GOAL FOR A ROOF

THE STAR POWER OF SOCCER HAS GIVEN THE HOMELESS A BETTER CHANCE AT LIFE

Sumit Chakraborty
Hello everybody. When cynicism and sarcasm have cast a dark spell on us, we dare to bring stories of the indomitable human spirit. Hope and courage have forced themselves into closed, dusty rooms of fear. In these musty corners, we found beautiful tales of survival – untold and untouched. We revelled in our discovery and decided to shine light on the unsung heroes of our times.

Our cover story celebrates the determination of young, homeless footballers who battled severe odds but did not give up on the one thing that kept them alive — football. Their talent did not lose way in the bylanes of poverty, thanks to the efforts of two former journalists, Mel Young and Harald Schmied, who set up the Homeless World Cup Foundation. With the intention of bringing attention to the plight of the homeless, the World Cup began in 2003. The annual mega event now has global partners across Europe, Africa, Oceania, South America and Central America. The foundation’s Indian counterpart, Nagpur-based Slum Soccer, has kept itself busy honing talented players from across India. And I feel terribly, terribly proud that two players from our city, Shilpa Dey and Md Salauddin, have made the cut and will represent the country at the World Cup in Mexico City in October.

Our photo story provides a window to the world of inmates in Alipore Central Correctional Home, and this world is not dark, not grim. It is filled with colours of many hues — hope, faith and a deep yearning for a clear piece of sky, even if broken. Art Therapy, conducted by artist Chitta Dey, allows inmates to overcome inhibitions and express their suppressed feelings through art. Hardened criminals and life timers took up painting with zeal to fill up the void of respect and self-worth in a life cast behind bars. The paintings received critical acclaim and even found buyers.

In our Big Story, we trace the journey of Koshish founder,Tarique Qureshi. A passout from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, he had everything going for him. But the idealist decided otherwise and launched into a beggar-reform programme that brought about palpable changes in the living conditions of destitute homes.

I hope you will rejoice with me in the victory of human will and guide us in our quest for stories that are different but no less important.

Do share your feedback with us.

Sumandeep Debnath
Editor-in-chief
At home with the homeless

Koshish founder Tarique Qureshi brings succour to thousands of beggars and homeless languishing on the streets

Sanjay Bhandari, a resident of Birbhum district in West Bengal, left home after a bitter fight with his wife. He had no idea where he was going – all he wanted to do was get away. He arrived at CST station in Mumbai with very little money. He made the streets of this megapolis his home. One night, mistaken for a beggar, he was picked up by the police and thrown into a lock-up.

He is not alone. Hundreds of street dwellers, working in dhabas or tea stalls, have been detained and deported to state-run beggar homes, thanks to the draconian anti-begging law of the country. The act, which aims to eradicate begging through detention and rehabilitation, unfortunately makes very little distinction between street dwellers and beggars.

Six years ago, Tarique Mohammad Qureshi, a fresh passout from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai, decided to turn things around and take up cudgels on behalf of beggars and unfortunate inhabitants of the streets. His efforts took shape in the form of Koshish, a TISS field action project that engages with the government to decriminalise poverty and at the same time works with beggar homes to improve living conditions.

Koshish employs a multi-pronged approach. It helps detained beggars and homeless people with legal assistance. Once people living on the streets are detained under the anti-beggary law, they are slapped with criminal charges and innocence is difficult to prove. The difficulties are compounded by the fact that their employers are reluctant to help in order to avoid legal tangles. Koshish steps in to provide legal aid and “encourage employers to appear in court and testify that they are not beggars”. After the charges are dropped, the homeless return to their employers. But the elderly and jobless, who have been abandoned by their families, are dumped in beggar homes.

Sanjay was thrown in one such home. The violence he witnessed in these shelters remains etched in his mind even today. Untrained caretakers often end up beating inmates to maintain discipline. The situation is not as simple as heartless caretakers beating up cowering inmates. “The inmates often get rowdy and make life difficult for the caretakers, who end up beating them in frustration,” Tarique informs.

Koshish organises volleyball and cricket matches within the walls of the home to improve relations between inmates and caretakers who are placed in one team and pitted against members of Koshish. “Such efforts build an emotional relationship between inmates and their guardians, so it helps minimise custodial violence and initiates a healthy atmosphere,” Tarique explains.

Counselling is also provided to caretakers to keep frustrations at bay, he adds. Receiving Centre for Beggars in Chembur, Mumbai, is one of the homes where Koshish members have managed to make an impact. Commending the project, Gautam Arwel, the home’s superintendent, says, “The situation has changed a lot after Koshish pitched in. Earlier, rehabilitation was as low as 1-2 percent but now the percentage has gone up. Koshish is doing a fantastic job and we are lending full support. Though custodial violence happens even now, the number of incidents has gone down significantly in the past four years.”

