

Building a Brighter Future

An attempt to create employment opportunities for vulnerable male youth



At Nizamuddin Railway Station and surrounding areas, a large number of homeless youth are engaged in odd jobs, living and working in an unsafe environment, lacking essential support system, engaged in substance abuse and lacking job or income security. They live without access to healthcare, education, and recreation.

Established in May 2017—in partnership with iPartner India—the Yuva Skill Development Centre seeks to integrate street-connected youth (young men aged 16 to 25) to mainstream society by providing access to better job opportunities. In July 2017, the centre began engaging youth through a flexible curriculum designed to impart basic education, life skill workshops, computer training, English language training and communication skills. After dedicated efforts towards mobilisation, counselling, and regular engagement; external vocational training is conducted to focus on developing specific skill sets, and corresponding job placements are ensured. Through regular follow up mechanisms, they beneficiaries' work environment and payment regularity are also monitored.



Childhood Enhancement Through Training and Action

Celebrating
10
Years



Reaching Out

It is 10:30 AM on a weekday, and Mr. Puran Choudhary, a key staff member at the Yuva Skill Development Centre, is ready to conduct the daily outreach activity. He will tread through the platforms, bridges and periphery of Nizamuddin railway station until noon, armed with a cap and a bottle of water. The purpose of this is to engage the youth living at the station—both new and regular beneficiaries—to visit the YUVA centre and use their time productively instead of destructively. It is owing to this daily effort that the centre has been able to engage more than 260 youth since its establishment. Along the way, we



come across several young boys who instantly recognise him. One among them is Samant*, a tall lanky fellow who is dragging his feet along the platform. His eyes are glassy and voice is barely audible. An environment that supports relapse more than it offers rehabilitation has made it difficult for him to seek treatment or counselling. Since his consciousness is cloudy, he is unable to respond properly to any questions. He manages to introduce himself by name, but reveals an interesting fact about himself before we leave. He has studied various forms of dance at the a popular dance academy. “I know hip hop, jazz, contemporary, salsa...” he drifts, and then upon insistence, reluctantly shows us some moves. A few years ago, he was placed in Ahmedabad after vocational training through CHETNA for a housekeeping job, but for various reasons, he now finds himself back on these familiar tracks. He is requested to return to the centre, to which he nods blankly.

Mr. Choudhary explains the various aspects and importance of outreach, as well as the challenges inherent to the target group that is being engaged— “Outreach happens morning and evening. One is local and one is external outreach. Local includes—homeless shelters, flyovers, station, and godowns. External outreach mean different points—Bhogal, Maharani Bagh, etc. For which we travel for 4.5-5

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MS. MONICA ANTAL, PROJECT COORDINATOR

hours. The centre is dependent on the outreach. The kids are high when we find them. We have to give each child a lot of time, and convince them, after which we ask if they will come to the centre with us. They might not come by themselves, so we have to accompany them to the centre. This takes a lot of time and energy, for each child. Secondly, they do not think about the future. Some of them even have kids, so we have to explain to them too. The homeless shelters make them very dependent—they get electricity, water, food; so they feel that they don’t have needs. The only thing that the government does not provide is *gutka* (tobacco) and substances. If they don’t find food anywhere, they go to the Gurudwara. They don’t wake up or sleep on time, bathe or get ready on time. We tell the kids about the jobs, and they insist on getting specific jobs nearby. They don’t wish to travel. So, how do

we find them jobs near the homeless shelter? They also fight at the centre. The person doing the outreach has to be careful of the hygiene in the surroundings. There are syringes lying on the ground, people defecate there, but we have to walk through all of that. We have impacted the lives of at least five children, who have stopped doing drugs. Even if we have changed the life of one person, it is worth it. We cannot fix their problem in one go. This project was required because most NGOs disengage the children after they turn 18 years old.”

