



A star so near
yet so far.....

Stories of careleavers from India



Table of contents



| | |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| Preface | 01 |
| Stories of careleavers from India | 02 |
| 1.) Ajay : | |
| <i>Through the Storm</i> | 03 |
| 2.) Afsana' : | |
| <i>Rising Above the Tempest</i> | 06 |
| 3) Anjali : | |
| <i>Sheltered by Love</i> | 09 |
| 4) Halema Khatun : | |
| <i>The Wonder Woman Within</i> | 13 |
| 5) Jimadi : | |
| <i>An Indomitable Spirit</i> | 17 |
| 6) Jasmine : | |
| <i>Breaking Through</i> | 21 |
| 7) Jyoti Prakash : | |
| <i>Beyond the Horizon</i> | 24 |
| 8) Kukil Das : | |
| <i>Resilient Wings</i> | 28 |
| 9) Mausami Das : | |
| <i>A Symphony of Scars and Stars</i> | 31 |

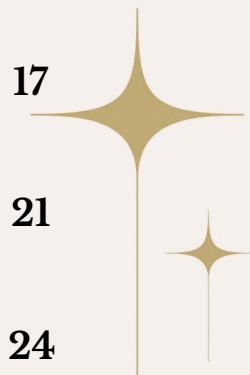
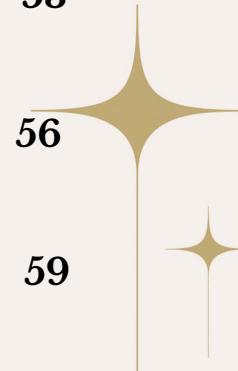


Table of contents

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| 10.) Mohsin : | |
| <i>Rising Beyond Challenges</i> | 34 |
| 11.) Priyanka : | |
| <i>Defying the Odds</i> | 37 |
| 12) Rajkumar : | |
| <i>The Courage to Be Me</i> | 41 |
| 13) Ram : | |
| <i>The Road Ahead</i> | 45 |
| 14) Saqib Rehman : | |
| <i>Cradled by Guardian Spirits</i> | 49 |
| 15) Shantanu Pravin Parmar : | |
| <i>A Name of His Own</i> | 53 |
| 16) Soni : | |
| <i>From Sinking to Soaring</i> | 56 |
| 17) Sowmya. P : | |
| <i>Elevated Pursuit</i> | 59 |
| 18) Surja : | |
| <i>Through the Dark</i> | 63 |
| 19) Ulfat Bashir : | |
| <i>Light Through the Dark Vault</i> | 67 |



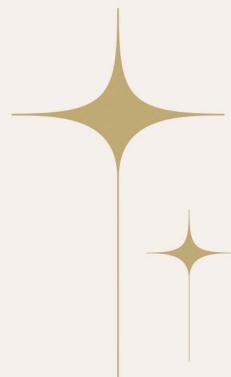
Preface

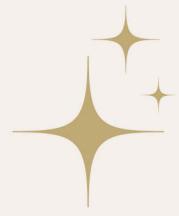


Dear Reader, It is with immense pride and heartfelt gratitude that we present this book as a collection of inspiring stories from care leavers across India. Each narrative is a testament to resilience, courage, and the relentless pursuit of dignity. This initiative is supported by UNICEF. Across the country, from the villages of Assam, Bihar and Chhattisgarh to the bustling cities of Mumbai and Delhi, countless young people who lived their childhood in institutional set-ups other than families, they stayed in institutions till 18 years of age, navigating life without the safety net of family. For them, turning eighteen is not just a milestone but a turning point, where childhood ends and the fight for survival begins. Their stories are not just about struggle but about resilience and transformation. They highlight the urgent need for a stronger, more inclusive support system — where education, employment, and emotional well-being are not just aspirations but fundamental rights. This book is more than a collection of narratives — it is a call to action. A call to recognize, support, and stand with care leavers as they build the futures they deserve. Let these stories inspire us to be the change we wish to see. Let us come together to build a society where every care leaver has access to the opportunities, support, and dignity they deserve.

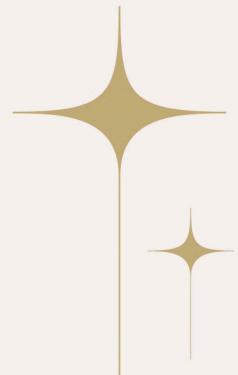
Warm regards,

Panab Jyoti Panging
Regional Manager, Guwahati Regional Office
Aide et Action





Stories of Careleavers from India



02



Through the Storm: Ajay's Journey

"Life is unpredictable; a single moment can alter its course forever. Trust, misunderstandings, and circumstances beyond one's control can sometimes lead to life-changing consequences. Ajay's story is one such example, where a simple acquaintance led to unexpected distress, drastically impacting his future."

Ajay's family belongs to a small village in Jaipur District, Rajasthan. His life took an unexpected turn due to his association with a girl from his neighborhood. She was the sister of a neighbor's sister-in-law and frequently visited his village. Over time, they became acquainted and often spoke. However, when Ajay noticed certain aspects of her behavior that he found unsettling, he chose to distance himself. The girl attempted to contact him multiple times, even through his relatives, but he consistently refused to engage. Determined to focus on his future, Ajay moved to Jaipur to pursue his studies and enrolled in a nursing course. Meanwhile, the girl became engaged to his cousin. Concerned about her character, Ajay tried to warn his cousin to stay away from her, but his advice went unheeded.

One day, under the girl's influence, Ajay's cousin left home with her. Soon after, the girl's family filed a kidnapping case against him. After nearly a week, the police located them, arrested Ajay's cousin, and sent him to jail. The girl, in turn, accused him of kidnapping her. Two months later, when she was called to record her statement, she made additional allegations against Ajay, falsely accusing him of sedating and assaulting her. Based on their past phone conversations, the police arrested Ajay, presented him before the Juvenile Justice Court, and sent him to a Child Care Institution (CCI), as he was a minor at the time.

Despite having no involvement in the incident, Ajay found himself entangled in a legal battle. To this day, he deeply regrets being falsely implicated in a situation where he had done nothing wrong. Ajay spent the next eleven months in the Child Care Institution (CCI) while his case was being heard in court. During this time, he often reminisced about his college days, his friends, and his studies—wondering how one association had turned his life upside down. He felt immense guilt and regret, questioning how he had ended up being punished for someone else's actions. More than anything, he deeply regretted the distress his family had to endure because of him.

In the midst of these challenges, Ajay found comfort in the friendships he formed at the CCI. The support he received from both his peers and the staff was profound, making the absence of home more bearable. Although the staff was supportive, Ajay demonstrated self-motivation and perseverance, which enabled him to thrive there. However, he also faced another police case while at the CCI. A protest broke out among the children over food quality and other grievances, leading some to engage in vandalism. Although Ajay was only trying to protect others, he was wrongfully implicated and had to spend an additional 7–8 days in jail. He maintains that he was unfairly framed in this case as well. Eventually, he was granted bail in both cases, marking the end of a turbulent chapter in his life.

