

The Restoration of Spirit



'Nobody has told me my full name, but I've heard that it might be...Yadav. Yes, I think so—in my village, my friends used to say it's Yadav,' Vineet* recalls vaguely. He hails from Jhansi in Madhya Pradesh, where his family still lives. "My mother, father, an elder brother, a younger brother—he's 10—and my six year old sister. They live there. But I was born in Gujarat, because my parents never had a *thikaana* (permanent abode). So, I don't remember much of my childhood." Since the family migrated erratically from place to place, they usually lived at the local railway station of whichever city they were in, "I used to live with my parents outside the station. My mother was a rag picker, and she used to take my younger brother along. My father's legs don't work, so he couldn't work. I didn't like living with them. My father would tell me to go for rag picking; and if I didn't, they would hit me a

lot. They had enough money to be able to help us." After his father became disabled, financial distress followed and the family moved to Mathura. For nearly a decade, his family resided under a tree outside the Mathura Railway Station.

Under these drastic circumstances—and faced with pressures that a child his age would presumably be ill-equipped to confront—Vineet was quick to learn the tact of survival, "I used to beg at the station, along with my friends. I also used to wash tea glasses at a stall. I remember I used to break the glass sometimes. But the owner was very nice; he used to keep me like his own son. He paid me ₹20 everyday, for making *samosa-puri* and breakfast at the tea stall. Then, when I was nine or maybe 10 years old, I started working at a hotel, making *chapatis* (flatbreads). I'd left Mathura for a while and started living in Rajasthan. There, I worked and lived at a hotel near the railway station. It's right there—as soon as you exit the gate. They paid me ₹80. I did that for around two years, and then I started making a lot of mistakes. This one time I broke a glass, and the tea spilled. But I had learnt all the work at that hotel—I had the talent to learn everything—so they sent me to a five star hotel where I started earning ₹9000 a month. I started feeling good about it, because it was a big place. They used to make tandoori *rotis*, but I didn't know how to, so I made all the vegetables. I was 11 years old at the time. I had to leave that job because the owner saw me once and said I was too young to work there."

By the age of 11, Vineet had already switched three jobs and two cities. He doesn't blame this phenomenon on circumstances, but shares, "I did it because I wanted to. I didn't like eating at the station, drinking the water that people used to wash their

hands with. We would drink tea in the morning without even washing our face, we used to fall ill, and there was no set time to eat. I have only now found out what food timings are—like breakfast, lunch, dinner! Back then, my father used to beat my mother. He used to drink a lot, and he still does. I used to feel bad, and wonder, ‘How long will he live? Who will care for us?’ We used to explain this to him, but he didn’t understand. We didn’t feel safe. In the situation we lived in, people were either good or bad to you. On one side there were cars, and on the other side there were trains. I have seen many accidents—people falling off the train and dying. I only found some happiness in the work.” Even in the midst of turmoil, Vineet nurtured an interest towards learning. He reminisces, “When I saw people reading newspapers, or going to buy something and making a bill, I felt like studying. We also felt like going to school, but we couldn’t. When I saw people working, I felt I’d also do good work. One time, I saw this man taking measurements, and I asked him why he was doing that. He was holding a pen and paper, and he said, ‘I make buildings’. I felt like I should also become a big man. While he was talking to me, he called me *beta* (son), and I found his language so polite and nice.”

Having spent the larger part of his life shuttling between train stations with his parents and siblings, he cannot recall the number of railway stations he has called home, “I don’t remember where all we lived. We spent some years at Kota in Rajasthan, then in the village in Madhya Pradesh, and Mathura in Uttar Pradesh; also Nagda and Ratlam in MP...but Mathura was the best place. We used to work well there, and there was the CHETNA centre. I used to stay there from 9 AM till 5 PM. I got the chance to study only when I started going to the CHETNA centre. Other than that, I never studied. Rehman *bhaiya* (CHETNA staff) would come to the station and teach people at platform number one on all days except Sunday. He taught Hindi, drawing, and other things.” CHETNA’s Peer-to-Peer Harm Reduction Centre in Mathura (supported by iPartner India) aims to provide a nurturing environment for vulnerable children to be liberated from the destructive influence of substance abuse and addiction. It was at this centre that Vineet eventually sought comfort.

