

Lighting the Path to Recovery

In an ecosystem that fosters drug dependency, CHETNA attempts to reduce the harmful impact of substance abuse amongst vulnerable children and youth



The Peer to Peer Harm Reduction Centre at Nizamuddin—established by CHETNA in partnership with iPartner India—consistently aims to provide a nurturing environment for vulnerable children to be liberated from the destructive influence of substance abuse and addiction along with their peers. Through counselling of the child and their families, provision of non formal education and access to the open education system; alongside health check ups and nutrition, exposure visits, and recreational group activities to aid the rehabilitation process, as well as follow up mechanisms to prevent relapse; the centre has continued to positively impact the lives of street and working children, serving as a companion in their fight against the perils of cyclical substance abuse and administrative neglect.



Childhood Enhancement Through Training and Action



Confronting a Systemic Inadequacy

On a sunny morning at the Nizamuddin Railway Station, Harm Reduction Centre staff member Mr. Ravi Kumar is conducting the daily outreach to recruit the children and youth living or working at the station. He speaks calmly to each of them, convincing them to visit the centre more regularly. The children he is appealing to are in various states of consciousness. Some are sober, others are heavily under the influence of substances. The regular attendees have already reached the centre on time, at 10 AM, to spend their day there. The children he is now talking to are the ones who require urgent attention and must be convinced to take advantage of the benefits provided by the Harm Reduction centre. Most children are keen to visit the centre once they have been sufficiently engaged by the



staff, and participate in the activities being conducted. During the outreach, Ravi also interacts with the Child Line India staff which operates at the station to rescue and rehabilitate runaway kids. After mobilising enough children, and directing them towards the centre, he makes his way back through 'Shahid ka godaam' (Shahid's godown). The majority of children support their addiction through the daily income earned from rag picking at the station. They find bottles in train bogeys and on platforms, and sell them to the local scrap dealer at this

godown. The 'scrap dealer' is the lady who owns and operates the godown. She also has a 28 year old son, who is lying unconscious next to her, having passed out after consuming drugs. "He does not listen. He has been to jail 9 times...9 times, and he does not stop. His brother passed away at 30. His father passed away 8 years ago. Earlier I used to work at home, but after we lost him, I started buying the bottles that these kids collect, and selling them to wholesalers. I earn around ₹300-400 a day," she says. This godown is also where hard drugs are sold to children, in exchange for the bottles they sell. The scrap dealer earns a steady income by luring unsuspecting children into the cycle of substance abuse. Once their dependency is established, she buys bottles from them in exchange for money, the very money that the kids then pay her for the drugs she supplies. The money she pays them comes back to her. It's a flawless business model.

Along the way back to the centre, Ravi stops by the GRP office (a police station located at the railway station) where children from the centre come to attend Open Basic Education (OBE) classes everyday. These classes are conducted from 11 AM to 1 PM everyday, and are aimed towards providing basic education to the children who are registered to the OBE system by the centre staff. Back at the centre, Project Coordinator Mrs. Shaswati Sai explains the purpose of their consistent efforts, "The centre has existed since 2009. The purpose is that children living at the station, and doing drugs, can come to the centre and may be liberated from addiction. We connect that to every activity. If the child cannot do drugs while at the centre, for 4-5 hours, that's also a big thing for us. If he feels like he is benefitting from it, he will reduce consumption or leave drugs. Some will even return to their families. A lot of them are doing jobs (after becoming sober)."

The causes for children living in the area to engage in substance abuse, and the failure to resolve these problematic elements, only amplifies the systemic neglect faced by them. "Peer pressure is the main reason. Also, the drugs are very easily available. If it's too cold, too hot, or they're too hungry; they will do drugs, because that will make them fall asleep. If they have to sleep at the godown, they

have to do drugs. Some kids come here themselves, or through peer to peer connection, or our outreach worker mobilises them. Initially, their condition is so poor that they cannot even stand upright. They are afraid that we will either send them to a childrens' home or send them back to where they've run away from. First, we observe their condition. A new child will not talk to you, he will be afraid that the other kids might steal from or fight with him. They immediately run away. Slowly, through outreach and repeat visits, they understand that the centre exists

for them. At first, we educate them about personal hygiene, make sure they bathe and stay clean. We leave them free to play with the other kids, and then they tell us they're leaving. We tell them we feed kids, teach them, take them out (for visits and trips). We have to make them trust us. We ask them, 'Can we talk to you?' If they say yes, we do. We talk to them like friends, and then they tell us why they've run away. The biggest idea is to send them back home, or if they choose to go to the children's home, we connect them through the Child Line. Sometimes, our staff takes them back home. A lot of them do not share their contact details or home address. This is a big problem. The kids who do a lot of drugs do not wish to bathe or talk to you. Bathing makes their high fade away. The kids leave the centre after 6 PM, and we know their activities, what (substance) they have taken, in what quantities. They even tell us if they've stolen a wallet, or phone, or gambled and collected money. We note everything, and then conduct a (counselling) session based on that," adds Shaswati 'Ma'am', which is what the children address her as.