These experiences made him realize that life can take unexpected turns, but one must be mindful of their actions and reactions. After his release from the Child Care Institution (CCI), Ajay faced mixed reactions from society and relatives. While some believed he was innocent and had been falsely implicated, others assumed he must have done something wrong to have ended up there. Despite these challenges, his family and college stood firmly by his side.

Before his time at CCI, Ajay had secured admission to a prestigious nursing college by clearing the entrance exam. However, spending nearly 11 months at CCI prevented him from appearing for his exams. Upon his return, he rejoined college, where the administration provided immense support. They ensured that his situation remained confidential and facilitated his reappearance in the exams through the supplementary category, allowing him to continue his education without disruption. Ajay remains deeply grateful for their understanding and encouragement.

Reflecting on his time at CCI, Ajay acknowledges the unwavering support of the staff, particularly the counselors, who played a crucial role in guiding and motivating the children. However, he also observed that many children at CCI struggled with anxiety, stress, and uncertainty about their cases, the bail process, and their future. Some remained withdrawn due to mental distress, while others faced bullying from senior children. Despite the efforts of the CCI staff and NGOs to maintain a positive atmosphere, the emotional toll on the children was evident.

Ajay, however, considers his experience at CCI to have been largely positive. He never felt trapped, pressured, or mistreated. Instead, the staff created a supportive environment that helped him cope and move forward. Now, as he steps back into his old life, Ajay feels a sense of normalcy returning. Everything seems familiar, and he is gradually settling back into his routine. With the continuous support of his college, family, and well-wishers, he is determined to focus on his future and rebuild his life.



Rising Above the Tempest: Afsana's Story

"Afsana feels a deep sense of responsibility toward the care home where she has spent most of her life. She wants to give back by contributing financially, believing that when someone supports them, it truly makes a difference. She says, "When someone comes here and provides financial help, it really feels good. I want to do the same when I start earning." Additionally, she is driven to offer emotional support and guidance to other children in similar situations. Afsana wants to motivate them, sharing her journey to show that if she can achieve her dreams, they can too."

Childhood is a crucial phase of development, laying the foundation for physical and mental health that shapes well-being throughout life. What a child experiences during this period influences their growth from adolescence to old age. Exposure to violence during childhood is one of the most traumatic experiences for children, significantly impacting healthy development and compromising their future growth.

This is the story of a young girl, Afsana, which illustrates the struggle of a child whose early life was deeply affected by violence. Afsana was only six years old when, in a moment of uncontrollable rage, her father killed her mother. He was arrested and sentenced to life in prison, leaving Afsana and her five siblings orphaned.

Afsana's family lived in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh. Her father was a skilled artisan who used to do embroidery work on bridal lehengas. He owned a small factory, which he operated along with his wife and a few other workers. After the incident, Afsana's maternal grandmother took the children to live with her. However, her maternal home was already occupied by her uncles and aunts, and the added responsibility of six more children became an immense challenge, both financially and in terms of adequate living space. Afsana and her siblings lived in despair for several months until a friend of her mother suggested sending the children to a child care institute. This suggestion provided a glimmer of hope for the family, and they decided to admit Afsana and her younger sister to a child care institute.

In 2010, at the age of seven, Afsana and her younger sister were placed in the child care institute (CCI) and enrolled in the first standard at a nearby government school through the institute's support. Consequently, Afsana, her sister, and the other children were transferred by the CWC to another facility—Full Life Assembly of God (FLAG) in Nilo thi Village, Uttam Nagar. Afsana was good in academics, consistently performing well and securing good marks in her secondary exams. From a young age, she aspired to build a career in the medical field, dreaming of becoming a doctor or a nurse. However, her circumstances at the Child Care Institution (CCI) presented a significant challenge—there was no one to provide her with proper guidance or mentorship. As a result, when it came time to choose her stream in 12th grade, Afsana opted for commerce, despite her true interests lying elsewhere.

After completing her higher secondary education, Afsana continued her academic journey by enrolling in a commerce degree program through Indira Gandhi National Open University, Delhi. While she was determined to succeed in her studies, Afsana realized that she didn't want to pursue a career in banking or finance. Her heart was still set on the medical field, and she knew she needed to take a different path to achieve her goals. With renewed determination, Afsana approached the caregivers at the CCI and expressed her desire to explore opportunities in the healthcare sector.

She requested assistance in finding courses that aligned with her passion for the medical field. Recognizing Afsana's dedication, the owner at the CCI took the initiative to research available options. After some time, she identified a course in dialysis technology—a field that would allow Afsana to work in healthcare and make a meaningful impact. Afsana seized this opportunity with enthusiasm and enrolled in the dialysis technician program. For her, it is more than just a course; it is the first step toward realizing her long-held dream of becoming a medical professional. Her sister is also pursuing her graduation and also working in a hospital. Afsana and her sister now live in the aftercare programme managed by FLAG. She recently brought her youngest sister from their grandmother's house and enrolled her in the Child Care Institution (CCI), ensuring that she, too, has access to education and a better future.

Reflecting on her journey, Afsana shares, "I come from a background where hardly anyone is educated—no one in my entire family has even passed the 10th grade. This is what motivates me the most to study further and achieve something meaningful in life. What drives me even more is the way my relatives and neighbours look at us. They think that because we are orphans, we will never achieve anything and will always depend on others for support. I want to prove them wrong. In my community, many think that educating girls is a waste because they are only meant to cook. I want to change their perception. People need to understand that girls are capable of much more than household chores, and investing in their education is not a waste. I want to show them that education brings respect, and respect is one of the most valuable things in life."

Now, Afsana dreams of building a secure future for herself and her sisters. After completing her education, she plans to start working and hopes to rent or eventually buy a home where they can live peacefully together. "We have faced enough struggles in our lives, and now we want to find peace in our own home. It has been too long living in care homes, and we're ready to settle down in our own place. My youngest sister is also pursuing a bakery course, so eventually, the three of us can work and build a better life together," Afsana says.



Sheltered by Love : Anjali

"Anjali's story illustrates how the continuous support from the government, along with the sensitivity and care provided by childcare home employees, brings about a positive transformation in care leavers' lives, giving them clear direction. If all children, like Anjali, receive such aftercare support, their futures can also be bright and secure."

Childhood is the foundation of life. The warmth of family, the laughter of friends, and the magic of imagination create memories that stay with children forever. But for some children, childhood is not at all like this. Anjali is one of those children whose childhood was spent in a childcare institution, and she has no memories of her family, relatives, or home.

Anjali's story begins at a childcare home in Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh—Bal Sakha Aashram—where she lived from 2010 to 2014. Before that, she has no memory of where she came from, who her parents were, or where they might be now. She doesn't even know how she ended up at Bal Sakha Aashram. At the childcare home, Anjali's education was neglected for certain reasons, causing her to lose out on some crucial years of her life. Additionally, she started experiencing pain in her legs, and after some time, she faced difficulties in walking.