The change is palpable, feels Ajay Lodhe, who has been a caretaker for eight years at Receiving Centre for Beggars. “We have benefitted a lot and can handle beggars better now. We try to understand their
Koshish Initiatives
- Advocacy
- Training caretakers
- Medical intervention
- Re-skilling beggars
- Reuniting homeless with families

problems and communicate with them. We play volleyball and cricket and it’s a lot of fun. We are also taken out for picnics by Koshish members. Last time, I took my 4-year-old daughter with me.”

Besides its outreach programme, Koshish is working to repeal The Bombay Prevention of Begging Act of 1959, which is aimed at preventing begging through detention, training and employment. But sadly, only detention happens and rehabilitation is completely overlooked. Koshish is now preparing the draft for an alternative law that can replace the act.

One of the basic problems of the destitute and the homeless is that they have no medical succour. So Koshish runs a “medical referral programme”, which provides ambulance services and takes care of basic medical expenses. To meet its objectives, Koshish receives financial assistance from well-wishers or “friends of Koshish”.

Rehabilitation is one of the key initiatives of Koshish and has successfully reunited several people with their families. Many state-run NGOs too have come forward to aid Koshish. The Rammahal Asha Gramin Development Society in Uluberia, Howrah, is one such NGO. “The families of the detained are traced with the help of local administration and the inmate handed over to them,” elaborates S L Rahman, secretary of Rammahal. Since 2006, the society has reunited 15 people in West Bengal.

Sanjay is one such beneficiary. He was reunited with his father at Howrah station and returned to his native village in Majurhati, Birbhum, to get back to his life as a barber.

Sanjay was lucky for he could pick up the threads of his life on returning home. But unfortunately, most are unable to find work after they are released from homes. Koshish, in partnership with government-sponsored Jan Shikshan Sansthan scheme, reskills them by imparting vocational training. This is followed by placement support programme, which helps them find jobs.

Koshish has come a long way since its inception and the journey has been both beautiful and heartbreakening. For Tarique, it has been a story of self-discovery. Ploughing through taunts of “get a real job” and crass ignorance, he has managed to create awareness about an issue that hardly evokes a response, except the rolling up of car windows at red lights to avoid contact.

Destruncated homes are not an easy place to infiltrate. Tarique’s initial efforts to enter the homes were treated with suspicion and indifference. But he persisted and the authorities had to cave in. “Once I was permitted into the homes, I received support from police as well as the authorities in charge of the homes,” he recalls.

Tarique never planned his future the way it unfolded. Hailing from Kanpur, he came to Delhi to do his graduation in political science from Hindu College. One particular incident in Delhi changed the course of his life, and many others. On a chilly December night, he saw beggars trying to keep themselves warm by wrapping newspapers around their bodies. Wet with dew, the newspapers just stuck to their shivering bodies. “I was worried whether they would be alive the next morning,” he remembers. Disturbed and shaken, he decided to volunteer at night shelters during his stay in Delhi.

Tarique went on to pursue a Master’s degree in criminology and correctional administration at TISS. During his compulsory field work, he witnessed the problem from close quarters. A visit to one such beggar home steeld his determination to make a difference.

Flooded with lucrative offers after topping his batch, Tarique remained unmoved in his resolve to work for the destitute. Not for a moment does he regret his decision. “The elderly, ailing people saved whatever little portions of food they could for me. Their show of love is overwhelming. It lifts my spirits and urges me to move on,” says an emotional Tarique.

He was given Ashoka Fellowship in 2011 for being an outstanding social entrepreneur. Lauding Tarique’s efforts, professor Ashwani Kumar of TISS, says, “What Tarique is doing is not elite social work like CSR and philanthropy. He is a true leader. Not many projects become as successful as Koshish.”

A visiting lecturer of social advocacy at TISS, Tarique talks about urban poverty in between classes. He is often faced with questions like why beggars are only interested in accepting money and not food. But these questions only prove the necessity to create more awareness about the dire circumstances in which most of the beggars, mostly old and ailing, live. Food can’t buy medicines, he explains.

Koshish has grown over the years. From its humble beginnings in Mumbai, it has now expanded its operations to Delhi and Patna. The team now comprises 15 full-time members and an army of volunteers from various educational institutions.

Sanjay got a second chance at life. Others may not be as lucky but their lives have taken a better turn on the road paved by Tarique.