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MS. SHASWATI SAI, PROJECT COORDINATOR

She elaborates on the approach used to create a conducive environment for harm reduction among the children and youth who are coping with the disease of addiction. “The centre is open from 10 AM to 6 PM everyday, for boys aged six to 18 years old. 20-25 kids come daily, but sometimes you will even find 40 children at the centre. The children arrive sporadically (in the morning), after collecting bottles and selling them at the godown. They bathe, then we do a prayer. They don't all arrive together, because sometimes they look through different trains. Then we do Yoga, an interaction, and then NFE classes at the centre. We also have OBE classes till 1 PM, at the GRP. Then we have dance classes for one hour. During the NFE classes, we also conduct counselling sessions for special children. Then, we give them nutrition, wherein we offer them diverse food choices.

They are very particular about food. Each one wants a different dish. To distract them from the substances, we have to give them different sweets, tea, cold drinks—to keep their mind away from substances. After that, around 3-3:30 PM, we have games—outdoor or indoor games, art and craft classes, conducted by Sanjiv sir. We ask the children how they felt after coming here, sometimes we ask them what else they would want. We take them out to watch films, take them to programmes. Most children remain at the centre till 5-5:30 PM, or earlier if they have to check the train (for bottles).”

Besides the structured daily routine, there are also a range of other activities conducted to ensure active participation and to measure impact. “Four activities are mandatory at the centre—Parents Meeting, Life Skill Workshop, Group Sessions, and Support Group Meetings—and bi-annual exposure visits, after asking the children where they wish to go. We organise a Health Camp every 6 months,

and during emergency cases we take home to the Safdarjung Hospital. We make them visit the government hospital (to understand the emergency protocol). Some children simply come to the centre and sleep. There has been a major impact on personal hygiene and behaviour. Some even take their peers to the hospital (in case of emergencies). During the winters, we give them a set of warm clothes. We also take them for a Leadership Workshop, which can result in reducing drug consumption or leaving it entirely. If we prohibit a child from taking drugs, it can impact them mentally. We have Non Formal Education classes at the GRP, for children who want to study as well as work. Kids at the station are very sharp at mathematics, because they count all day. These days, children come and know that they cannot use substances in the centre. When they enter the centre, they deposit their paraphernalia. At the end of the day, we return it to them, because otherwise they will not return the next day. We control their addiction gradually, not instantaneously. When we counsel any child, we do it alone. We would probably know more about them than their own parents. The kids themselves have named the centre 'Humaari Khushiyaan' (Our Happiness)."

A Refuge for the Runaways

Many of the children that the centre seeks to benefit are runaways. They have escaped from their homes for a variety of reasons, ranging from insignificant to tragic. Mrs. Sai explains, "Most of them run away due to peer pressure. They give us false information, so that we don't send them back home. If the child reveals the phone number of the parents, we contact them. If not, we cannot. Some parents are aware of where the kids are, and they call us to ask if they are here. They take them back home, and consult us in case of any problems with the children. The children even visit Mathura, or Haridwar (by boarding trains with their friends). It seems like it is their own train. They travel everywhere in it."



Vikas, Project Beneficiary

Vikas*, who is the first to show up at the centre today, has run away from his home four times in his 14 years. Thrice, his reason for leaving was the fear of being reprimanded for his behaviour by family members. Each time, the centre contacted his family back home and ensured that they know of his whereabouts. Simultaneously, they attempted to convince him to return. He recalls how he was first engaged at the centre. "I didn't know that the train (which he boarded) was coming to Delhi. I stayed at the (Nizamuddin Railway) station for 8-10 days. The *karamchaaris* (cleaning staff) would give me rotis or money—₹50 or ₹60 for

cleaning the tracks. I missed home. Then one day Ravi *bhaiya* came and sent me to the centre with a boy called Chandan (former beneficiary). I came here for four-five days, and liked it, and then I started coming daily. Everyone is here, I used to study and play. I used to keep talking to papa on the phone (through Shaswati ma'am). He himself came to get me back."

On a daily basis, Vikas interacts with peers who struggle with the disease of addiction. They work together, come to the centre together, and live in close proximity at the station. Not surprisingly, it was peer pressure that led him to consume substances as well, "I had only one *nasha* (addiction), I used to take a lot of *gutka* (tobacco). Papa didn't mind me eating *gutka*, but he told me to take only little bit. I picked up the habit in Gwalior. My friends told me to chew *gutka*, so I did. I might have been six or seven years old. Slowly, I started doing *nasha* (intoxicants). I only did it when I felt like it, like when I felt cold," he says. Shaswati ma'am interjects—"Don't you drink quarters (alcohol)?" He

defends himself swiftly, “I haven’t had a quarter in three days! I’m eating well these days.” Upon her request, he elaborates further. “Chandan and all used to inhale tube (whitener fluid). I tried *ganja* (marijuana) a few times, and I drink alcohol. I found *smack* (another kind of intoxicant) *kadwaa* (bitter). I didn’t do it again. I like *gutka* and *beedi* (cigarettes). I buy tube when I feel like it.”

