

"I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone's heart."

Raymond Carver

We step into the third decade of our existence holding close to us the support and encouragement we receive from all of you, the faith our clients place in us to respond to their needs, and the standards they set for us to keep doing better, and to see things through to their logical end. We are now a team of 450 professionals on a mission to bridge the daunting 85% treatment and care gap, shrouded in archaic but enduring demonstrations of systemic, societal, and individual stigmas associated with afflictions of the brain and mind. In partnership with the state, philanthropies and civil society organisations, The Banyan and The Banyan Academy of Leadership in Mental Health (BALM) now operate directly out of 5 states, and as a technical partner in 8 states and 2 low- and middle-income countries. We feel an immense sense of gratitude and pride about kindred spirits coming together as one, transcending barriers of language, education, backgrounds, and perspective, united strongly in our urgency to make a difference.

We spent a significant portion of our 29th year consolidating our objectives, strategy, and activities to further align with the vision of The Banyan which imagines an inclusive and humane world promoting capabilities, equity, and justice, and of BALM, endeavouring to bridge the care gap through education, research, social action, and public policy. The responsibility of converting these dreams into action shoulders heavily on our amazing team of human service professionals who resonate with the organisations' values and ethos, acknowledge the struggles, uncertainties and grey areas that percolate into daily and long-term decision making, and who continue to soldier forward delivering services, engaging in meaningful advocacy, and owning the cause. The task of building this team and watching it grow has been a great privilege.

At the centre of all this work lies the most crucial component of our care structures and policies – appropriateness. Understanding the ever evolving and diverse metric, we strive constantly, through all aspects of our social action, education, and research to define, measure and audit if what we do makes a difference, and what difference itself means, to those accessing care. Without inputs and lessons from our service users and colleagues with lived experience, co-creating these metrics with us, our work will be incomplete, our vision for epistemic justice goes unfulfilled. Through BALM, we have begun creating training modules catered exclusively for persons with lived experience to take on formalised roles as service providers, researchers, trainers, advocates, and leaders. To forward our own learning, aside from periodic social audits, pulse meetings, we will create a compendium of narratives from the ground, of stories of the beautiful individuals with whom we cross paths, which offers the nuance, sensitivity, and the diversity which, as of now, only exist in theory. Seeing these stories unfurl, catalysed by robust and nuanced responses that truly match the need, may be the most important learning tool for coming decades, for students and professionals and policy makers.

We have shared a preview of 4 stories with this newsletter. We welcome your input, feedback, and thoughts on the same, and as always, on our work and journey.

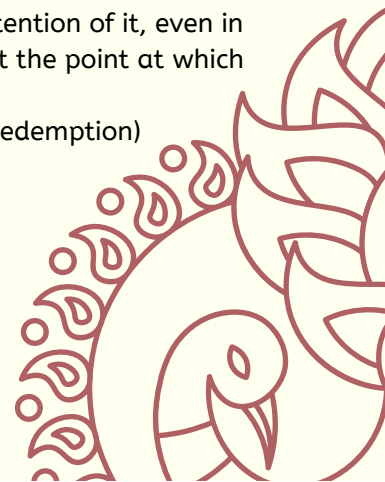
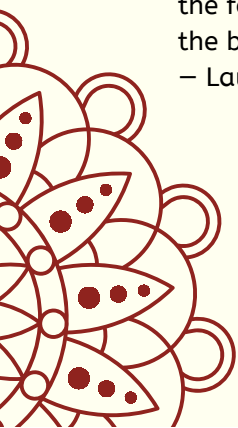
We wish you only the very best for 2023, and request your continued support and encouragement to the advancement of our vision.

In friendship, gratitude, and solidarity,

Senior Management Team, The Banyan and BALM

"Dignity is as essential to human life as water, food, and oxygen. The stubborn retention of it, even in the face of extreme physical hardship, can hold a man's soul in his body long past the point at which the body should have surrendered it."

– Laura Hillenbrand (Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience and Redemption)





Komal Andhra Pradesh Home Again

Vincent Van Gogh longed to see his brother again, and they used to communicate with letters. In one letter, Van Gogh wrote about domestic life -- “Even if one loses here and there, and even if one sometimes feels a sort of decline, the point is nevertheless to revive and have courage, even though things don’t turn out as one first thought.”

