

## The Relentless Pursuit of Knowledge

16-year-old Afzal\* is busy with the desktop computer at CHETNA's Yuva Skill Development Centre at Nizamuddin. So, when asked to spare a few minutes to talk, he is apprehensive at first. Kindly, he obliges, "I live with my two sisters, my brother and my mother, under the flyover here. It's been 10 years since we came to Delhi, to find work. I didn't even know



where Delhi was. We've been living under the flyover ever since we came here. In Lucknow, I studied from first till third grade, and then we got my name cut, because the kids there used to fight. They used to beat up my sister, so we left the school too. Then, in Delhi, I went into sixth class when I was eight years old. I passed my exams till eighth grade, and I even scored full marks. I wanted to study further, but nobody got my admission done (he was not enrolled to the senior secondary school). My mother says that the notebooks are too expensive, and we can't afford the uniform. Plus, you have to pay a fee of ₹800 per month. So, they didn't get my name written. We did go to get my admission done once, but we saw that there were no teachers in the classes at that school, only children smoking *beedi* (cigarettes). So, I told my mother I won't go to that school. I don't want to go to that kind of a school."

Denied his rightful access to quality education, Afzal began working—not out of necessity or helplessness, but out of choice—"When I was 14 years old, I worked at weddings. I used to pick up the glasses or trash that people used to throw. We used to go only sometimes, but we earned around ₹400 per day. I did it on my own. I never told my mother before going for work. When I turned 15, I started selling headphones here (near Nizamuddin railway station). I did that for six months, and then the person who owned the shop ran away with my money—₹1300—to his village. The second day, we found out that the police had caught him. Now, I just wander around and do no work. People say I'm too young to do work. I come to the centre everyday."

In October 2017, he was engaged by CHETNA's YUVA Skill Development Centre (established in partnership with iPartner India), where he was taught English, Hindi, communication and computer skills. Since he is not an adult, he cannot be placed at a job. Hence, given his circumstances, the centre attempts to enrich his knowledge base. "Sir (CHETNA staff) came and told us that we'd get food, learn computer (at the centre). He asked if we could come, even just for an hour. I heard 'computer' and

said I'd come. Everyone else was afraid. When I came here, I realised it's quite close by, and you can get food and everything here. Since then, I started coming. I've learned computer in the past three months. I'm slow at typing, but I can work on other things. Once I'm done with that, I take out my notebook and study Hindi and English. I told them (his family) to get me enrolled to school, but they didn't allow it. So, I come here to study."

As we flip through his elaborate notebooks, which document his progress over 10 months of regular engagement, he explains what encourages him to visit the centre everyday. "First I studied ABCD—I learnt it here. I didn't know how to write anything! I used to just scribble anything in the notebook. Then, I decided that I should come here everyday. We started learning how to speak—basic sentences like, 'My name is Afzal. What is your name?' But I am fond of studying the most, even more than computers. I feel very good here; I study a lot. I like it, that's why I come. Here, you can study, you can learn computer, you get food. My mother says, 'You don't earn any money.'" Although he is under pressure to contribute financially to the family, Afzal is committed to his education, "My only problem is not going to school. I want to study well and become something. So that people say, 'He used to live on the road and now he's reached here'. I like everything about computers. I asked my mother if we could get a computer but she said, 'Have you gone mad? We don't even have a mobile, you want a computer?'" he giggles.

As he talks, Afzal keeps his mouth covered with his hand. His teeth are stained red, and he seems self-conscious about it. He says, "I only chew *gutka* (tobacco). The first time I ate *gutka*, my friends gave it to me. I tried to stop doing it. I've tried to stop myself many times, but I couldn't stop. I even fell ill in between. One year ago I had TB. It took me six months to recover." His mother, a street vendor, is the sole breadwinner for the family, "She even sends money to my brother in Lucknow. He works as a labourer. He drinks alcohol, smokes weed. I've been around him for so many years, but never done it." With enough access and exposure to substances, it is indeed commendable that Afzal has kept himself at bay from intoxicants. Still, he faces unique issues as a homeless youth, "Policemen come and swear at us. Yesterday he was about to hit us. But where can we go? We go to use the toilet at the homeless shelter, but even there, people swear at us. Last night, someone stole a phone I'd borrowed. Kids come there to play cards—I don't gamble. Maybe they picked it up. Now I'm in trouble. I have to return ₹2500 to the person whose phone it was. My mother scolded me a lot; she said never to borrow someone's phone again. When anyone has troubles with their phones, they come to me. I know how to fix it." This incident reflects the kind of circumstances that might drive street youth towards reckless behaviour or exploitative work environments. In spite of these distractions, Afzal manages to sneak in some treasured moments of joy, "I feel good in the winters, when people give us blankets, or give toys to us. And every Sunday, we go to India Gate. I like taking a walk there. I go with him—" he points towards a boy sitting beside him, who looks about the same age as him—"He's my nephew. He's two years younger to me," they grin sheepishly.

Afzal acknowledges the impact of the past 10 months, which have indeed proved transformative. He concludes, "Yes, there have been many changes. Earlier, I used to just be wandering; I used to not stay clean. I didn't bathe during winters, when I was smaller. Now, I bathe every alternate day. Where I live, you can get very dirty, because there's a road on both sides. And wherever I sit, I want to study. I don't even like Sundays. On Sundays I feel, 'Why isn't the centre open?'" Behind this bright enthusiasm is a more elegant and intimate understanding of the true value of education, "My father died without studying, he was an illiterate. But I had decided that I would not be an illiterate. I will draw my signature on papers (not use a thumbprint). I'm thinking I'll keep going ahead, and going ahead...as long as I'm walking." That idea, in itself, is a small revolution.

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