Despite her worsening condition, no one at the childcare home paid attention to Anjali's health. She was only given painkillers, which ignored the root cause of her illness, leading to much greater challenges for her in the future. However, after some time, Bal Sakha Aashram was shut down for various reasons, which surprisingly brought happiness to Anjali's life. After its closure, Anjali was transferred to a government-run children's home in Bilaspur, named Balika Naman.

Once there, Anjali was given a golden opportunity to discover and live her life, marking the beginning of a transformation in her journey. Upon arriving at the new childcare home, Anjali was provided with the necessary resources to restart her education. However, her leg pain continued to intensify, prompting the childcare home to take her for a check-up at a prominent hospital in Bilaspur. There, it was discovered that both of Anjali's legs had ceased functioning properly, requiring immediate surgery.

With support from the government, Anjali underwent a successful operation at KIMS Super Specialty Hospital, the largest and most renowned hospital in Bilaspur. After the surgery, both of Anjali's legs fully recovered, and she is now able to walk comfortably. At the childcare home, alongside her education, Anjali was also given the opportunity to learn various skills that matched her interests. For example, she was taught arts and crafts, which included painting, drawing, rangoli, mehendi, sewing, embroidery, "waste to best" activities, making diyas, and decorating them, among other things.

"Today, I use many of the skills I learned there to create various things, which helps me earn well. For example, I sell my paintings, and each one is priced at 500 rupees," says a proud Anjali.

When Anjali turned 18, according to the rules, it was time for her to leave the childcare home. However, she was terrified about what she would do once she stepped out, where she would go, and how she would survive, as she had no connections or acquaintances.

To help her, a staff member from the childcare home came forward and offered Anjali a place to stay at her own residence, along with another girl. Both Anjali and the other girl are pursuing a B.Sc. in Nursing.

The CCI staff later supported one more girl, and they all live together as a family. This staff member is a woman who never married and has dedicated her entire life to caring for such children, ensuring their future is secure. Anjali lovingly calls her "Maa."

Thanks to the government's Bal Uday Yojna, Anjali receives support for her living, food, and educational expenses, which makes it easier to manage all their needs. Initially, Anjali was unaware of the Aftercare Support Fund provided by the government. However, she was later added to a WhatsApp group where she, along with other children in similar situations, received information about the scheme.

In a workshop organized by Aide et Action, UNICEF, and DWCD, Anjali learned about the Bal Uday Scheme and its benefits. Through this workshop, she also gained an understanding of various opportunities available to her, which would support her present life and future aspirations. She realized that she could pursue her interests, explore new career paths, and potentially earn a good income.

Anjali is currently pursuing her B.Sc. in Nursing and aspires to build a career as a professional nurse in the future. She says, "I am grateful to the government for providing so many opportunities to children like me, who once had no one in this world. I want to make the best use of these opportunities so that these benefits are not wasted. I am also thankful to my mother, who gave me her name, a place in society, a family, and constant support. I want to make her proud by becoming educated and achieving something significant. I can never forget the support and help the government has provided me in every challenging situation. Because of them, I am healthy and able to work today. I also want to contribute to the government's efforts and reach out to children like me so that their futures can be secure as well."

Anjali dreams of making her mother proud by becoming well-educated and establishing herself in her chosen career.

She believes that through education and hard work, she will not only bring pride to her family but also honor the government's efforts that have made her journey possible. "I want to use these opportunities to their fullest potential so I can build a better future for myself. I can never forget the support the government has given me. Because of them, I am healthy and able to do meaningful work today," she shares with pride.

Her gratitude extends beyond her own journey. Anjali has a deep desire to give back to the society that has helped her. She hopes to contribute to the government's initiatives, reaching out to other children like her and helping them secure their futures as well. "I want to help other children who face the same struggles I did, so their futures can be as bright and secure as mine is now," Anjali says with a sense of purpose.



“The Wonder Woman Within”

: Halema Khatun

“Halema’s journey, from being nurtured at CCI to overcoming challenges and building a successful career, reflects her strength and determination. Grateful for the love and guidance she received, she now aims to empower fellow care leavers, using her experiences to create positive change and ensure they feel secure, loved, and empowered to reach their potential.”

When a young child is admitted to a Child Care Institution (CCI) due to financial hardship or family issues, it is often seen as a misfortune. Many assume that separation from family and placement in an institution would harm the child's future. However, CCIs can sometimes provide life-changing opportunities.

They not only offer a safe haven for children in crisis but also open doors to opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach. Halema Khatun's story from Assam shows that, with the support of compassionate caretakers and a nurturing environment, children in CCIs can thrive. These institutions empower children to pursue higher education and fulfill their dreams, transforming their lives in ways that would not have been possible otherwise.

Halema came to SOS Children's Village, Guwahati, when she was just 15 months old. After the death of her father, it became very difficult for her mother to raise four children alone, leading to this life-changing decision. When Halema arrived at SOS, she was too young to understand anything. She was raised entirely at SOS, where the caretakers and other children became her family. Although Halema had no memories of her biological family, the immense love and care she received at SOS Children's Village ensured that she never felt their absence.

Halema was an excellent and disciplined student who actively participated in extracurricular activities. Her remarkable qualities earned her the "Best Student" award twice, which included books and a cash prize of ₹10,000. Halema felt the absence of a family for the first time when her caretaker, whom she lovingly called "mother," retired. At that time, Halema was in Class 10, and her departure deeply impacted her, causing her life to become unbalanced for a while until a new caretaker arrived. This emotional turmoil also affected her Class 10 results. However, Halema soon regained her composure and successfully completed her Class 12 education.

After turning 18, Halema transitioned out of the Child Care Institution (CCI) to pursue higher education. Even then, she continued to receive aftercare support from SOS, which sponsored her graduation and post-graduation studies, covering all other expenses, including hostel fees. With their support, Halema successfully completed her BBA and MBA from the NERIM Group of Institutions, Dibrugarh.

Although Halema faced challenges and lacked emotional support after leaving the CCI—there was no one to visit her at the hostel, bring her homemade food, or provide for her daily needs—she recalls having to wait two years to purchase a cell phone costing ₹6,000 in 2018. However, this did not bother her much, as she understood that it was what she could manage at that point in time and remained focused on her goals. It was Halema's dedication, hard work, and perseverance that led to her selection at ICICI Bank through campus placement after completing her MBA.

With her earnings from ICICI Bank, Halema fulfilled her long-held dream of purchasing a brand-new phone. Additionally, her salary allowed her to support her sister and, most importantly, cover the medical expenses of her brother, who endured a severe illness. She proudly shares that she was able to afford his entire treatment for six months. Today, her brother has secured a good job with a handsome salary, and Halema, with her modest earnings, is able to maintain an average lifestyle without making compromises. Everything is now falling into place for Halema, and she considers herself incredibly fortunate to have been nurtured and supported by SOS, an organization that provided her with unwavering care and guidance.