As with other kids at the station, Vikas’ addiction is supported by a steady daily income, commonly earned through collecting and selling plastic bottles to the local scrap dealer. Working at the station exposes the child to a variety of threats and dangers. “I’m scared of the police. If someone picks pockets, or steals phones, it’s the bottle collectors who get caught. They don’t let us sleep (on the station premises). There’s a problem of finding place to sleep.

You never know when an accident can happen—like a running train. I’ve seen it happen with many kids. One kid—he was mute—a train ran him over. He was alive for three-four days, and then he died. Another one was hanging onto the train, he slipped and his head burst open. He stayed alive for four-five days, and then died. Someone could hit you, fight with you, cut you with a blade.” These are the concerns of a 14 year old, which no effective state mechanism bothers to address. There are no shelters dedicated to homeless children in the vicinity, and no active measures taken to prohibit underage children from boarding random trains to unknown locations. In addition to systematic administrative neglect and failure to address social ostracisation, there is a lack of empathetic behaviour towards these children— specially on part of the authorities that are meant to ensure law and order.

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VIKAS, PROJECT BENEFICIARY

Vikas soon intends to return home. Today, he is using Shaswati ma’am’s phone to once again contact his father in the village. She urges his father to immediately travel to Delhi and take him home, away from the harmful influences of the station. Vikas acknowledges that there has been a change in his behaviour since his engagement at the centre. “I used to do a lot of *nasha*, and I am dry (sober) now, *didi*,” he says to Shaswati ma’am, “Now I don’t do much (consumption of substances). I either send someone to buy stuff (substance), or go myself. They sell alcohol next to the station, tube near the *dargah* (shrine). My bed has been stolen, and I will feel cold tonight, so I will surely drink alcohol. I can drink any kind—rum, whisky, *desi*, English. At home, I only do *gutka*, that too in hiding—for ₹5 or ₹10. I like home better but they bother me, they make me cook *rotis* in the morning and evening. If I don’t, they swear at me. They want tea in the morning, they want me to fetch water. I have to fill 15 bottles of water—morning and evening. If I don’t, then my *mama* (uncle) tells me to run away. When they trouble me or bore me too much, I feel like running away. I don’t mind making *rotis*, but if I don’t fill water, they scold me and tell me to run away.” This might be a reason that contributes to his recurring return to the station. “I feel good at the centre. I stay with everyone here. I roam around, sleep whenever I feel like at night. I don’t get as much freedom at home, as I do here (at the station). There, they don’t let me hang out with people.”

For most children like Vikas, dependency on substances is established at an early age. Hence, work at the centre requires long term commitment in order to build faith amongst beneficiaries and see them through to recovery. This task comes with a unique set of challenges. Shaswati ma’am and her team attempt to face each challenge with dedication and perseverance, employing all their resources and experience in dealing with sensitive matters—“During outreach, children ask us, ‘Why should we come to the centre?’ Regularly engaging them is the biggest challenge—to engage them without substances for 6 hours minimum. Why would a child who is addicted come to the centre? If we take away their paraphernalia, one child will leave, and take 4 others along with him. They are very stubborn. They refuse to deposit their substances. We don’t allow them to consume any drugs within the centre, so less children come here. But the ones that do, know that they cannot do drugs here. During the summers, they wander off. The children live with elder kids, who don’t allow them to come to the centre. If we ask them to bathe, they ask for (new) clothes.”

Another challenge commonly faced at the centre is controlling the unpredictable behaviour of boys under the influence of substances. “The children can get rough and violent, they have a lot of anger, so

there have been spontaneous fights. When they're under the influence, they can hit each other, abuse us, harm themselves, or lose control." Owing to her years of experience, she is now able to identify the reasons for these outbursts, "Firstly, they live at the station where they don't get proper food or sleep. They release that tension here. If we send them back home, they return here. Some parents send them to work, some are suffering from depression. We speak to them politely, and conduct sessions or plays on their rights, hygiene, Child Line service. There is a negative impact on their health (due to addiction). We get them to interact with the police, so that they build a friendship with the police. Most of the children here do not have parents. Some of them do, so we go door to door (to counsel parents). We tell parents about the school admission process, talk to parents about how to keep hygiene amongst themselves, and connect the (elder) kids to the YUVA Skill Development Centre (also run by CHETNA in partnership with iPartner India). Some children are good at dance, art and craft, or at studies. They have skills. We channel those skills. The work requires a lot of patience, and the staff works very hard. We must supervise them throughout the day. We even conduct meetings, even at the godown where they live, if they want."