Komal’s story is one of revival too. She is from Harnuth, Patna. She joined Home Again in 2021, after being discharged from a government mental health center. But she is not entirely sure how she got there. “One day, I woke up in a place which wasn’t my home. It was so unfamiliar. I don’t know what happened,” she says. Some stories involving homelessness begin this abruptly. There is no clear beginning, no clear timeline of events – if you have a difficult relationship with your family, as Komal says she did with hers, and you don’t find the support you need, things often just happen. She often argued with her husband about his role in raising their children. “It isn’t enough to give birth to children,” she says. “You also have to be responsible for them.” Sometimes she argued with her family because they thought her goals were too lofty – “If we are poor,” she says, “does that mean we shouldn’t want anything, should stop living?”

But exactly how Komal reached the health center, we don't know - there is no logical explanation, which leads Komal to hypothesize that black magic was involved.

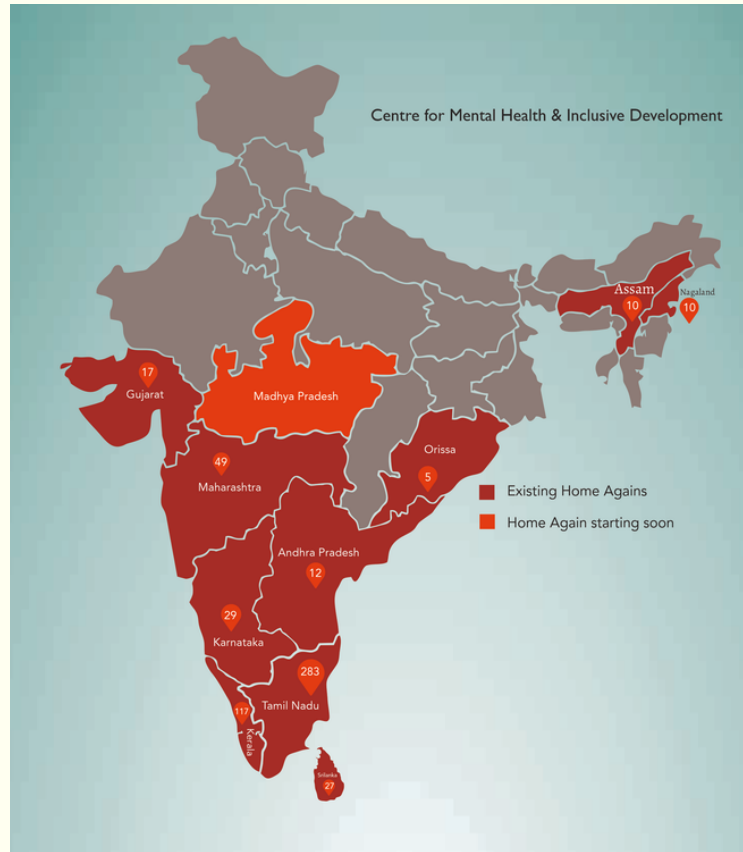
After she joined Home Again, she needed very little support from peer advocates, and was functioning independently. She started to see that this was the kind of house she wanted all her life: a nice, spacious house with a bathroom. (In her hometown, she had to use the fields, and this was much better.) She asked if she could set up a small puja counter and started praying every day. It was the life she wanted, but something was missing. She liked the other residents in her house, but the house could never offer her the family members she missed so much. She wanted her children to study in an English medium school. She wanted to be back with them, and no matter what happened in life, she wanted to provide for them.

After family conferences over the phone, Komal finally met her husband, children, and her mother, when they agreed to 'take her back.' Komal's mother was taking care of the children in Komal's absence - she ran a small provisions store in the area to earn money.