She is also a proud member of the Assam Care Leavers Network (ACLA), where she continues to receive valuable support and mentorship. However, one thought consistently occupies her mind, even subconsciously—how she can contribute to the lives of other care leavers like herself. Halema has always had a deep desire to support care leavers, particularly by providing sponsorship or financial assistance to those who have transitioned out of CCIs and are seeking aftercare support.

With guidance from ACLA, she applied for the yearlong LIFT (Learning in Fellowship Together) fellowship offered by Udayan Care and was selected for the 3rd batch of the program. Halema is now focused on addressing issues related to care leavers, particularly in the areas of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Joining this fellowship has been a significant milestone for her, as she has always aspired to work in a space where she can contribute to the welfare of care leavers. "I feel like Wonder Woman with superpowers, capable of achieving anything I set my mind to," Halema chuckles.

She currently shares a rented place with a friend and recently visited her mother.

A passionate reader and writer, Halema dreams of expressing herself through her words. “I’m not very confident right now, but I aspire to write and publish about my thoughts and experiences.” Halema is now determined to make a difference in the lives of other care leavers. Reflecting on her journey, she joyfully shares, “Whatever I have achieved today is because of the CCI. Had I not been raised there; I wouldn’t have had the opportunity to study as much as I did or reach where I am today. It’s true that being raised by different people can be difficult, but it teaches you adaptability strengthens you, and instills a deep dedication to becoming a better and more independent person.



Jimadi : An Indomitable Spirit”

“Jimadi's story is a powerful testament to resilience and the indomitable spirit of fighting back. She is a true hero who refuses to give up, no matter the circumstances. Reflecting on her journey, she shares, "Even if you have nothing—no family, no money, no timely education, no friends, or even no talent—you can still accomplish something in life if you have the will to succeed. I never viewed my struggles as problems; I saw them as challenges and faced them head-on."

Jimadi's father never wanted a daughter. When his first daughter was born, he accepted her as the first child, but when Jimadi was born as the second daughter, it was unacceptable to him. He even tried to kill her. Jimadi's family lived in Assam, where her father, mother, and elder sister resided together. With great difficulty, her mother managed to save Jimadi's life. After Jimadi, a younger brother was born, followed by a fourth child—another daughter. Her father refused to accept this any longer. This time, he attempted to kill both Jimadi and her younger sister. To protect her children, Jimadi's mother fled with all four of them to Delhi, where they eventually settled in Nizamuddin Basti.

To support her children, Jimadi's mother worked as a domestic helper in nearby houses, but it wasn't enough to sustain a family of four. As a result, Jimadi and her siblings couldn't attend school. In such dire circumstances, someone informed them about a care home where the children could receive care and education. Following this, Jimadi's mother decided to send her and her younger sister, Suman, to a Child Care Institution (CCI).

For Jimadi, staying in the CCI without her mother was a significant challenge. She was in an unfamiliar environment, surrounded by strangers. At 10 years old, she had never attended school before. Adding to her struggles, she only spoke Bengali and couldn't communicate in Hindi. When Jimadi arrived at the CCI, her biggest concern was figuring out how she would learn to read and write. During her first six months at the institution, she attended bridge classes that provided her with basic education. After completing the bridge classes, she was enrolled in the sixth grade at a school that aligned with her age.

In school, Jimadi faced significant challenges as she was directly placed in the sixth grade, struggling with the curriculum and her inability to understand Hindi. Her teachers, frustrated by her lack of comprehension, often resorted to scolding and even punishing her. This made Jimadi fearful of attending school.

Seeing her struggles, the caretaker at the Child Care Institution intervened. She spoke with the schoolteachers, explaining Jimadi's background and situation. Following this, Jimadi resumed attending school regularly.

Jimadi quickly realized that if she didn't put in extra effort, she would never be able to catch up with the other children. Determined to overcome her challenges, she committed herself to studying harder and improving her skills. She started visiting the library and reading books to bridge the gap with her peers. Her efforts paid off when she passed the ninth grade with good marks. In the tenth grade, she worked even harder, confident that this time she would excel with remarkable results.

However, just as things seemed to be improving, an unexpected event turned Jimadi's world upside down. One day, her elder sister visited the CCI with devastating news—her mother and younger brother had gone missing, and there was no trace of their whereabouts. This news left Jimadi deeply depressed. She couldn't imagine a world without her mother, and the thought of her absence shook her to the core. The emotional toll was so severe that it profoundly affected her studies. That year turned out to be one of the most challenging for her academically. She somehow managed to pass the 10th grade, but even in the following year, during 11th grade, she struggled to regain her focus and return to a sense of normalcy.

Slowly, however, Jimadi realized that if she didn't focus on her studies, how could she set a good example for her younger sister? She didn't want them to remain stuck in difficult circumstances, relying on others. The struggles they faced—poverty and their mother's disappearance—were not the life they should settle for. Jimadi knew she had to work hard to create a better future for both of them.

With renewed determination, Jimadi worked very hard, and in 11th grade, she was among the top performers in her school. By the time she reached 12th grade, she decided to leave the CCI and move in with her elder sister. According to Jimadi, while the hostel provided discipline and structure, it lacked emotional support. Feeling this void, she chose to live with her sister instead.

However, things didn't turn out as Jimadi had hoped. She believed that moving in with her elder sister would help her focus better on her studies and provide the emotional support she needed, leading to a more peaceful life. But reality was quite the opposite. Both Jimadi and her sister struggled to understand each other. Her sister felt that Jimadi didn't behave like a typical child—her time at the CCI had made her more reserved, reluctant to open up, and hesitant to form friendships. She was also fearful of boys due to the trauma caused by her father during her childhood.

Despite these challenges, Jimadi continued her studies. She commuted from her home to Tahkhand, Okhla, where her school was located, learning to travel by bus to save money because her sister's monthly income was modest.

After completing her 12th grade, Jimadi decided to pursue a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) as she had a keen interest in the arts. While preparing for her BFA admission, she came into contact with Udayan Care and was deeply inspired by their work. She also observed other social workers helping children like her. This exposure made her realize that people who have faced challenges similar to hers are often best suited to work with and support such children. Jimadi says, "I have lived that life, so I can deeply understand their problems. The challenges I faced are the same ones that every child in that situation goes through. At 19, many young people think life is about traveling, relationships, and social media, but true life lies in achieving something meaningful. However, the right guidance is essential, and that guidance can only come from someone who has genuinely experienced those struggles. I felt that I wanted to work for them and become a role model for those children."

Jimadi is deeply grateful to the CCI for the numerous opportunities it provided her. It was there that she learned many life skills and discovered new paths for her future. For the past three years, Jimadi has been connected with Udayan Care as a youth care leaver, and today, she works with them as a community mobilizer. Alongside her work, she is pursuing a Bachelor's in Social Work from IGNOU and continuously supporting her younger sister's education, setting a positive example for her.

