

The Other Identity Foundation

Why the OIF: In our lifetime, most of us come across individuals who live with a mental health issue, whether or not we have been told explicitly and whether or not we realize it. Unfortunately, almost everyone with a serious mental disorder is written off for life: popular sentiment, stereotypical depictions and reporting, influencing these public perceptions and trends. The truth is that close to 7 billion in the world, and 60 million in India alone live with a mental health issue. Most of them continue to contribute to society and live productive lives, despite their personal struggle with depression, anxiety or severe mental disorders like Schizophrenia and Bipolar disorder. This foundation attempts to bring the world closer, bridging social distance and differences and celebrating both diversity and yet a sense of sameness and connectedness.

Our founding member, **Vandana Gopikumar**, a mental health service user herself, like many others, celebrates all her identities equally, be it that of a humanist, flawed person, spontaneist, dog mommy, writer, social entrepreneur, friend, wife, daughter, clinical social work practitioner, researcher, problem solver, dancer, dreamer, thinker, mental health advocate or spiritualist. She considers her identity as that of a person who experiences mood switches, simply another, from which she draws profound meaning and life lessons.

Realising that the same was true of many other persons whom she came in contact with through her 25-year engagement in the mental health sector, she felt a strong urge to showcase and celebrate the courage, grittiness and insights of these inspirational women. Her primary passion, her work with poor and homeless women with mental health issues, who experience losses both on account of their ill health and extreme poverty, as a result of her work with The Banyan and BALM, (organisations that she co-founded with her partner Vaishnavi Jayakumar), led her to believe that their truths also need to be told and heard.

Supported and encouraged enthusiastically as always by her friend, companion, anchor and husband, Senthil Kumar, the principal donor to the foundation, the couple by virtue of their association and closeness with women that The Banyan supports felt the need for these stories to be told and for greater investment in mental health. Together with Balraj Vasudevan (Managing Trustee, The Banyan and BALM), a great support to both Vandana and The Banyan, other friends, Vaishnavi and her colleagues who are like family to her and share similar passion and vision, founded the OIF that serves the following objectives:

1. **Fellowships** that support grassroots mental health activists who are also mental health service users. Facilitating intrapreneurship and entrepreneurship initiatives led by women with mental health issues, in addition to assistance with job placement through grants and fellowships
2. **The Other Identity Awards** to showcase women and men who have experienced distress and overcome obstacles, demonstrating resilience despite their vulnerabilities and

in the process positively impacted lives of others. Mental health service users who are also mental health advocates or social entrepreneurs are recognized and celebrated as their stories are narrated. They are also supported further with a financial award or fellowship that enables them pursue their aspirations and goals ardently.

3. **Support organisations that promote inclusive living options for persons with disabilities** by offering friendly, compassionate and nurturing environments and uphold values of social justice and equity as paramount.
4. **Support children of persons with mental illness/ in distress** - Scholarships for children with parents in disadvantaged circumstances, especially those with mental health issues. In addition to monetary assistance, other forms of psychosocial support will be offered to these children and their families.

The Other Identity Awards, July 2018:

The first event of this series will be conducted on the 22nd of July 2018 at the Sheraton Grand, Chennai. Our awardees this year are:

1. *Mr. Akhileshwar Sahay*
2. *Ms. Porselvi Vijayalakshmi*
3. *Ms. Jyothi Mary*
4. *Mr. Ibrahim*
5. *Ms. Preethi*

Each of the above individuals have directly, or through a family member have suffered a mental health issue. Despite unimaginable distress, psychosocial hurdles and exclusion, they dared to dream, found strength to fight, and rise above their circumstances. We salute their grace and resilience and are proud to announce them as our first batch of awardees.

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