Ms. Monica Antal, the Project Coordinator at the Yuva centre, reveals the purpose of the centre and activities conducted in order to achieve this objective. “The main purpose is mainstreaming of street and working youth—to provide a dignified job unlike rag picking, begging, or stealing. That is the

idea. It is also for financial stability, which they now have. We open the centre at 10 AM, wait for the youth to arrive till 10:30 AM. By 11:15 AM, we conduct their prayer. From 11:30 AM till 1 PM is engagement—Earlier it was basic education, computer skills and English, now its only computer and English classes, because most of them have been given basic education. After lunch at 2 PM, they are allowed to leave if they wish. 2PM to 4 PM is the other batch of youth. From 4 PM to 5 PM, we discuss their issues. From 5PM to 6 PM, we do documentation. Saturdays are dance classes, and as per the boys' mood, we either arrange drawing activities, or they can play in the nearby park. There are internal life skill workshops every month—focused on awareness, personal hygiene, how to appear for an interview, first aid kits, fears, dreams, confidence. We conduct an exposure visit every quarter, and a youth group meeting twice a month, where they share their issues with the centre. They also receive vocational training. It depends on the education and the requirement of the training provider. So far, we've only been able to find a housekeeping course, according to their qualifications."

The Recurrence of Detours

Engaging the youth with the purpose to bring about sustainable improvements in their quality of life, is a long process—a journey that may experience some detours, but must be navigated back on track, each time the traveller loses their way. If the 'travellers' may be thought of as the beneficiaries of this centre, this analogy is specially true for Chandan. As a student of class five in his village in Gwalior, he impulsively ran away from school, fearing that he would be punished by his father after a class fellow threatened to complain about him. Once I reached here, I didn't like it. I didn't know anyone. I started selling bottles that I collected from the station—they paid by the kilo, you could even earn ₹200-₹300, it depends. Then, four or five years later, I started doing drugs." The onset of Chandan's addiction was undeniably linked to his surroundings. While he had lived in and around the Nizamuddin station for almost four years, he only started using drugs once he started living at the station permanently. In the past, he would devote his time during the day to an NGO operating in the area, and subsequently began living a shelter home nearby, until it shut down. "At the station, small kids used to look at the elder kids and learn how to do drugs. At first, I didn't feel like doing it. But then I started inhaling the whitener fluid slowly, and I started liking it. Everything goes numb. You feel like you can do anything, even if you're in public." And what happens when the high fades away? "We never let it fade away."

The station serves as an narrow, but familiar, alternate dimension—an insular world where nobody asks, everyone simply knows. "We used to do drugs openly, nobody stopped us. People don't ask you questions, they don't interfere. When I turned 16, I started washing utensils at weddings. They used to pay us ₹150. The money I earned, I spent on drugs. We used to even take our paraphernalia along when we went to work at parties. Nobody ever found out, because they couldn't tell. The policemen (at the station) used to hit us if we did anything wrong—like if we climbed onto trains when they had said we couldn't—they'd get angry with us. They would catch the kids who were doing drugs and beat them up. Only the one who does wrong gets beaten up. But then, CHETNA had a meeting with them, and then they stopped hitting us."



Chandan, 20, Beneficiary

In July 2014, almost eight years after he arrived at the station, Chandan was engaged by CHETNA's Peer-to-Peer Harm Reduction Centre at Nizamuddin (supported by i-Partner India), which provided

basic education to Chandan, and sent him for a housekeeping training programme before securing a job for him at a restaurant in Delhi. “I worked there for five months, but then I left it because the salary was too less.” In May 2017, Chandan was connected to the Yuva Skill Development Centre. Here, he received basic training in computer and communication skills, after which he was placed as housekeeping staff at a pharmaceutical company in Ahmedabad. After two months of working there, he was asked to resign due to the objectionable actions of his peers. Fortunately, this hurdle did not deter him, “I came back and completed my course in driving. But, I couldn’t get my license made because I don’t have a PAN card. I’ve also worked at KFC for three months (where he was placed through the YUVA centre, in April 2018), but I fell very ill and so, I couldn’t keep going. That was around a month ago. These days, I work as a DJ. I earn around ₹400 (for each event), plus tips,” he says.

“I stopped doing drugs in November last year, because of *didi* and *bhaiya*.”