Jimadi aspires to complete her Master's in Social Work (MSW) and eventually pursue a PhD, with the goal of becoming a social worker to support children and vulnerable populations who, like her, have faced difficult circumstances. She believes that social work brings her immense happiness, and working with communities and children gives her a sense of peace and fulfillment.



Breaking through : Jasmin's Story

"Jasmine's story is one not only of personal triumph but also of giving back. Despite the many hardships she faced, she transformed her life into a beacon of hope for others. Her journey highlights the profound impact of support, opportunity, and an unwavering spirit. Today, Jasmine continues to dream of a better future—not just for herself, but for countless children who, like her, deserve a chance to rise above their circumstances and reclaim their lives."

Maslow, in his theory of the hierarchy of needs, states that people are psychologically motivated to fulfill their needs in a hierarchical order. Ironically, before love and belonging, come the basic needs for survival and safety. When financial constraints hit a family, survival often takes precedence over belonging, forcing difficult choices that leave deep psychological scars. This is especially true for young children abandoned by their families due to financial hardships, left to navigate a world devoid of the warmth and security of their loved ones.

Jasmine's life is a poignant illustration of this cruel reality. Living in a big city like Delhi was a constant struggle for Jasmine's father, who was physically disabled and unable to work. Caring for his family of six became nearly impossible as he had no stable income. Every day, he faced the challenge of meeting even the basic needs for his family. Often, he found himself begging for help, relying on the generosity of strangers to ensure his children wouldn't go to bed hungry.

As their poverty deepened, Jasmin's father realized he could no longer take care of his children properly. The hunger, instability, and constant hardships were too much to bear. With a heavy heart, he made the difficult decision to send Jasmine and her siblings to a care home. It was a heartbreakin choice, but he hoped they would at least get regular meals and a safe place to stay—something he could no longer provide. So, at the age of six, Jasmine was taken to Khushi Rainbow Home, a shelter for children whose families could no longer afford to care for them. For Jasmine, being separated from her family was deeply distressing. The care home provided safety, but it could not replace the warmth and love of her family. She yearned to return, but deep down, she understood the harsh reality of her family's struggles. Her emotional turmoil significantly affected her academic performance, causing her to fail third grade three times. These failures compounded her misery, eroded her confidence, and made her feel increasingly inadequate. The caregivers at Khushi Rainbow Home recognized Jasmine's academic struggle and stepped in to support her.

They introduced bridge classes tailored to address the learning gaps of children like her. These classes became a turning point in Jasmine's life. Over time, Jasmine's academic performance improved and she began to rebuild her confidence. Her hard work and determination paid off when she earned a spot in a private school. Jasmine remained at the care home for nine years and completed her schooling. After that, she returned home where nothing had changed and the financial instability still loomed large. This time, though Jasmine was determined to contribute to improve her family's financial conditions , she stared looking for jobs and finally secured a job at a call center. Although Jasmine successfully completed her formal education, she still lacked additional skills like strong communication and the confidence to work independently, which hindered her progress. These challenges made it difficult for her to advance and earn a decent wage. Despite this, her dream of supporting her family and uplifting other girls in her community remained unwavering.

This reflects a fundamental shortcoming of our education system, which has been limited to providing only basic education. It has failed to impart practical, employment-oriented education and essential skills that prepare individuals for the job market. As a result, young adults like Jamine often struggle after completing school education, either in pursuing higher education or securing employment, highlighting the urgent need for a more comprehensive and skill-focused approach. Amid all these challenges, Jamine too began to feel that her hopes would shatter and she would never be able to fulfill her dreams. Just as she was about to lose faith, she received a call from Salaam Baalak Trust, which completely changed the course of her life. She was invited to join their Aftercare program, a boot camp designed to empower care leavers with skills and opportunities.

Initially, Jamine was hesitant, as past disappointments had left her skeptical. However, after receiving counseling and motivational support from Salaam Baalak Trust, she decided to join the Aftercare program. This experience became a turning point in her life.

Salaam Baalak Trust's Aftercare program guides children and young adults, especially those living in challenging circumstances. Its initiatives include access to technology and STEM skills, mental health support, health and nutrition education, and career guidance—key elements for building a successful future. The boot camp helped Jamine regain her confidence and equipped her with the necessary skill sets to pursue her dreams.

Through the Aftercare program, Jamine secured a position as a community outreach worker with Railway Children India, an organization dedicated to the welfare of street children. In her new role, she found her purpose. Today, as an outreach worker, Jamine reaches out to children with similar stories, teaching, mentoring, and advocating for their rights. She is also actively involved in rescue operations. Every child she helps serves as a testament to her resilience and the strength she has gained from her journey.



Beyond the Horizon : Jyoti Prakash's Story

"The most rewarding part of this work is seeing care leavers thrive. It's truly inspiring to watch them become self-sufficient and independent. I want them to know they're not alone, that there are resources available, and most importantly, that there are people who genuinely care about them," says Jyoti Prakash.

As children step into young adulthood, they carry dreams—dreams nurtured by the guidance of family, the support of loved ones, and the security of a home. But not everyone is fortunate enough to have these pillars of strength. While some chase their aspirations with a safety net beneath them, others struggle just to meet life's basic needs, searching for a guiding hand in the darkness. Their journey is far from ordinary, shaped by hardships most never have to face. This is the story of Jyoti — one of resilience, survival, and hope.

Jyoti's life began with a heartbreakingly tragic event when, at a very young age, he lost both his parents in an accident. At just ten years old—a time when a child needs the love and protection of their parents the most—he was placed in a child care home in Odisha in 2003.

Life was full of challenges for Jyoti, and the absence of his parents left an emptiness within him that was difficult to fill. However, over time, he gradually found strength within himself, adapting to life in the child care home and continuing his education while staying at the CCI. Life once again showed Jyoti its unpredictability in 2010, reminding him that no one can foresee what lies ahead. When he turned 18, he had to leave the CCI as per the rules. For Jyoti, it felt like a sudden shock—he had to part with the only place in the world he could truly call his own. Beyond those walls lay an unfamiliar world, one where he knew no one and had no resources to survive. The uncertainty of what awaited him was daunting, yet he had no choice but to step into it.

But there were even more challenges awaiting Jyoti in the outside world, as he lacked any identity documents—no Aadhaar card, no PAN card, nothing. He felt invisible, as if he had no identity and no place in the world. The outside world seemed vast and intimidating, and all he could think was: What will I do? Where will I go?

After much struggle and effort, Jyoti finally saw a glimmer of hope when a friend offered him a place to stay for a month. This small act of kindness gave Jyoti the strength to carry on. He found a way to survive by tutoring young children, and the little income he earned from teaching helped him continue his education, eventually enrolling in college. However, there were days when life was so tough that he could only survive on a single Tiger biscuit.