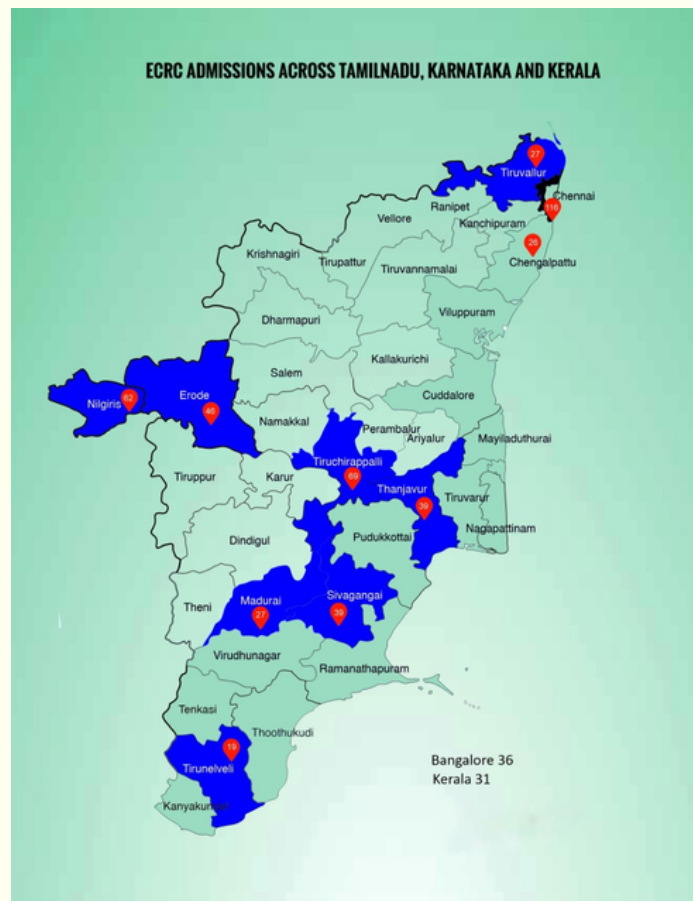
But sometimes, life doesn't take a linear path. Recovery doesn't, either. This is something that residents, as well as those who want the best for them, must accept. Komal is back at Home Again. On the train journey back to Andhra Pradesh the second time around, though she was ill, and tired, she asked for the food she wanted and insisted her rights be respected. As Komal said, why should she stop living? We hope she is able to be with her children again some day, but it's okay if that process takes some time.

All names changed for privacy.

Our Home Again Program



Our Emergency Care and Recovery Centres



Lakshmi

Peer Leader at Emergency Care and Recovery Centre, Kovalam, Tamil Nadu

Lakshmi, librarian at BALM and coordinator at the Home Again Program, works with, describes her sensitive approach:

“When I say I don’t feel like working one day, she doesn’t judge me by my ‘productivity.’ She is able to understand it, and respects my decisions and my right to rest.”

Lakshmi describes her own approach:

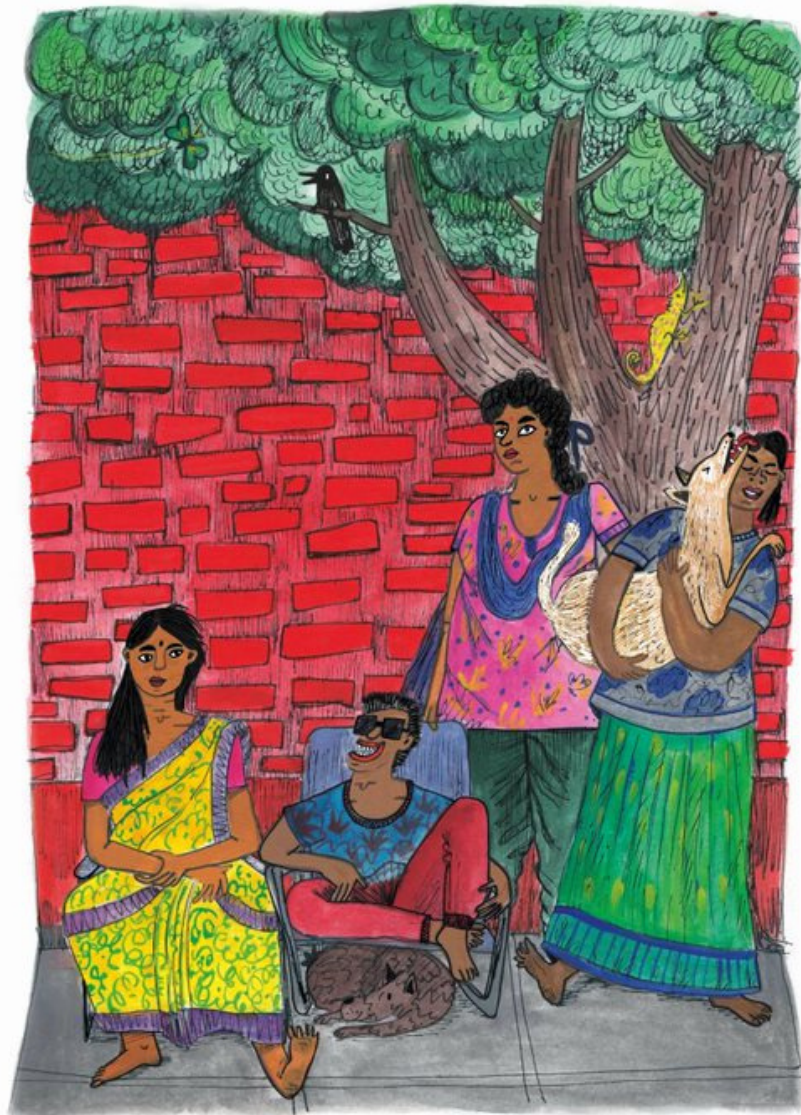
“It’s easy for me to understand how treatment and care sounds to someone else. I love spending time with people and getting to know about them, their past. I’ve grown so much to the point where I can now be with these people and support them. What fascinates me the most is looking into the rights, choices and preferences of people.”