**CHANDAN,
BENEFICIARY**

We’re now seated at the centre, surrounded by the staff that ultimately enabled Chandan’s recovery. He shares, “When it opened, I came here immediately. They organised a meeting with SHO sir, and he told us, ‘You’re wasting your time on drugs. You might as well spend that money on buying an apple and a few bananas to eat.’ He said that if we continued taking drugs, he’d have to put us in jail. After that, I never did drugs again. So many tragedies can happen when kids are intoxicated. You can fall ill, or you can lose grip of the handle when you’re hanging out of the train, or you could even die. I’ve witnessed so many accidents. I stopped doing drugs in November last year, because of *didi* and *bhaiya* (CHETNA staff members). I found it easy to quit drugs. I don’t think about what has passed. I only think about what lies ahead,” he concludes. Towards the end of August 2018, he was placed as housekeeping staff at Gulab Restaurant in Haridwar. He still chooses not to contact his family. In two months, it’ll have been an year since his recovery.

Within the centre, the atmosphere is calm and comfortable. On an average day, between 8 to 15 boys visit the centre, in order to learn computer and communication skills, to enquire about job opportunities, receive English language training, or simply to find a way to engage themselves productively, away from the chaos of the station. Among them is 18 year old Krishna, who is currently seeking a job. He is assured by Mr. Sanat Kumar, the training coordinator at the centre, that he will be placed appropriately at the earliest. Krishna is hard to convince, but he is happy to share his experience at the centre. “Towards the end of December last year (2017), I started coming to this centre. My friend Rohit told me that I could come here, and they would get me a job. They taught us computer, asked us about ourselves. I liked coming here. After my housekeeping training, they got me a job at Ahmedabad, in Gujarat, to work for INTAS, where I worked for three months. It was good but I used to feel scared. It’s a medicine factory, so I was afraid I’d fall ill. I also couldn’t save any money there, so I left the job.” Due to insufficient remuneration at his job, Krishna returned to Delhi, where he instantly sought other options—“I started working as a security guard at South Ex, which I didn’t like at all. They also didn’t pay much. Then, through CHETNA I got a job at Levi’s. I did housekeeping there, and folded clothes. But I left the job after 9 or 10 days, because you had to keep standing there for 12 hours, and I would have to take leaves because my body used to hurt after that. So, they asked me to leave.”



Krishna, 18, Beneficiary

After his brief stint at the apparel store, he resolved to continue his engagement at the YUVA Centre—hopeful that he would secure a more suitable job profile. “Now, I come here occasionally. The centre helped me get a job, so I would like to continue coming here.” In August 2018, Krishna—through the YUVA centre—was placed at a Cafe Coffee day branch in New Delhi. Through regular follow-up visits or phone calls (for outstation placements), the staff monitors the performance of their beneficiaries to ensure sustainability and a safe work environment. It is not uncommon that street youth is unable to adjust or assimilate to the professional environment, which may lead to them losing interest or quitting the job. In such a scenario, the centre provides the essential agency of searching for more appropriate placements for their beneficiaries.

Mr. Sanat Kumar is responsible for the follow-up mechanism and retention of youth at their jobs. He elaborates on the challenges that must be faced to ensure sustainability, “First I follow up through phone calls. 90% of the kids, I follow up with daily. I ask them—How are you? What are you doing today? Is there any issue? When I get complaints, then I ask them why they don’t tell me about the problems. According to the situation, we visit them. There is a visit planned anyway, three to four times a week. But, in case of a crisis, like they’ve had an argument with colleagues or supervisors, or there is a fight, I have to mediate between both parties. Some of them even steal, so that’s also a risk. The issue of the kids is that they’ve never done proper work. They’re in the habit of working two or three hours. They get salary on the 15th of the month, advance on the 20th. They take the advance before the salary. They have a problem in saving. We tell them to take the salary on time, and to spend it wisely. If they have an issue, we can only explain to them. If a youth tells me they don’t like the job, I try to find a better position for them elsewhere. Earlier, they would run away in a few days, not even go for the training. Now, some of them have been working for an entire year. Some are switching jobs but are not returning to the station. These are the things that give us confidence.”

