

## The Boy at Platform 8

“What did you do on Saturday?” enquires Shaswati ma’am. “On Muharram, I ate just a little bit of biryani, that’s all...Yesterday, we found Tarun\*, and we beat him up a lot,” Vikas\* responds casually. It seems spontaneous brawling is regular fare at the station. “And how much money did you earn?” “I earned money, but someone stole ₹80 yesterday—this guy named Tunda, his fingers are cut,” he adds, prompting Shaswati ma’am to recall, “Oh, that guy—” This conversation flows like a daily ritual at CHETNA’s Peer to Peer Harm Reduction Centre at Nizamuddin ( established in partnership with iPartner India), which aims to provide a nurturing environment for vulnerable children to reduce consumption of substances,



and possibly be liberated from the destructive influence of substance abuse and addiction. The level of ease and comfort with which Vikas shares the most mundane yet intimate moments of his life with Shaswati ma’am is heartening to witness. In her presence, he is more at ease with revealing information that he might otherwise withhold. “I’m from MP (Madhya Pradesh)—Gwalior. At home, there’s papa and a younger brother. Papa is a labourer. He lays tiles. I’ve studied till class eight in government school, but then my bag got stolen at school. It was monsoon, and we used to leave our bags in school itself (so that the notebooks wouldn’t get damaged by rain). Ma’am would tell us to leave it there. It was raining a lot, so we didn’t go to school for 5-6 days. When I went, the bag wasn’t there. Ma’am said, ‘You won’t find the bag now, go away.’ I swore at her, so they told me to leave. I left school. I didn’t feel like studying further. My younger brother is in class six now.”

“The first time I came to Delhi, I was 15. Now I’m 17.” Vikas is clearly uncertain about his age, but Shaswati ma’am is assured that he is all of 14 as of now. We infer that he first came to Delhi two years ago. At the tender age of 14, Vikas has run away from his home multiple times. This is remarkable, but the reasons he left are far more interesting than the frequency of this occurrence. He recalls the first instance, “I was at my *naani’s* (grandmother’s) home. A man (local resident) made me go to get alcohol for him. After I left, he stole stuff worth ₹70,000. When I came back, he started swearing at me. So, I ran away and went to the station.”

Vikas was blamed for the robbery, and after he ran away, the doubt turned to suspicion. At the station, he was clueless. “I didn’t know that the train (which he boarded) was coming to Delhi. I had told the TC I had no money, so he sent me to the general compartment. 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 used to sleep on steel parcels. I missed home. Then one day Ravi *bhaiya* (Harm Reduction centre staff) came and sent me to the centre with a boy called Chandan (former beneficiary). I came here for four or 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. He himself came to get me back. The person whose house was robbed threatened to put papa in jail because they thought I had stolen the things. I called papa from *didi’s* (Shaswati ma’am’s) phone. I didn’t tell him where I was—the full address. Then I called up my village from the station. I heard my *naani* crying on the phone, and told her where I was. My *mausa* (uncle), who lives in Old Delhi, saw me at the station. I was sleeping, so he asked around about me, and one boy told him where I was. Then he called papa to Delhi. Papa saw me, and he started crying. They fed me food, gave me clothes, made me bathe, and then took me back home to the village. I must’ve been in Delhi for one or two months. I used to go and sleep at an NGO nearby. When I reached the village, the police questioned me and caught the man (the real thief). Then I started staying at home. I liked being at home. I stayed at home for three-four months, maybe. Then one day, I took someone’s cycle to the market, and someone stole that cycle. So, I ran away again. I was afraid that my family would hit me. I just came here. First I took the intercity express to Agra, and then from Agra to Delhi. The TC said nothing; I was sleeping. I arrived at 9 PM and reached the godown. They fed me, and I slept there. In the morning—at 10 AM—I came to the centre. Ma’am and all asked me, ‘How did you come back?’ I said, ‘Just like that,’” he concludes.

His other adventures were also triggered by equally incidental occurrences. “I’ve run away from home four times. Each time I run away, I come back here. One time (the third time) I came by my own choice. I had spent ₹100. Papa was making someone’s house, so I took ₹100 out of that money and spent it. Then I was afraid that he would hit me, so I ran away. I spent *holi*, *diwali*, and *Raksha bandhan* here (at the station in Delhi). I never told papa my address. He knows I’ll be at platform 8. When I come in the morning, I’m at platform 8. When I go in the evening, I’m at platform 8. The next (fourth) time, my *nana* (grandfather) brought me here. I went to a birthday party in Narola, in Old Delhi. I told him to give me money, and that I won’t stay (at the station) for many days. He didn’t give me money, so I hit him and made him run away. I stayed for 10-15 days and then returned home.”

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 a little bit. My *maama* (uncle) used to beat me up over the smallest of things. 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 Shaswati ma’am’s request, he elaborates further. “Chandan and all used to drink 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. “I pick bottles. We wake up at 4 AM, collect till 7 AM. Now I sleep outside, near the ticket counter. There’s a *dhurrie* (carpet) that we can spread out. When we wake up, we go to the station. When I’m sleeping, the other kids bother me—put a hand in my pocket, steal my money. The ones I make sleep next to me, they only take away the money and run.” However, this is not his greatest worry as a child living and working at the railway station. “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. 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 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 sufficiently addresses. There are no shelters dedicated to homeless children, or protective supervision. In addition to systematic administrative neglect and failure to address social ostracisation, there is a lack of empathetic behaviour towards these children— especially on part of the authorities that are meant to ensure law and order.

While Vikas’ banter with Shaswati ma’am is usually in jest, she does sincerely laud his efforts towards improvement. She says, “He’s connected many kids to the centre, and we gave him a prize for that, from the centre. He would bring around three or four kids in a day. Now, he speaks better. Earlier he would abuse 10 times before he started talking. Since he joined the centre, there has been a lot of difference due to counselling. Now, he participates in all activities. His thinking and speaking patterns have changed. (But) He feels angry if someone doesn’t listen to him. When he is sober, he really regrets his actions. He’s our *raees bachcha* (spoilt child). He gives money to needy kids, takes care of his hygiene. He’s connected many children to Child Line, when the centre is closed. He helps children if they are hungry, that’s always been there in him. He is a very helpful child.” Vikas, however, does not boast of this trait. He simply comments, “If I find a child (alone at the station), I bring them to the centre. I tell them politely to come to the centre, but if they don’t want to, then I send them to the Child Line.”

He 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 (substances), 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." Besides his domestic environment, it could also be the freedom this unrestrained lifestyle affords him that brings him back to the city. The simple fact that running away is an option, and that he knows a place away from home, makes the option worth considering.

The last time Vikas ran away from his grandfather, he lived at the station for almost two weeks. He returned home safely. Yet here he is, seated at the centre now. How come he ended up in Delhi again? "I went to a *mela* (fair) with my friend, and it was one or two o' clock at night (past his curfew), and I got scared that my father will beat me up. So, I ran away. That was a month ago." He shifts his attention towards Shaswati ma'am, reciting a number to her, which she promptly dials so that he can speak to his *naani*. It is his father who picks up. "Hello Papa, it's Aakash speaking. Is Mummy good?" He halts, "She's ill." Shaswati ma'am takes over, "Let me speak to him! Hello, is this Vikas's father? He's at the centre, in Nizamuddin. That's where he's speaking from. You can speak to him." He's on the phone briefly, and then he hangs up. Will he be going home anytime soon? "I will go in four-five days. I may not need to pay money for the train, but I definitely have to pay for the bus (to go home). But I will come back, with an Aadhar card; and do work, any work."

**\*Name has been changed to protect anonymity**