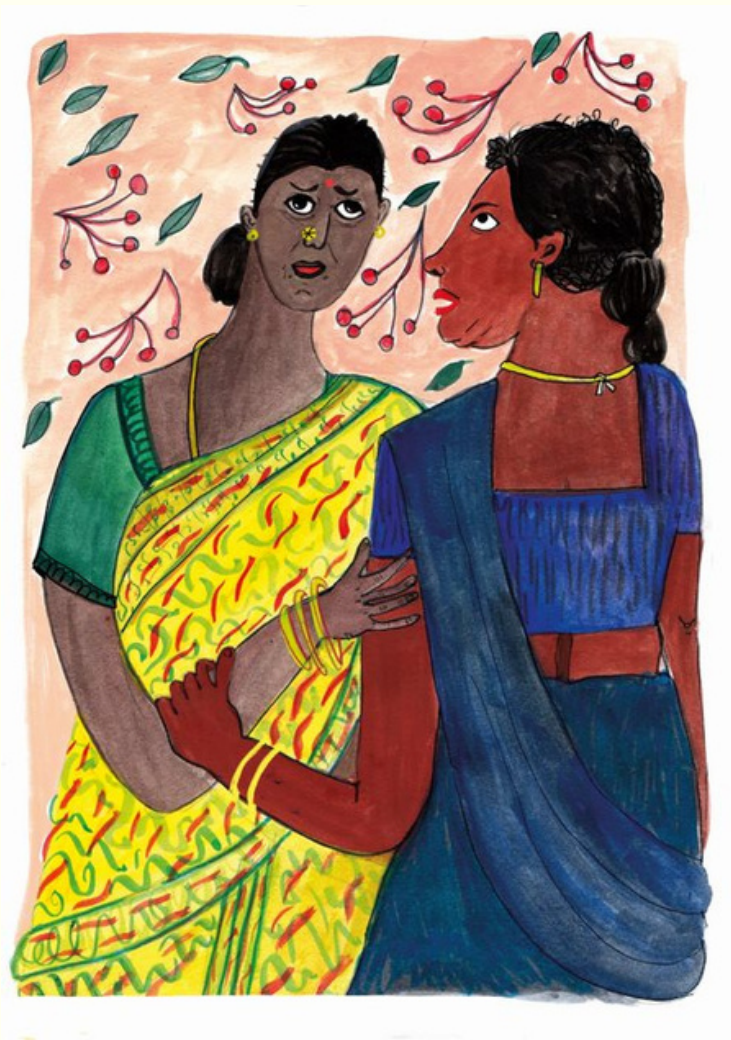
Many years ago, Lakshmi reached the Banyan after a struggle with abuse, a failed marriage, and the loss of her beloved mother. She lost track of time and felt stuck in a prolonged state of grief. With the help of her caregivers and other residents, she slowly grew to trust life again. She used her own lived experience to translate others’ rights for them, in a language they understand. She is able to understand them – and speak with them rather than for them – one of the most important things in mental healthcare. We always talk about helping the vulnerable, but often, for reasons understandable and not so understandable, we fall short of being able to understand them. This is where someone like Lakshmi comes in – she is passionate about understanding other people and knows she can communicate with them in a way that really gets to the core of who they are.

Lakshmi's achievements at the Banyan are almost too many to list. She completed a Diploma in Community Mental Health from BALM (Banyan Academy of Leadership in Mental Health) and joined BALM as a librarian. She learnt what her interests are and has been passionate about continuing her education. She has spoken at international forums about lived experience and community inclusion. She played a key role in getting many people ration cards, and in advocating for the rights of the homeless to housing and employment, with the district collector. Her work has been featured in newspapers including the News Minute. As Home Again coordinator, she visits homes, conducts ethnographic interviews and group sessions, and helps in trauma-healing.

As she herself explains, the lines between understanding and judgement, and normal and 'insane,' are wafer-thin:

"When I was normal, I used to look at Home Again residents and think they were mad. But then I started working with them, mingling with them. Now I realize how affectionate they are. They miss me. I want to do something for them." And Lakshmi has done more than just something. As the author Jerry Pinto says, "we all know there is a state of wellness. We forget about that state as soon as we are in it." But Lakshmi hasn't forgotten, and has thereby enriched the lives of so many people around her.