Mending a Culture of Neglect

Unlike most other boys who visit the centre, 16-year-old Raman* lives at home with his family. However, his experience within the domestic environment has not safeguarded him from engaging with the hazardous work culture and substance abuse that children in the area are vulnerable to. "I studied from class one till eighth. I liked going there, but I (also) didn't like going to school because there were boys who would do *nasha* behind the school, and fight with each other. It's probably been three or four years since I left school. Now I study through OBE (he was connected to the Open Basic Education system by CHETNA). When I was 10 years old, one boy named Ehsaan* started bringing me here. He said, 'I'll show you my centre, it's very nice; they teach a lot of things.' I used to like it, and I still like it. We get knowledge here. I've given the seventh class paper, and gone into eighth. I gave the paper one year ago. As I kept growing older, I started learning more. When I was younger, I didn't know much about studies. The difference came when I started getting more understanding, when I started having some faith in myself."

A significant task of the staff at the Harm Reduction centre is not only to gain the trust of children suffering from drug abuse, but also to instil a sense of self-worth amongst these children. For Raman, the journey has been challenging, in spite of having his family around. "I was probably seven or eight years old when I saw boys collecting bottles at the station. I saw them and started picking bottles too. I still pick bottles. A lot of police men say that it is our age to study. My family didn't know for a few months. When they found out, they told me to leave all this work, do something better. Papa is a gardener, and my mummy is housewife. Papa leaves (for work) at 6 AM in the morning, and returns by 7 or 8 PM. I go at 8 AM or 9 AM, and return home by afternoon." While his family has suggested that he should 'do something better', they have failed to prohibit him from working at the station. Just as observing his peers guided him towards working as a bottle collector, it also initiated him into substance abuse. "At Shahid ka Godaam, the boys would buy it (intoxicants, often sold or offered as remuneration by the scrap dealer) and I thought I should try it once. I used to do tube and *beedi*. You can find it easily, at Nizamuddin *dargah* (shrine). I got a high fever a few months ago, because of doing *nasha*. After that, I started reducing it, and now I want to quit. If I quit it, I can improve. I want the place where *nasha* comes from to shut down."



Shahid ka Godaam, where bottles collected from platforms and trains are sold by children to the local scrap dealer

At the Peer to Peer Harm Reduction Centre, Rakesh* (now 17) has been nurtured since April 2017. His domestic situation is volatile, resulting in neglect and apathy towards his needs. His family lives in Delhi, yet does not want him to live with them. After being separated from them at a young age, and having witnessed the death of his beloved mother, he was left abandoned. Circumstances led him to Nizamuddin station, where he now lives and works. “I was 11-12 years old. I was in 2nd class. (After his mother’s death) Papa started driving buses, and married a woman he met there. He had children with her. Then, papa started telling my *daadi-chaacha* (grandmother and uncle) that I am not his kid, that his children with that woman are his real kids. When he used to get drunk they would beat me up, and kick me out. They cut my name out of school. The other woman my father married, she also used to hit me. I used to sleep on the bus stand or on the tracks, and eat food by asking the *bhaiyas* who used to eat at shops, or we would beg and buy food. I started living on the road, and sleeping anywhere. Someone would steal something, but we (street children) would get caught for it. I’m afraid that the police should not catch me again, and beat me up again. I used to beg over there (near his former home), and then some boys got me from there to here. Then we found some friends, and came to Kale Khan.”

Once Rakesh started living on the street, the other street children exposed him to substance abuse. “The boys there (on the road) were older than me, they taught me how to use drugs. Tube, *beedi* (cigarettes), *ganja* (marijuana), but when I came here (to Nizamuddin), I reduced that. I don’t do too much now. I used to be rag picking all day in the sun, but now I stay at the centre. I used to earn enough to feed myself. ₹50-₹60 to eat and drink tea. The two kids who taught me how to do it, they would keep giving me drugs. They said they’d beat me up if I didn’t take it, that they do it and nothing happens. If I refused, they would hit me. They used to steal food and stuff from trucks. Now, I collect bottles and the money I earn, I spend on buying vegetables, and give it to them.” He also identifies the root cause of his addiction. He does not have easy access to education, financial security, shelter, or basic amenities; but substances are readily available at all times—“I want the shops selling drugs to shut down. As long as people keep selling drugs, people will keep buying it and getting away with it.”

Rakesh now lives under the Sarai Kale Khan flyover, which is walking distance from the centre. He articulately describes what brings him back to the centre everyday, and how it has impacted his life. “I used to do rag picking, and then they told me about the centre—where people feed, clothe, bathe you. The boys who used to study here showed me the centre, but I was scared that I could get caught and taken somewhere. Then *bhaiya-didi* (centre staff) met me and told me, and made me meet other boys. They told me they come to the centre. Then I came for one or two

days with *bhaiya*, and then I memorised the route to the centre. I started coming here everyday. I’d bathe here, speak to *bhaiya-didi*, study, dance, learn drawing from sir. Earlier I used to be in the sun all day, rag picking. Here, *didi* teaches us to study, Ravi *bhaiya* teaches us dance. I’ve been to Dumduma (CHETNA’s annual residential retreat), and India Gate, where we have programmes. *Bhaiya* even took us to visit the railway museum, to a fair, and to the zoo. They teach us many things to make us move forward in life. Earlier, I didn’t know anything. I like to play, study, dance, draw, and live together with everyone—like *bhaiya*, all the *didis* (centre staff). The way these people behave with us, they love us like our parents, it’s better than how my *daadi-chacha* kept me. Here, we study and learn something. Outside, we can’t study or learn anything. We pick trash, hear abuses, get beaten up. Here, nobody hits us. That’s why I like coming here, and even my *nasha* has reduced since before.”