He continues, “When I came to Mathura, I learned how to do drugs. See, it is on us to do or not do a thing, so I can’t blame my friends because they never forced me to do anything. I learned it myself. I used ‘solution’ (whitener fluid) and alcohol. There were many shops that sold it, and my friends would buy it and distribute it. So I used to ask them for it and use it. It used to feel quite bad. It felt like there was a blindfold in front of my eyes, and then my body would go numb—you couldn’t even figure out if a train was moving in your direction or not. I used to not want to do it in front of anyone, so I did it alone. If anyone did drugs around me, I told them not to use it. They would say, ‘But you do it too,’ and then I could reply with ‘But you’ve never seen me doing it, have you?’ I didn’t know who I was, where I was. After doing it, I used to feel bad, but my tension was that I was still in that environment.”

“CHETNA gave me a lot of courage. Rehman *bhaiya* would come to the station, and the kids would have books and pencils with them, and I’d wonder what they were studying. So one day I went there without doing *nasha* (drugs), and *bhaiya* asked me

a lot of questions, and I answered him. He asked if I ever felt like studying and I said I want to study so much that I would read an entire book. I told him that I couldn't study because I was too much into drugs and everything. And then one day I went to him while I was still high, and I said, 'Hello Rehman *bhaiya*'. He asked me to sit with him and I asked, 'Why should I sit here? Why should I listen to you?' I had no manners," he giggles embarrassingly, "I was high on drugs, so I didn't feel bad while saying it. He said 'You're on drugs, that's why you're saying all of this, so leave for now.' I replied, 'Yes, yes, Rehman. I'll be back.' I called him by his name! The next day I went to say sorry, and he told me that the drugs are not good for me, and I should stop doing them. I told him that I never used to be dirty before—I used to love being clean too much—and he said, "*tumhaari galti nahi hai, tumhaare nashe ki galti hai* (It is not your fault, your addiction is to blame)." He said there's no need to say sorry. He gave me a biscuit, because he used to give kids nutrition, and then I went back to earning money and doing drugs. When my parents found out about the drugs, I even tried to end my life a few times, but I didn't succeed. As much as I felt like moving ahead, just as many problems would come up in front of me. When I'd be selling *gutka* (tobacco), policemen used to hit me or swear at me. But I always thought, 'Even if I die, what will happen?' Then, finally, an opportunity appeared before me—to leave drugs. I had a friend who used to inject drugs into his body, and when he overdosed, his body lay in the same place for two days. Crows and dogs, and other animals, started feeding on his corpse. It was terrible. When I saw that, I thought, 'If you don't stop the drugs, this is what will happen to you.' I still think about it, and I get worried. After that happened, I joined CHETNA. They'd opened a centre at the *chowki* (police station), and later they took a room, which was a little far from the station. We children couldn't go that far, so all of us together told them to shift closer to the station. So, they did it. They used to teach us there, and there was a field where we could play. The only work I did then was selling *gutka*. Many of my friends used to do that, so they told me to join them. They gave me *gutka* and said I could sell it for money. I started doing that work and did it for many years, for as long as I lived in Mathura. Now, it has been four years. I used to find the tea stall the best, because *seth* (the shop owner) would get food from home and feed me his *rotis*, even if I wasn't hungry. And the job I have now is even better than that! If my life has improved, it has been because of CHETNA. They made me study, sent me for (vocational) training...whatever I am today, it is because of them."

At 21 years of age, Vineet now works as housekeeping staff for a company in Hyderabad. Unlike most professionals, he only works on weekends; "I work in a company, where I clean the carpets. I go to work thrice a week, so twelve times a month. I work on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, because these three days the office is closed. It's been two years since I came here." In spite of his volatile domestic past, he continues to support his family, "Now they live in the village. I visit them very rarely because I don't like to go there. Whenever they need money or there's a problem, I go and help them. They never left the work that they were doing (rag picking). They still do that work. When I see them now, I feel, 'Where have we reached?' They don't have a problem with me, they have a problem with my work. I have a great life to live, which I want to live well." Vineet has maintained his sobriety

for the past four years. His only advice to children still suffering from addiction is simple, but effective—"In your heart, you should have the feeling that this is bad for you, that you should leave it. Like in my case there was that incident, and that's when I stopped doing it. There is nothing of value in drugs." He finally feels safe in the environment he is in, and his perspective on life is what helps him persevere, "I don't look back, I only look forward. Now, I think about how I can help people. I want to move ahead in life." This is the story of Vineet, but in a broader, more uplifting sense; it is also a retrospective of hope, healing, and ultimately a testimony of human survival. How can one be sure that the spirit has healed itself, with only the relentlessness of time applied as a salve? Does the spirit regenerate, or does it erode and revive, or rearrange itself as something more wholesome than what it once was? Perhaps, for some among us, the most definitive sign of healing is survival.

***Name has been changed to ensure anonymity**