

# No kids living on streets

## Varun Shrivastava has an UPAY and a vision:

By Payal

Driving around the city, you may have come across many beggar children. Most of us avoid an eye contact with them; some express outright disgust while still others offer them a coin or two.

Varun Shrivastava, a 30-something large hearted man, and his close friends take these kids aside and talk to them. Their conversations revolve around the life on the streets, their schooling, their dreams – would you like to go to school, they ask. Varun and his friends then work to realize the street children's dreams through their NGO, the Under Privileged Advancement by Youth (UPAY).

Though informal education is the sector UPAY is engaged with, the volunteers ensure that the kids also get good formal education. "Often, these kids don't even find a place in government records. We started with enrolling them in schools. Our classes were just a little out-of-school educational help that the kids couldn't afford. We have made Aadhar cards and other documents for them," Varun says.

He says they have begun to notice a change in the children's attitude towards education, jobs, ambitions and life in general. Despite many vulnerabilities – being kidnapped and trafficked or pushed into flesh trade, organ trade, sexual and physical abuse, the children under UPAY shelter have started looking at a sunny



future with the help of their new-found mentors. UPAY now plans to train the street children in vocational skills that would help them get off the streets.

In 23 centres across different villages and cities in India, UPAY is working towards social integration of kids from disadvantaged backgrounds. "From our interactions with these kids, we realized that the biggest problem was that they inherit a negative outlook of life. Every generation that lives on the streets passes on misery to the next. We are working towards breaking this cycle.

The effects may not be visible immediately, or even in this generation. But we hope that the next generation of street dwellers will be a little more hopeful and optimistic," says Varun, who founded UPAY in 2010.

For him, this has been quite a journey. Born in a small village near Bhanu, Madhya Pradesh, Varun received his education under the proverbial mango tree. However, seeing how bright he

was, a few people came forward to guide him to a path that led to Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur (IIT-K). And then to placement offers from many multinationals. Giving up the cushy offers and fat salaries, he chose to work for the country and opted to work for the National Power Training Centre (NTPC) at Moadra. Once settled in his career, Varun wanted to work towards the country's growth by addressing an often neglected section of people. That was how UPAY was born. Through his NGO, he started teaching kids from a nearby village. The modes of instruction in his 'classes' were music, dance, drama, stories, skits and sports. And the aim of the instructions was to teach them ethics, values, hygiene and other sunny things. With these volunteers as guides, the trend of dropping out of education at high school level is no more prevalent. What started with just four students in a small village has taken the shape of a movement now. Many volunteers who see value in Varun's vision and work have joined him. Eight villages in different parts of Nagpur district have a centre each, where the senior students have taken over the role of instructors. Nagpur has nine centres on the street corners, also called Footpath Shala, where 450 street kids are taught by 82 volunteers.

The Footpath Shala model was so successful that youngsters from Pune and Gurgaon reached out to UPAY with the aim of replicating it in their cities. Both cities have three centres each, with more than a hundred students and a very few but dedicated team of volunteers.