The Propensity of Change

A key aspect of the work being undertaken at the YUVA centre is ‘transformation’. In order to connect vulnerable youth, the majority of whom are struggling with addiction, a sense of motivation and trust has to be stimulated within them. The essential conflict is between the physical and mental condition of the youth, and the ability of the centre to address their most immediate concerns, “Some come with the point of view of gaining a job, but the ones who have left their jobs long ago, are used to

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NGOs helping them. The youth are either in trauma, or in a post traumatic situation—very into guilt, and inferiority complex. Even for me or you, it is difficult to adjust to a new job environment. The training coordinator must ask and document how they’re feeling when they’re placed at jobs. That could help. They don’t need counselling, they need therapy and professional individual attention. Following that, if we work on a child for one full year, we can hope that the child is ready for the job. It’s very important to bring them out of the guilt and trauma,” explains Monica. Another issue often faced by the youth is adjusting themselves to the formal work environment, “They are all money minded, and they’re into the habit of daily wage work. They don’t understand that they’ll get money once every 30 days. Because of (the long term physical health impact of) their addiction, they are not able to work for 12 hour days, and they have a terrible habit of sleeping. Look at the routine of their childhood. It will be unjust to break their pattern—the life that they have considered right for 12-15 years. They want to be free. We cannot expect that a person who has been free for 12 years, can be transformed in a few months—will be in regular attendance, have proper hygiene, regular timings, will tolerate being reprimanded by the supervisor.”

In some cases, the transformation is still in progress—as with Vikram, who speaks to us over the phone, between breaks at his workplace. “In my family, there’s my mummy, papa, and two bothers. I ran away from home, because my brother used to hit me. After I ran away, I lived at Old Delhi railway station for nine years. I used to do rag picking at the station,” Vikram says matter-of-factly. In 2011, at the age of 10, he left his home in Sultanpur. This was also prompted by his father finding out about his substance abuse, and reacting with a violent outburst. With no access to education—“I had

studied from first grade till class five. But, I had a fight with my friend and I hurt him. So, I was expelled from school.”—Vikram started selling water bottles on the station and worked as a cleaner at a restaurant nearby. This enabled him to earn between ₹250-300 on a daily basis. Access to this amount of money may also have funded his regular consumption of intoxicants.

Vikram has been in contact with the CHETNA team since at least the past three years—“I started learning through CHETNA around two or three years ago. From there, I was connected to the Yuva centre.” Vikram was given knowledge regarding computer skills and English language training. Besides this, he was also taught to prioritise his personal hygiene, and received counselling. However, his addiction is a stubborn companion. Owing to his toxic environment, he has not been able to adequately address and uproot this vice. He acknowledges the changes that he underwent following his engagement with the centre. “Earlier I used wear dirty clothes, do drugs. Now I get a monthly salary, I have a good job, I eat good food. When I would do drugs, people used to slur at me, but here (at his place of work) I’m treated with respect. Last year I took GMR training for housekeeping (facilitated by the Yuva centre) for 1.5 months, and I now work at a restaurant in Karol Bagh. I’ve been working here for five months now. Earlier I was spoilt, but CHETNA has made me better. I have a good job now, and people treat me well here. I’m very grateful to ma’am for that.”



Vikram, Beneficiary

There is also the possibility to create holistic change, that contrasts with the lives the youth has led before coming into contact with the centre. This is possible through regular engagement, but is extremely dependent on each individual beneficiary’s history and capacity to gain from the centre. This is evidenced by Vivek’s journey. His father worked as a bus driver at his home in Agra, where his entire family still lives together. The youngest of three siblings, his calm demeanour is defined by a sincere desire for self-determination. Born in Kota, Rajasthan; his family leads a comfortable existence at their home in Agra. However, following a heated argument at home and frustrated by his father’s drinking habit, Vivek’s friends convinced him to travel to Delhi with them. “I was maybe 10 years old at the time. I used to work in a clothes shop, at Jangpura in Bhogal. I lived in the shop itself, and the people around used to do *nasha* (drugs).”

In his new surroundings, Vivek was introduced to the manager of a local NGO, where he eventually sought shelter and education. “I’ve studied from class three till class five, and then I became greedy for money. When I was 15, I started working on the train. I used to take food orders from the passengers.” On the train, Vivek worked as a pantry guard, lured by the ₹12,000 salary he earned

“Earlier, I didn't feel like doing a job, but now I do.”