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RAKESH, PROJECT BENEFICIARY

Having witnessed a significant amount of distress in his life, it is somewhat comforting to know that Rakesh now spends the larger chunk of his day at the centre. Here, he is cared for and looked after. His needs are not neglected, he is not alone, and he is not vulnerable within the confines of this centre. Not all children who are engaged here are abandoned. Some among them live with their families in the vicinity, but nevertheless find themselves inevitably drawn into the cycle of substance abuse. “I’m 16 years old—”, Abhishek* is interrupted mid sentence—“Wait, what’s your age on your

Aadhar card?" "It's 14." "So, then you must say 14," demands Shaswati ma'am. He corrects himself, and goes on to share details that would bear no mention on his ID. "I was born in Bengal, I lived in the village with my grandparents, but after they passed away, we came to Delhi. Papa and mummy fought, so she left him and came to Delhi with me and my elder sister. I must've been three or four years old then. My sister is married now. Mummy lives at the Sarai Kale Khan homeless shelter. I also live there. We got a room in Delhi first, then my father joined us after he stopped drinking a bit, but then he started again...but now he's made it less. Two years ago, my mother was very worried. My father was stuck in a case, for stealing something. He was in jail for three-four months."



Abhishek, Project Beneficiary

Not surprisingly, owing to this volatile domestic situation, Abhishek's education suffered. "I studied in the village, in 1st class. Since I came to Delhi, I stopped studying. My parents were labourers. They used to leave us at home, but mummy would come home to give us lunch. They used to return at 5 PM. I used to play with my sister all day. I used to think a lot about studying when I was younger, but then I stopped thinking about it. Now, I study through CHETNA, in OBE. If I find something difficult, I ask ma'am about it." While he is connected to academics now, Abhishek has been working since a young age to

support his family of seven in the absence of his father. "When I was very little, I used to beg. People give a lot to little kids. I used to earn around ₹500—morning to evening. I used to go till Okhla and Ashram, by bus, till the red light. I only did that for one year. I left it because I started feeling ashamed." Currently, he collects plastic bottles at the Nizamuddin railway station and sells them to the local scrap dealer. "I started selling bottles when I was 10, maybe. You can only find bottles in the summers on the station, so I do that throughout the summers. You can earn ₹300-₹400 a month. I take ₹10-₹20 rupees to eat and drink, and the rest I give at home. In that much money, I can feed my sisters, brothers, and parents. In the winters, because people don't drink much water, you can't find too many bottles. So, I help my father in the *shaadi-party* work (daily wage labour for weddings and small events). I started doing that one year ago."

Since he lives at the local homeless shelter with his family, he has access to basic amenities—"Water, food, shelter, cold water dispensers, TV, and so many toilets—don't even ask. Cleaning happens everyday. I wake up at 6 AM, go to pick bottles at the station till 10 AM, then I go to the GRP (for CHETNA's OBE classes), to study. Pooja ma'am teaches us there. Right now, I'm learning Hindi. It's been a month now. Earlier I never used to go, because I never felt like studying. Then my friend Javed took me there one day. I told him if I didn't like it, I wouldn't go. I liked it, so I started going there. After that, I come to the centre—to dance! Dance happens from 1 PM to, say, 2 PM; because after 2 PM we eat our lunch. Everyone's favourite food comes. It goes on for half an hour, because there are quite a few of us. Then, we watch TV, play carrom, games, go to the park. I leave at 5 PM." He agrees that it is common for children working and living at the station to be addicted to a variety of drugs, but he has distanced himself from that possibility. "Many of them do it (drugs). Some do tube, *ganja*, drugs, or A-vil—its a small syringe they put in their veins, and then they fall asleep for two or three days. It's very dangerous. Two or four people in the station have lost their lives because of it. I don't interact with them, because I know I have my brothers and sister. I have to give them money, who else will do it? My father doesn't earn a rupee in the summers. And in the summers, the days are longer than the winters."

