the country.

Vandana grew up with a premise that everybody - be it the helper at home, the stray dogs, relatives, friends or even the people she did not know - was part of one world and was connected. Vandana recalled that when she saw that connectedness violated in terms of poverty, lack of facilities or the shades of grey in a family member's behavior, she would get very affected.

As an adolescent moving into civilian life, Vandana saw more of these violations and went through troubling times. She recalled having her first bouts of depression around that time. While she had all the conflicting existential questions, about which she mulled over, sitting up on trees, there was also an ambitious side to her. Vandana was good at public speaking and as class monitor in high school, when she got the first opportunity, she chose to speak about Indira Gandhi, the then prime minister. Vandana admired the prime minister and held an aspiration to become the prime minister someday.

The two very opposing sides to her personality culminated in some self-destructive behaviour. It was then that her mother felt that there probably was a problem and took Vandana to a doctor. Vandana said it was not a specialist, but a general physician, who put it down to a crisis. Life went on and so did her existential questions and conflicts. After a very traumatic episode concerning her neighbour and some pups, Vandana remembers writing a

letter to God, posting it and waiting for a response. Despite suffering from emotional highs and lows, she was given no counseling; and she realised that there weren't enough resources for people seeking mental health support.

Vandana joined Women's Christian College (WCC) in Chennai, for a graduate programme in English literature. As a student, she began writing and went from being depressed to feeling a great sense of hope. Her desire to work toward a better world returned. It was at WCC that Vandana met and became friends with Vaishnavi, fondly called Vaishi. Vaishi suggested that her inherent people skills should be put to good use and that HR might be a better option. Vandana did not get into HR but chose to do a master's in social work at the Madras School of Social Work. She chose family and child welfare as her specialisation, but eventually switched to medical and psychiatric social work.

As part of her course Vandana visited the mental hospital in Chennai and saw women her age - women who did not even have the freedom to 'just be'. She realised the need and the plight of women who suffered from mental illness.

### **An unknown woman and The Banyan**

Vandana witnessed a scene that not only changed the lives of many vulnerable women but also led to the development of a care model based on human dignity.

While on her way to college, Vandana saw a scantily clad, battered woman with matted hair and soiled hands running from one end of the crowded street to the other. Vandana recalled being shocked by the fact that there were many onlookers, but no one came forward to help the woman. With the help of the college principal, Vandana and Vaishnavi cleaned up the woman and got her admitted in an NGO.

Vandana, at 22 and Vaishnavi, younger by a year, felt good that they could help someone get another chance at life. However they soon found out that the woman had left the NGO. The young women knew that it might not be possible for them to trace her back. The episode got them thinking about the plight of mentally ill women on the streets. Vandana said that from then on all that they could see were such people.

Vandana said that how they responded to this was a combination of many things. It wasn't just the need to reach out. Both of them were young and wanted to do something entrepreneurial together. Women with mental illness and suffering resonated closely with Vandana's own experience of emotional highs and lows. She saw herself in the mentally ill women she met or came across.

Vandana said during her recent visit to the Guruvayur temple in Kerala, she saw a homeless woman seeking alms and had the same feeling she experienced 25 years earlier. She felt, and is true for any one of us, that there is but a thin line that separates that ill woman on the street from her. What if our friends and loved ones let go of us, what if we let go of

ourselves: it would take very little to land up in the same situation - completely lonely and helpless.

### **The influences**

Vandana attributed The Banyan and her chosen path of life to two women who have remained a large influence on her life. One is her mother who stood by the effort right from giving them space in her house to cooking food for the clients, being a part of fund raising meetings and even supporting them financially. The other is Vaishi who dumped her MBA, jumped in to help Vandana and co-founded The Banyan.

In 1993 Vandana and Vaishi set off to work from a rented room. The idea was to get a first-hand understanding of what the distress was. The two decided that there could be no better way to find out, than to live with the people that they wanted to care for. They took a house where there were four rooms, besides one for themselves.

They had no idea of the magnitude of the problem and thought there may be about 15 people in the city of Chennai. From the days of that small house, they have had a culture of being part of the family - live together and support each other. This has continued as the basic cultural ethos of The Banyan to this day.

For the homeless mentally ill people, Vandana and Vaishnavi designed a system of care that would seek out, treat, and reintegrate them into society. Their system is built on the basis of dignity, empathy, empowerment, and freedom.

### **The Banyan's prop roots**

The cultural ethos of the organisation is reflected in the experiences of the staff who have had a long association with The Banyan. Lakshmi, one of the staff members at The Banyan, who handles research, recalled her first meeting with Vandana, which was actually a job interview. In Lakshmi's words, "Vandana thinks big - she has a large vision yet there is a difference. It is not a large vision in terms of setting up 20,000 centres; it is rooted in what can make an impact in the lives of people who come into the fold of The Banyan".

Lakshmi equated her relationship with Vandana to that of a teenager and her mother. While there is a defined professional relationship, it lies enmeshed in a personal bonding that has grown over the years, such as the time Vandana stood by Lakshmi when her child fell ill. As Lakshmi put it, "Vandana can be overbearing at times - that goes with the kind of work and the person she is. Yet The Banyan couldn't have been what it is today without the freedom and dynamism she allows the team".