“The little money I made allowed me to keep studying. It gave me pride, knowing that despite all the hardships, I was still able to continue my education,” says Jyoti.

A significant flaw in the Indian education system is its failure to equip children with employment-oriented skills, leaving many young people without job opportunities and falling behind. This was the case for Jyoti as well. While he received basic education at the child care institution where he grew up, the lack of vocational or skill-based training made it incredibly difficult for him to stand on his own and move forward in life.

He wasn't even aware of aftercare services until later, when he started working with CHILDLINE (1098) at YCDA, an organization focused on child welfare. It was during this time that he discovered many other care leavers were going through similar struggles, particularly in terms of transitioning to independent living. Having endured so much herself and witnessing the struggles of others like her, Jyoti was driven by a deep desire to make a difference. This moment became an intrinsic motivation for her. He began small, creating a WhatsApp group for care leavers with just 25 members at first. It quickly became a platform where they could share their challenges, offer advice, and support one another. When the YCDA team recognized the potential of Jyoti's initiative, they provided guidance and technical support, which enabled his to expand the group. This is how the Odisha Care Leavers Association (OCLA) was born.

It is a reflection of Jyoti's vision and efforts that the small network he started with the intent of connecting and supporting one another has now grown into a registered organization with over 250 members. Since its registration under the Trust Act in January 2020, the OCLA has been dedicated to supporting youth aged 15 and above living in Child Care Institutions (CCIs). OCLA provides them with crucial information about aftercare services, as well as emotional and practical support as they prepare to transition out of care.

OCLA also advocates for increased awareness and better communication about aftercare services within CCIs and Child Welfare Committees. They strongly believe in the principle that no child should leave care without being fully informed about the resources available to them. The organization also stresses that the government must take a more active role in this process. Given that many children face challenges in establishing their identity, the government should intervene to ensure that every care leaver receives their identity documents before leaving care. Additionally, providing financial and housing support would give these young adults the foundation they need to build a successful and independent life.

OCLA has forged collaborations with CCIs, Child Welfare Committees (CWCs), and other partners to help care leavers access government schemes like the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) for skill development and job placement. In addition, they offer counselling and guidance to assist these young adults in adjusting to their new lives and successfully settling into both their professional and personal lives. However, there are still many challenges ahead.

One of the biggest hurdles OCLA faces is helping care leavers secure stable employment. Many struggle to align their education and skills with the job market's demands. Another major issue is the lack of essential identity documents—such as Aadhar and PAN cards—making it difficult for them to access basic services or find employment. Jyoti explains, "Some care leavers don't even have an identity, which is one of the first challenges we face. Without identity documents, it becomes incredibly difficult for them to access the services and resources available to Indian citizens. For us as an organization, securing funding to offer skill development and self-employment opportunities remains a constant challenge."

He adds, "While things have improved since I left care, I know there's still so much more to be done. There needs to be stronger government support for youth transitioning out of care. I firmly believe that every care leaver should receive financial assistance, temporary accommodation, and access to proper documentation before leaving the institution." Today, Jyoti serves as the Secretary of OCLA, passionately advocating for a brighter future for care leavers in Odisha. His journey, which began as that of a scared, confused, and uncertain 18-year-old, has now shaped him into the leader of a growing support network.

This journey reflects Jyoti's courage, resilience, and an unwavering determination to never give up. For Jyoti, this path has never been just about finding survival and growth for himself—it has transcended that, turning challenges into opportunities and guiding others along the way. He is committed to reaching every care leaver, ensuring that none are left behind, and offering everyone an equal opportunity to move forward in life.



Resilient Wings : Kukil Das's Story

By stepping forward, organizing themselves, and working to provide guidance and assistance, these young people weave stories of empathy and positivity, showing that a life rooted in these values can create a better world for everyone.

Being away from home and loved ones is never easy. Every step is filled with challenges, and life feels uncertain. For an ordinary person, it is hard to even imagine what it feels like to have no family support or sometimes even no identity, how challenging it must be to access basic services without it. Whether it's pursuing higher education, attending a job interview, or securing a home, everything becomes an uphill battle. Yet, there are young individuals who have overcome such challenges and are now moving forward on the path to success. They aspire to ensure that other children like them do not have to go through the same struggles they faced. One such inspiring individual is Kukil Das from Assam. Rising above the difficulties in his own life, he is now proudly serving as the CEO of the Assam Care Leavers Association. His story is one of hope, empathy, and positivity—a tale of a young man who has learned from his own struggles and is now dedicated to helping other care leavers overcome theirs.

In his childhood, Kukil Das faced the absence of his father, whose untimely demise was a significant loss and shock for his family. The family endured severe financial hardships, and in such a situation, his uncle stepped in and arranged for Kukil and his younger brother to be sent to Assam Sishu Kalyan Sadan (ASKS). Kukil and his brother found a nurturing and motherly environment at ASKS, where they completed their primary education up to class five. They were then transferred to Snehalaya, where they spent their formative years, building essential life skills, strong values, and a solid educational foundation. Kukil remains deeply grateful to Snehalaya for the supportive environment that played a pivotal role in shaping the person he is today. Kukil experienced the struggles of care leavers up close when he went through this phase himself. At the age of 18, he had to leave the CCI as per regulations, and until aftercare services were arranged, he had no choice but to live independently.

During this time, he had to manage everything on his own, from arranging food and shelter to meeting all his basic needs. This period not only tested his strength but also caused significant mental stress and emotional turmoil. Reflecting on those challenging days, Kukil says, "This was a pivotal moment in my life, as it marked the beginning of my journey as a care leaver, navigating the world independently."

Kukil was fortunate, as he soon received aftercare support from the Child Aid Network of Snehalaya. With their guidance and his dedication, he managed to rise above his challenges and secure admission to a BA (Bachelor of Arts) program. Determined to complete his studies and fulfill his dreams, he also started working at Purabi Dairy Laboratory as a milk tester, ensuring his financial independence.

Currently, he is living with his younger brother and remains focused on achieving his goals.

The struggles and challenges Kukil faced as a care leaver stayed with him, deeply embedded in his heart, constantly motivating him to find a way to support others in similar situations. The lessons he learned from his journey became a wellspring of strength, resilience, and inspiration. These experiences ignited his passion to help those who faced the same hardships. His opportunity came when he joined the Assam Care Leavers Network (ACLA)—a moment he felt had been waiting for him. Upon becoming part of ACLA, he committed himself wholeheartedly to advocating for the rights, opportunities, and well-being of care leavers, ensuring they have the resources and support they need to thrive as independent individuals.

Kukil says: “After joining ACLA, I found the motivation to help other care leavers, especially those who do not have documents or ID proof, without which they face many difficulties. When such problems arise, we need to find solutions, whether it’s providing financial support, access to higher education, shelter, or other essential services, so that they don’t have to endure the same challenges that care leavers face when they leave the CCI. Today, I am proud to serve as the CEO of the Assam Care Leavers Association, a platform dedicated to empowering and supporting care leavers in Assam, and I strive to provide support services to as many care leavers as possible.”