He does not engage in harmful activities, but working on the station creates a vulnerability one cannot avoid. “I’m only scared of one thing. That if anything is stolen, they (the police) will only beat us up. They will beat us up, so much that you confess something you haven’t even done. Once, they caught me for something I hadn’t stolen. They beat me up, till I admitted to stealing it when I actually hadn’t. Then I searched through all the bottle collector’s things and found the stuff that was stolen. The money was gone but the passport, ID cards and all were there. Then, I returned it. I was very angry, because they beat me up for no reason. I hate the police, ever since they beat me up. It must have been one or two years ago.” While he has previously been intimidated by the police, he now visits the GRP on a daily basis, for regular classes with the CHETNA educator. Shaswati ma’am explains how the interaction between police and children has proved impactful, “Earlier the police used to be suspicious of the children, but ever since the OBE classes at the GRP started, they’ve built a kind of friendship with them. If there’s any issue now, the children themselves go and talk to them, they even go for trips with the children. They accompanied them to Agra, and now might be taking them in October for one of their visits. Whenever there is an event at the GRP, they invite our kids. The children, if they find anything at the station—like any lost items—they deposit that to the police. So, they’ve built a rapport of friendship with them.”

Abhishek acknowledges the role the NGO has played in his life. “I’ve been coming here since six or seven years now. You get to visit really nice places, attend big programmes. Everything at the centre has been good for me. I like coming here because everything happens on time—we eat on time, play on time, study on time, leave on time. I like people who do things on time. Earlier I never spoke to anyone, but now I talk to my parents and siblings. Now, I even go out by myself. Through CHETNA, my brothers—they’re in third and second grade; and my sister—she’s in class one; study.” Abhishek’s mother has been out of town for three days. In her absence, he has collected ₹300 through picking bottles. He’s now off to hand over his earnings to her, so that she can meet the family’s expenses. Unfortunately, he will be skipping today’s dance class, the daily activity which never fails to stir the fancy of all the children present. Today, Ravi sir is rehearsing a choreographed dance with his students, who are expertly nailing each move. It is early evening now, and another young man at the centre is also on his way home. “I have to go home,” says Faizan*, even before we begin our conversation. Still, he is willing to participate. He instantly launches into a brief retelling of his history, somewhat unsentimentally. He has experienced personal loss and tragedy since the time he was a young child. He witnessed the impact of substance abuse on the lives of his brothers, three of whom struggled with addiction and passed away at an early age, while he was barely a teenager. He now lives with his elder sister and brother-in-law, in Sarai Kale Khan.



Dance classes in progress at the centre

Before coming into contact with the Harm Reduction centre, Faizan had no experience with formal education. “I haven’t been to school, I used to go to the *madrassa*. But I didn’t like it. I wasn’t fond of it. I used to go one day, bunk the next. When I was 8 years old, I started working at weddings and events. I used to work and then come back home. If it was a lunch event, we would leave at 4 AM or 5 AM and return by 5 PM. If it was a night event, we went in the morning and returned by 1 AM.” Faizan still continues to battle substance abuse, which is one of the reasons his engagement with the centre is so regular. “I’ve been collecting bottles (since he was a child). When I didn’t collect bottles—I was very young—my cousin one day said, ‘Let’s go for rag picking.’ I didn’t understand it. I just felt happy when I got the money.

Earlier, I never even used to give that money at home, I just spent all of it on drugs. I don't know how old I was back then. At that time, even ₹1 felt a lot. Now, we earn ₹200-₹250. I leave at 5 AM and stay till 8 AM (collecting bottles and selling them to the scrap dealer). On Sundays, it's a holiday at the centre so I sometimes do it (bottle picking) from morning till evening."

Recovery is a long and non-linear process, specially when a dependency has been established since early childhood. Faizan has had a sustained experience with substance abuse, and while he has not attained complete sobriety, the staff at the centre continues to work with him towards his recovery, "I first did fluid tube, and then *gutka*, and *ganja* at the tea stall, I sometimes drink alcohol, or *beedi* (cigarettes)." He details his reaction to substances, and the long term impact of consuming them, "I didn't find anything good, couldn't eat properly, my chest and stomach used to hurt. I used to stay at *khala's* godown (a small room behind the station, where one of the the local scrap dealers operates from), and slept there. She would pay us for collecting bottles. She also used to tell us not to do *nasha*, but we didn't listen. Then *bhaiya-didi* (CHETNA staff) started doing outreach, and we came here. Earlier, I used to just come here and sleep. Then, I started improving. People get addicted due to domestic issues, or due to peer pressure. I fell into it because they used to sell the *nasha* in black (at cheap rates). We got the fluid at a house near the *dargah*, on the third floor of a building. The policemen would fine the people who were selling it. Still, they kept selling the drugs. Even at (Sarai) Kale Khan, they started selling it, but the police shut it down. They opened another one, but the landlord had it shut. That's when all the kids started going to the *dargah*. They sell smack, *ganja*, tube. We started buying fluid from them. This much—" he indicates half the length of his index finger,— "is for ₹200. I didn't buy all these things."



Faizan (Project Beneficiary) with Shaswati ma'am

"I used to stay dirty, wear dirty clothes, did a lot of drugs, didn't even speak properly to people. Since I started coming to the centre...I started reducing the drugs. I stay clean now."