In my interactions with people in The Banyan, I often saw Lakshmi bring along her little daughter after school hours. Lakshmi said that The Banyan at its heart is a woman-friendly

organisation. The space to work and be productive is beyond policies put on paper, emerging from the ideology of its leader.

Vandana and Vaishnavi lived at The Banyan for the first eight years of its existence; this was a period of dealing with one crisis after another right from financial resources and political pressures to each client's unique problem.

Kaiser was four years old when she was brought to The Banyan, along with her mentally ill mother. Brought up at The Banyan, Kaiser said that Vandana and Vaishi have been the real mothers to her, ensuring her care and education, despite her circumstances. Today Kaiser is preparing to sit for the Indian Administrative Service exam. Another event was the suicide of a client named Bilquees and the helplessness the team felt in the wake of the event. When Sushmita Sen, a Miss Universe title holder, came to The Banyan and there was a fashion show, their donations dropped. People assumed that Sushmita had donated her title money to The Banyan and they did not need donations.

Vandana looked back to those years and felt that they coped with it by celebrating the little joys and successes of life. Dancing and partying and having fun was a part of life at The Banyan.

Senthil was one of the donors of The Banyan. He was introduced to The Banyan by his partner Jayanta. When Vandana was going through a particularly difficult phase with The Banyan, with Vaishi also sick and in hospital, she and Senthil drew close. Vandana and Senthil got married. Vandana said that Senthil is the stability in her life now, a calming steady presence who is there for her all the time, without being intrusive. According to her he is also her mirror, ensuring that she does not get too self-absorbed.

### **Spreading roots**

Due to lack of similar facilities in Chennai, The Banyan became immensely popular, and soon they had to move to a larger space to accommodate more women. Jayalalitha, the then chief minister of Tamil Nadu noticed The Banyan's initiatives within three years of inception and granted them a few acres of land. A transit care centre, aptly named Adaikalam, meaning refuge, was established in the space allocated by Jayalalitha.

By 2003, The Banyan hit a client base of 430, and that was a disaster. The Banyan's policy at that time was not to turn anyone away because they knew the streets were hostile. With the growing numbers, quality of care dipped. Everything became impersonal and maintaining hygiene became a big problem.

That's when the second part of the journey of The Banyan began. By then they had figured out that not everyone who came to them would be able to go home. Also not everybody who goes home stays well. Such issues needed to be tackled. For those who do not go home, other options had to be thought of, and thus clustered group homes, shared housing, independent living, work options and many other options were thought of and slowly put

into place. For those who went home and did not stay well, some model of providing holistic mental health care in rural and urban spaces had to be thought through and developed. This has led to the spectrum of work that The Banyan does in the mental health care arena.

### **For future leaders in mental health**

Dr Parasuraman, the director of Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), mentioned that when he joined TISS, he realised that TISS was producing 60 social workers every year. For a country like India, this was less than a drop in the ocean. Dr Parasuraman felt the need to expand the capacity of TISS, to bridge the huge human resource crunch that the development sector faced. His innovative idea of expansion was to build collaborative platforms with people who were doing path-breaking work on the ground.

Whilst Dr Parasuraman was still pondering about the idea, Nachiket Mor, who was then with the ICICI group, asked if TISS could forge a training association with The Banyan. When he met Vandana, Dr Parasuraman realised two things - one that Vandana had a world of experience in a very niche area which could be crystallised and systematically brought out through a PhD programme for her. He facilitated Vandana's PhD and was her co-guide.

The second was, he felt that TISS could work with The Banyan not just on a training programme but to offer a joint master's level programme through The Banyan Academy of Leadership in Mental Health (BALM) which was already in existence. Dr Parasuraman also offered Vandana a professor's post at TISS. He strongly believes that her passion and real world experience would add value to the TISS programme and give his students a taste of the real world of social work.

Vandana has received several accolades for her work and championing the cause of people living with mental illness, especially women. These include, WHO Public Health Champion Award - 2017, Justice J S Varma Award for Women's Empowerment - 2016, The WHO and Swiss Foundation Award for Excellence in Mental Health Promotion - 2012 and the Sat Paul Mittal Award for Outstanding Service to Humanity.

The Banyan's journey has been through a path strewn with difficulties. It has taken a toll on both Vandana and Vaishnavi. Vandana continues to be actively engaged with both The Banyan and the BALM. Vandana's work is fueled by the passionate belief that everyone should have the freedom and opportunity to strive for a better life. She emphasised that mental illness is a part of the human experience but it need not be the defining one.

## About Vandana Gopikumar

- Banyan's services operate across Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Assam, and have reached out to over 10,000 individuals directly, and serve about 8 lakh people
- The Banyan's emergency care for the homeless with mental health issues has looked after over 2,000 women through their Transit Care Centre
- The Banyan helps in rehabilitation by assisting some women start self-help groups, and offering fellowships to some to work as mental health peer counsellors and mental health activists
- Through its placement support services, The Banyan helps many find employment
- The Banyan Academy of Leadership in Mental Health offers masters level programmes to consolidate knowledge and learning from the work of The Banyan and set benchmarks for mental health care

Vandana Gopikumar

The Banyan

6th Main Road, Mugappair Eri Scheme

Mugappair West, Chennai

PIN: 600037

Phone : 044 – 26530504, 2653059

Email: vandana.gopikumar@thebanyan.org

<http://www.thebanyan.org/>

**Written by Tasneem Raja**