VIVEK, BENEFICIARY

from the job. During this period, his parents managed to finally locate him, and successfully convinced him to return home. However, upon his return, Vivek found that his father was unwilling to change his ways. Seeking financial independence, he decided to leave home yet again. “I’ve been living in Delhi for the past 10 years. When I got my driving license made—in March 2016—I started driving from Agra to Delhi-Delhi to Agra. I used to drive an Innova. Nobody else in my family has done this job before, I was the first one to do this.”

In February 2018, Vivek was connected to the Yuva centre. Here, he was enrolled for a housekeeping training course. “My friend Bhola got me to the centre, and now I work in housekeeping. First, I was sent to work in Gujarat. I worked there for around two months. Now, I work at a restaurant in Karol Bagh.” His engagement with the centre has had a significant impact on his mindset. As he explains, “This is a very good centre. Earlier, I didn't feel like doing a job, but now I do.” In May 2018, he started working at Gulab Restaurant in Karol Bagh, as housekeeping staff. He still occasionally visits his family in Agra, even as he endeavours to make progress on his own merit. His resolve for self-

determination has led him through an arduous journey. However, it is this very resolve that has also ensured his survival.

While Vivek is an exception, it is a struggle for most children who have lived independently, even under distressing circumstances, to adjust to authority and routine. Since their childhood and youth is often characterised by trauma or chaos, it is difficult to integrate these personalities into unknown surroundings and the monotony of professional life. In addition, it is a constant battle against addiction which they continue to confront, and the work environment does not necessarily offer enough of a distraction from such thoughts. However, the trust and faith they invest in the staff at the centre, can yield fruitful results over a long period of engagement. Says Monica, “There are many positive impacts, but the one I would like to highlight is that our centre has gained a lot of trust. They (the youth) doubted the NGO, but they have realised that they can’t blame an NGO for everything. They also have to do their part.”

A Small Revolution

By early evening, Inside the classroom at the centre, Afzal* (16 years old), sits immersed on the desktop he is currently learning computer skills on. He has been a regular beneficiary at the centre for almost a year, also finds a remarkable change in his knowledge base following his association with the Yuva centre. After his mother refused to enrol him to school (due to financial distress), he chose to take up daily wage work for a short duration before he started visiting the YUVA centre in October 2017. Here, he was taught English, Hindi, communication and computer skills. Since he is not an adult, he cannot be placed at a job. Hence, given



Afzal, 16, Beneficiary

his circumstances, the centre attempts to enrich his knowledge base. “Sir (CHETNA staff member) came and told us that we’d get food, learn computer. He asked if we could come, even just for an hour. I heard ‘computer’ and sad I’ll come. Everyone else was afraid. When I came here, I realised its 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 my name written in the school, but they didn’t allow. 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 on the notebook. Then, I decided that I should come here everyday. We started learning how to speak—basic sentences

“I don’t even like Sundays. On Sundays I feel, ‘Why isn’t the centre open?’”

**AFZAL,
BENEFICIARY**

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’.

Afzal realises the impact of the past 10 months, which have indeed proved transformative. He shares, “Yes, there have been many changes. Earlier, I used to just be wandering, I used to not say 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 will not be an illiterate. I will draw my signature on papers. I'm thinking I'll keep going ahead, and going ahead...as long as I'm walking." That idea, it itself, is a small revolution.

Ultimately, it is the relentless efforts of the team at the Yuva Skill Development centre that have engaged and benefited youth in the area. While there is a long way to go in terms of addressing the root causes of their limitations, the fact that there has undeniably been a positive impact on some lives is evidence that transformation through long term engagement is possible. This unique approach currently attracts 22 regular beneficiaries, and has engaged more than 260 youth since its establishment. Since May 2017, 23 youth have been successfully placed in jobs. For the youth to be motivated and directed towards a more rewarding lifestyle, there is a need to break the pattern of systemic state neglect, address the insensitivity of local stakeholders, and a collective attempt to accept people belonging to the ignored subcultures of society—so they may be integrated and uplifted. This centre intends to provide the means towards this end.

*Name has been changed to protect anonymity