FAIZAN, PROJECT BENEFICIARY

didi earlier—they explained everyday, but I still didn't understand. My friends, who used *nasha*, would manipulate me, and I would come back the next day. Then, slowly, I started to understand. Now I can control my anger and speak to them politely."

After years of regular engagement and sustained intervention by the centre and CHETNA staff members, Faizan might not have achieved a full recovery, but there has been an improvement in his temperament. "I've been coming to the centre for 6-7 years. (Earlier,) I used to stay dirty, wear dirty clothes, did a lot of drugs, didn't even speak properly to people. Since I started coming to the centre, and I started going home every night, I started reducing the drugs. I used to fight a lot, but now I don't do it. I feel angry when I do wrong, or someone else does wrong. I stay clean now. I started coming to the centre everyday. I didn't listen to *bhaiya-*

As Faizan makes his way down the staircase at the entrance of the centre, a boy with a modest demeanour introduces himself. Aasif*, now 16, spent his childhood at Khajuri district in Delhi. Brought up under disadvantaged circumstances, he started working at an alarmingly young age, in order to support his mother, his five brothers and two sisters. These circumstances forced him to abandon his education in third grade. Since 2007, he has worked to sustain them and himself. He sheds light on the mistreatment and exploitation faced by child labourers, "When I was four years old,

I used to work at a factory sewing buttons. I left that work after 5 months because the owner didn't pay me on time, and he used to hit me for very small mistakes. After that, I worked in the same factory, I had to put clothes into hot water and take them out. My hands used to burn, but I had to do it to earn a living, and to support my family. My father had left us, and we didn't have enough money to even buy two meals a day. My mother used to work, but how much can one person do? Once, she even fell and injured herself. We had to collect money and pay for her treatment. After that, we told her to stop working. She's taken care of us all our lives, so she is our responsibility now. A few months ago, I started working at a hostel. I used to clean and make food, but then the owner refused to pay me and asked me to leave." The team at the centre has observed and intervened in the lives of many children who have survived hazardous and toxic work environments. Shaswati ma'am understands the extent of injustice faced by many of the centre's beneficiaries, within and outside the station. She explains, "The people at the godown do not return their money, or give fair wages. We have meetings with them too. They supply drugs to them, and the kids sleep there at night. They are also physically abused at the godown, or where they live. They tell us, and we either try to send them home, or send them to a children's home. They even run away from the children's home, due to lack of food or poor living conditions."



Aasif, Project Beneficiary

In 2011, influenced by his friends at the time, Aasif left his work and home. He worked at a cycle repair shop, and an apparel shop. Once he started living at the Nizamuddin station, he also worked as a bottle collector and water seller, earning ₹500-600 a day. Aasif's experience with drug abuse started fairly early on, owing to peer pressure, "In 2009, I used to live in Khajuri. I used to study, and my friends who used to do drugs would ask me 'How much money do you have?' I used to tell them I had to buy groceries with the money, but they would tell me to spend it on drugs. Then, one of them forcefully put it on my

mouth. The day after that, I didn't feel like doing it. But two days later, I went to do drugs again. I used to get high a lot. Once, I even took money from my mother's wallet to buy drugs (whitener fluid). When I was 14, I left home and came to Sarai Kale Khan. I saw kids here doing drugs too, and I'd already learned how to do it. I left home because my *chacha* (uncle) didn't want me to live with him. Even when I go now, he doesn't let me stay. I live at the homeless shelter. People there also do drugs. I have to send someone elder than me to the shop to buy the drugs for me. I think if the shops selling drugs are shut down, people won't buy them." The shops depend on children who are addicts to sustain themselves, and these children have no access to state run rehabilitation facilities or de-addiction programmes. This fact entails that NGOs have to intervene to address this glaring gap in a system that conveniently turns a blind eye towards these most vulnerable victims of addiction.

One of Aasif's close friends informed him about the Peer to Peer Harm Reduction Centre. Upon joining the centre in June 2017, he underwent many counselling sessions, which has resulted in changes in his hygiene condition, behaviour towards people, and overall personality. He also continued to pursue his education through OBE, and intends to reappear for his Class 8 examinations soon. "Now, I don't use drugs as much. I've started doing it less. Many things within me have changed. I come to the centre to study, talk to my other friends here. I've been coming here since around 1.5 years. Earlier, I used to feel scared of coming, but then I saw so many kids coming here, so I also came. We have two teachers—Shaswati ma'am and Manjula ma'am who teach us such nice things, and give us so much knowledge. We also have Ravi *bhaiya*, who teaches us dancing. I come to the centre everyday, because I want to study. I feel that if I study, I can get a good job in the future. I want to

create a job through which I can give good knowledge to wayward children, and empower them to achieve their goals. I used to be at 0 percent, and now look, by God's grace I have come so far in life."