Kukil hopes that by sharing his story, he can inspire others to overcome adversity and actively work towards creating a better future for themselves and their communities.



A Symphony of Scars and Stars : Mausami Das's Story

Mausami's journey reflects her remarkable strength in overcoming numerous challenges, including mental health struggles. Despite the hardships, she persevered and shaped her own path. Her relentless determination has given her a sense of purpose and fulfillment, making her story a powerful example of resilience. She continues to inspire others to rise above their circumstances and create a brighter future.

When a child is born, the first touch she feels is that of her mother. Across all species, a mother's love is said to be the purest, and her embrace the safest. But what happens when a child opens her eyes for the first time only to find an empty space beside her on the hospital bed? This is the story of Mausami Das from Assam—a journey of loss, resilience, and survival in the absence of parental love.

Mausami lost her mother at birth and was raised by her father until the age of five. Just as she began to find comfort in his presence, life dealt her another cruel blow—she lost him in a tragic accident. Orphaned and alone, with no one to turn to, a doctor at the hospital took the compassionate step of admitting her to a child care home. And so, in 2006, Mausami's life restarted within the walls of that child care institution—unaware of what the future had in store for her.

When little Mausami arrived at the CCI, she was terrified. She had never lived in such a crowded environment before, and seeing so many people around her was overwhelming, unsettling, and deeply uncomfortable. At that time, Mausami wanted to be alone—she avoided interacting with anyone. She longed for the comfort of her home and the love of her father, unable to control her tears. For a six-year-old child, enduring such emotional trauma was incredibly difficult.

Gradually, as Mausami spent more time at the CCI, observing everyone around her, she realized that this was her reality now—one that was not going to change. With this understanding, she made a decision: she would break free from the cycle of grief and isolation, start interacting with others, and focus on her studies. Slowly, she began adjusting to life at the CCI and immersed herself in her education. After completing her higher secondary education, Mausami left the CCI. However, having spent so many years in a sheltered environment, she was completely unfamiliar with the outside world.

Every step in life presented a fresh challenge—whether it was securing admission to college or managing her documents, handling everything on her own was incredibly difficult. However, she refused to give up. Facing each challenge head-on, Mausami successfully completed her graduation from Guwahati University. Despite all the hardships, Mausami had managed to keep her life composed.

However, the arrival of COVID-19 brought unprecedented challenges. Many relied on the support of their families and friends to navigate the crisis, but for those without a support system, the struggle was even more intense. Mausami witnessed firsthand the difficulties of living in such uncertain times. She found herself struggling to maintain control over her mental well-being. Typically, CCI support is available only until the age of 18 to 20, but by 2020, Mausami faced immense hardship as she received no assistance from the CCI and lacked the financial means to sustain herself. Struggling alone in the world without any support, life felt unbearable for Mausami. As her mental health deteriorated, she attempted to end her life multiple times, but thankfully, those attempts were unsuccessful.

Mausami experienced overwhelming fear and anxiety, especially at night, making it nearly impossible for her to sleep. However, in 2021, things began to shift for Mausami. She saw a ray of hope when she landed a job at the Assam news channel Pridin Time, where she met Aide Et Action member Chinumoni Dutta. Chinumoni introduced her to the concept of care leavers and the Care Leavers Network. Initially, Mausami had no idea what care leavers were or who they encompassed, but Chinumoni's explanation sparked her interest. Eventually, Mausami connected with over 300 care leavers in Assam, forming a supportive community that felt like family to her. This was a mentally soothing and transformative moment in her life. United by a shared purpose, they established a platform under Aide et Action where care leavers could come together to share their experiences, challenges, and concerns. They named it the Assam Care Leavers Association (ACLE), and Mausami became its first chairperson. Their goal was to work collectively to address these issues and advocate for greater societal and governmental support for care leavers.

In 2022, Mausami was presented with an incredible opportunity to join the LIFT (Learning in Fellowship Together) program, supported by UNICEF and Udayan Care. As a fellow, her primary focus was on enhancing the educational outcomes for care leavers. Throughout her time in the fellowship, she gained valuable insights into leadership, teamwork, and self-empowerment. Mausami reflects, "I take immense pride in my personal growth, as the program taught me how to become stronger and more vocal in society." Later in 2022, she joined Udyan Care as Senior Program Coordinator, where she played an instrumental role in the development and support of the care leaver community. Mausami takes immense pride in being a care leaver herself and is deeply grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the betterment of her community through her various roles. At present Mausami is working as Project coordinator with Aide at Action for strengthening and expanding Sarathi Association of Indian Care Leavers. Mausami has expanded her horizons by becoming involved with the Global Care Leavers Community (GCLC), a platform that connects individuals transitioning from local to national levels, ultimately fostering global exchanges to share experiences and ideas. She is currently an active participant in the course group within this international community.



Rising Beyond Challenges: Mohsin's Journey as a Care Leaver

To all care leavers, my message is simple: You are not alone. Your struggles matter, your dreams are within reach, and your voice is powerful. Together, we can overcome challenges and build a legacy of resilience and hope." Says Mohsin

Mohsin's journey started in the shadows of uncertainty. He spent his childhood and adolescence in a Child Care Institution. As a care leaver, he faced the dual challenge of stepping into adulthood while grappling with the absence of a conventional support system. However, he believes that within these challenges lie opportunities—opportunities to grow, transform, and give back. The turning point in Mohsin's life came when after leaving the CCI, he joined Childline. For the next six years, he dedicated himself to child protection- responding to distress calls, providing immediate assistance, and ensuring the safety of countless children. This was more than just a career; it was a calling that deeply resonated with him. Working on the frontlines of child protection, Mohsin became a voice for the voiceless, a guide for the lost, and a shield for those who couldn't protect themselves. Each distress call he answered and every life he touched reinforced his profound sense of purpose.

The stories Mohsin encountered at Childline were heart-wrenching—children abandoned, exploited, or trapped in cycles of abuse. Yet, amidst the despair, he also witnessed the resilience of the human spirit. These experiences shaped him, teaching him compassion, patience, and the power of listening. But they also tested him, pushing him to confront his own vulnerabilities.

The work was rewarding, but it wasn't easy. There were days when the weight of others' pain felt overwhelming. Sleepless nights followed cases where the outcomes didn't reflect his efforts. Moments of self-doubt crept in, making him wonder if he was doing enough or if his contribution even mattered. Balancing his professional responsibilities with the echoes of his own past as a care leaver was a battle he fought daily.

After spending six transformative years at Childline and gaining valuable work experience, Mohsin turned his focus to a cause even closer to his heart: care leavers.