Kanagi and Usha

Emergency Care and Recovery Centre, Kovalam, Chennai

Some bonds are stronger than life itself: like the sisterhood between Kanagi and Usha. One day, Kanagi had a finger infection and agreed to go to the local hospital. Usha didn't drink a drop of water until Kanagi returned. She said, "Let Kanagi come. I want to see her. She has never been away from me for so long."

Her younger sister responded in kind. "Why didn't you eat your food? I told you and went that I'm going to the hospital for so long. See, I've dressed my wound, I'm fine, don't worry about me." She started feeding her and then she ate her food.

Kanagi and Usha are sisters and best friends, through thick and thin: and their lives have had plenty of both. They lived in their family home in Maduranthakam, but the home was run down, with no electricity. It had been four to five years – they couldn't find anyone within proximal or distant circles to trust to resolve their distress. Even when the Banyan team reached them, responding to a community call, they spent hours before deciding if they could trust them. After all, their house was their safe place – from where no one could evict them, because it was theirs. When they reached ECRC, too, they weren't sure of their environment.

Twenty days later, they felt slightly better. Healthcare workers, doctors and social workers decided not to force them to take medicines, or to do anything in particular: these were the ways the care team built trust, honoured choice, and respected rights. The healthcare worker used to sit with them outside their ward, and talk. Slowly, they started talking, trusting their environment, and forming relationships around them. But they still put each other first: often walking hand-in-hand to the gate, and sitting there. The team would sit there with them, have meals together, and after a couple of hours, they would all walk together to their rooms.

Kanagi and Usha are still getting used to their environment, and still miss their home. Maybe one day, when their mental well-being has restored itself, they will go back to their home – which is what they want most. But until then, trust will have to be built slowly, without words, just with presence – the way Kanagi and Usha support each other – sensing how the other feels, missing the other, always looking for the other in a room. After all, like most things, love takes work.

Our Aftercare Services





Manohar Home Again, Kerala

“The Manohar from five years ago is not the Manohar I am now,” Manohar says. Around five years ago, Manohar used to work in a movie theatre, selling tickets. His brother admitted him into the local mental health center. He had a history of multiple hospitalisations – usually involuntary – because his family tended to find some behaviors that were aggressive or confrontative, difficult to manage. Every time he was discharged and back home, his symptoms would reappear in a few months, so his family didn’t want him at home. Manohar joined the Kerala Home Again center in 2019. When the team staff spoke to Manohar’s wife, she would say she doesn’t want him out of the mental health center – fear continued to pervade their relationship.

The idea of Home Again – both a home, but also part of the Banyan – was a bit confusing initially. Staff had to assure the family they would be safe, and not be disturbed by Manohar. At Home Again, Manohar didn't fall back to a state of ill health, but felt quite disturbed, about which he was open with the team. . They would talk and sort it out. He didn't ask to go home: he participated in family sessions on the phone, but did not contact them directly. He was understanding, and knew his family needed time to accept him. Visits began in slow measures: he visited his family home; they visited the Home Again home for a few hours. The family was shocked: they felt he had changed. They invited him home: first for one day, then five, and then in 2022, he spent the long holidays of Onam and Vishu with his family, for nearly two weeks.

The interesting ways that connections reveal themselves: whatever money Manohar earns, from taking up work at the theatre again, when he is home, or office work at Home Again – he went home, shared his earnings, even his ATM card with them. This made the family feel like he wanted them, and accepted them, the way they accepted him. He feels proudest when he has spent money on his family.

Manohar now works as a peer advocate at Home Again. He is now learning cooking amongst other skills, and wants to train others. He looks back, proudly, at his life's work:

"I used to get angry with everyone, and everyone would always get angry with me. When I walked around, people would call me mad, say I'm mental, taking medicine for it – I used to ask, 'who are you talking about?' Nobody used to value my opinion or take anything I said seriously. But now, things are very different. I am working. When I go home, everyone asks me how I am, when I got there, how my job is going. Everyone talks nicely with me now."

**Our impact: from inception to
present day (December, 2022)**

3353 total admissions

2260 reunifications with families of origin

561 people currently in our Home Again program

9250 people have registered for our continued clinical
and social services

690 people have accessed our aftercare services

40% of our employees at The Banyan and BALM have
lived experience of homelessness and mental
illness