Manifesting Joy

"It's Jeetu's* birthday, right? Let's gift him a Rampuri (knife) as a gift!", says Punit* lovingly. Jeetu has been at the centre all morning, and preparations are in full swing to celebrate his birthday this afternoon. Jeetu does not know when his birthday is, but for the past few days, he has been asking Shaswati ma'am when his birthday will be celebrated. So, today it is, she decides—"They might be high, live in dirt all day, but if we involve ourselves even a little bit...it's a very small thing. He looks so beautiful today, so we'll celebrate his birthday. We don't know how he'll be looking tomorrow," she laughs. In the midst of preparations, Jeetu recalls his journey so far. While doing so, he clearly has to strain his memory, and struggles to articulate himself. "I'm from Bhopal. My *maama* (maternal uncle) lives there. I've got three brothers, one sister. I even remember their names. It's been five years since I went home. I sat in the train—Jabalpur Express. I came to Delhi with a friend. He said he would take me around Delhi. I didn't tell anyone at home. I was 10 years old then. I liked it—I studied, came to the centre, danced." Upon his arrival at Nizamuddin station in Delhi, he inevitably started working for survival. "I used to work. We would take empty containers in a small car (he was paid for carriage labour). They paid me ₹300. I started working at parties when I was 13. I still do it when I get the work. (Now,) I pick bottles in the train."

It is somewhat unclear why Jeetu left his hometown and family behind, but from what he has shared, it seems that some of his friends in Bhopal convinced him to accompany them to Delhi at a very young age. Yet, he remembers his family, and is updated about their current status. "It takes 12 hours to reach home (from Delhi, by train). I used to study in school, in second class. I can write ABCD, and counting. My brother is a truck driver—he drives from Jabalpur to Nagpur. He is married. My younger brother works in a garage, and another goes to school. My sister is 15 years old, she also goes to school. She was very small when I left. Papa also drives a truck." A few years ago, Jeetu suffered a head injury, the impact of which is uncertain but evident. "I fell from the train. Even my eye is injured. It happened two years ago. Someone pushed me from behind—I have a scar here, look. Then they took me to the hospital, and the doctors kept me there for two weeks. They called my father, and he paid the doctors ₹7000. Then he took me back to Jabalpur. I fell in Bhopal on platform 4, when I was on my way to the village, and then (fell from the train) again in Delhi." Jeetu returned to the station, and has lived here since. Shaswati ma'am understands his condition and has witnessed his gradual progress at the centre. "Since he started coming here, he studies, focuses on his health, does very little *nasha* now. Earlier, we would have to send him off, because he would create a ruckus. Now he deposits his stuff himself. He would buy two or three tubes at a time. He used to be angry all the time—he has a record (history of volatile behaviour). Whenever we have an activity, there is no photo of him (as he does not like being photographed). When people would come to visit (the centre), he wouldn't talk to any of them. Now, at least he talks to people."

The streamers are hung and the candles on the cake are being lit, as Jeetu looks on with a smile on his face. He knows this is all for him, and perhaps that gives him a sense of joy. He and his friends gather around the table, and everyone sings along as he blows out the candles, all at once. Shaswati ma'am is the happiest of all. Her joy is palpable, as she feeds him a piece of cake, and then hands him cold drinks and food. Jeetu is observant, and he looks satisfied, even though all the cake smeared across his face. These are the smaller joys of life at



the centre, but the greater purpose of these activities is to inculcate a degree of self worth or appreciation amongst children and youth suffering from the tough predicament of confronting their substance abuse. To create an uplifting environment even in uncertain circumstances is a mammoth task, aimed towards generating hope that inspires and motivates the often uneven process of recovery.

By directly interacting with vulnerable children for eight hours a day and mobilising stakeholders to encourage and assist in the recovery process, the Harm Reduction centre has engaged 839 children, based on data encompassing July 2012 to June 2018. In this span of time, it has also provided Non Formal Education to 263 children and connected 159 to the Open Basic Education system. 82 children have been counselled during this period, and 15 children completed a vocational training course in Housekeeping. The centre also provides daily nutrition, ensures that the children possess identity proof, provides first aid services in emergencies, and also connects suitable children or youth to CHETNA's Sapno ka Aangan day care well being centre, and the YUVA Skill Development Centre; both located within the vicinity. The children whose home address can be traced are rehabilitated, and subsequent follow up procedure is followed. Those who wish to live in shelter homes owing to their domestic circumstances are also provided that option.

The children that the centre impacts are the most vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and harassment, and often find themselves in situations where they lack negotiating power, or knowledge of their autonomous rights. By educating and empowering them, the centre plays an integral role in their daily lives. Where authorities have failed to provide necessary resources, security and basic amenities to children living and working at railway stations, the centre has proved that through sustained and regular engagement, a change in patterns of behaviour is possible. Authorities have failed to practice accountability, transparency and responsibility by ignorantly isolating this neglected subculture of addiction. Through interactions and activities, the centre staff attempts to provide education, healthcare, sanitation facilities, nutrition, and a stable routine to their beneficiaries. Amidst the chaos, the consistent ideology that guides their operations remains—an assured combination of focused dedication, patience and relentless optimism.

*Names have been changed to ensure anonymity