The stories Mohsin encountered at Childline were heart-wrenching—children abandoned, exploited, or trapped in cycles of abuse. Yet, amidst the despair, he also witnessed the resilience of the human spirit. These experiences shaped him, teaching him compassion, patience, and the power of listening. But they also tested him, pushing him to confront his own vulnerabilities. The work was rewarding, but it wasn't easy. There were days when the weight of others' pain felt overwhelming. Sleepless nights followed cases where the outcomes didn't reflect his efforts. Moments of self-doubt crept in, making him wonder if he was doing enough or if his contribution even mattered. Balancing his professional responsibilities with the echoes of his own past as a care leaver was a battle he fought daily. After spending six transformative years at Childline and gaining valuable work experience, Mohsin turned his focus to a cause even closer to his heart: care leavers. For the past four years, he has dedicated himself to addressing their challenges and ensuring their holistic development, particularly in Madhya Pradesh. Having walked in their shoes, Mohsin deeply understands their struggles—the fear of an uncertain future, the longing for belonging, and the difficulty of finding a foothold in an indifferent world.

In 2020, Mohsin founded Yuva Shakti Sangathan, a community created by care leavers for care leavers, with the guidance and support of Udayan care, UNICEF and Department of Madhya Pradesh. Today, this network has grown to include more than 400 members. Through Yuva Shakti Sangathan, care leavers in Madhya Pradesh receive crucial support, from assistance with identity documents to connections for job opportunities. This initiative has become a lifeline for many, offering not just resources but also hope and a sense of belonging.

Mohsin's journey has been a reflection of growth—not just for those he has helped but for himself as well. The ups and downs have been many, from celebrating the triumphs of care leavers who secured jobs or completed their education to grappling with systemic roadblocks that hinder progress. Each experience has been a stepping stone. With pride, Mohsin says, 'Today, I stand not just as a care leaver, but as a survivor, a mentor, and an advocate. The journey hasn't been easy, but it has been worth it. Every challenge has shaped me into a more empathetic, resilient, and purpose-driven individual.'

He further adds "My mission is far from over. There is still much to do—more children to protect, care leavers to empower, and systems to transform. I envision a world where care leavers are recognized not for their past but for their potential, where they don't just survive but thrive as meaningful contributors to society."



Defying the Odds: Priyanka's Story

"Priyanka's journey from a challenging childhood to a fulfilling career in social work is a testament to her resilience, dedication, and the transformative power of support and guidance. Priyanka's story is an inspiration to others, demonstrating how consistent hard work and perseverance can lead to success."

Hardships are an inevitable part of life. While some give up when faced with challenges, there are others who refuse to back down. They transform hurdles into opportunities, confronting each struggle with courage and persistence. No matter how tough the journey, they move ahead until they turn their aspirations into reality, proving that resilience and courage can conquer even the greatest obstacles. Priyanka's story is one such example, reflecting her hard work, persistent efforts, and strong desire to become independent and self sufficient. Priyanka faced a difficult childhood after her father passed away untimely. With limited support for the upbringing of Priyanka and her five siblings in Odisha, one of her distant relatives took her to Mumbai and arranged for her admission to a Child Care Institution to provide her with care and support.

The move to Mumbai was particularly difficult for Priyanka, both emotionally and academically. She had to adjust to a completely unfamiliar cultural environment and overcome language barriers. However, Priyanka's determination to learn kept her motivated. Being naturally studious, she immersed herself in her studies with dedication and focus. While living at the Child Care Institution (CCI), she continued her education and achieved remarkable academic results along the way.

As Priyanka approached the end of her 12th grade, a sense of anxiety about her future began to take hold. She was aware that turning eighteen meant she would have to leave the CCI, and the uncertainty of what lay ahead troubled her deeply. Questions plagued her mind: Where would she go? What would she do next? What would happen to her dreams of further education, especially with no one outside to support her?

Fortunately, upon aging out of the institution, Priyanka transitioned to a Girls' Group Home. This new opportunity gave her the chance to pursue higher education and continue her journey toward independence and self-reliance.

Priyanka earned her graduation degree with History and Sociology as her core subjects. Initially, she dreamt of joining the army and serving the nation. However, during her college years, she encountered health challenges that prevented her from pursuing this goal.

After completing her studies, Priyanka found herself at a crossroads, unsure about her career path. Having spent much of her life in a CCI, she developed a strong inclination to work with children and make a meaningful impact on society. Yet, she struggled to figure out how to transform this aspiration into a sustainable career.

During this contemplative phase, Priyanka attended a career awareness session organized by CSA (Catalyst for Social Action) staff. Through multiple counseling sessions and a career assessment test, she gained clarity about her strengths and discovered her potential in the development sector, paving the way for her journey toward a meaningful career.

Observing Priyanka's strong interest in learning and her persistent determination, a personalized aftercare plan was designed to align with her unique interests and abilities. As part of this plan, she was enrolled in a two-year Master of Social Work (MSW) program at a prestigious institute in Mumbai. CSA not only supported her financially by covering the course fees but also provided her with an aftercare kit to ease her transition into this new chapter of her life. The aftercare kit included resources to enhance her interview skills, CV preparation, grooming, and coping strategies.

At this stage, Priyanka faced one major challenge, particularly with communication in English and her fear of public speaking. To overcome these obstacles, she also attended a spoken English course. This training greatly improved her language skills and played a crucial role in boosting her confidence during her internship and job placements. Alongside her MSW program, Priyanka gained valuable hands-on experience through internships with the OYA Foundation.

At the OYA Foundation, she had the chance to work with the elderly population, focusing on their care and well-being. This experience deeply resonated with Priyanka and aligned perfectly with her long-standing passion for working with vulnerable communities. It not only brought her immense satisfaction but also solidified her dedication to the development sector. She now had a clearer sense of her purpose and was ready to pursue it with conviction. After completing her Master's degree, Priyanka joined CSA, and today, she works as a Program Associate at CSA, earning a monthly salary of Rs. 21,000.

Reflecting on her experience working with children at CSA, Priyanka shares that everything she has gone through in life has taught her valuable lessons, and she can easily relate to the struggles of children like her. The children feel more connected to her because they see her as someone who truly understands them. They view her not just as a Program Associate but as a sister, a friend, or someone with whom they feel a sense of belonging.

Priyanka says, "Whatever I have learned, I want to use that knowledge to help these children. I want them to have opportunities, learn, and move forward in life. I aspire to be a voice for the community, for those who cannot express themselves, just like I once couldn't." She also finds great joy when children look up to her as an inspiration and want to follow in her footsteps. Priyanka loves to travel and visit historical places. She says, "Though I haven't had the opportunity to travel and see new places yet, one day, when I am financially independent, I would love to explore new places." Priyanka is also passionate about mental health. She believes it is a major issue that many people, especially children living in CCIs, face. She says, "It's very important to address this issue, and I want to explore it further and eventually work on it."

Priyanka is very grateful to CSA for all they have taught her, for giving her opportunities to grow, and for supporting her along the way. She takes great pride in her growth and is determined to prove herself through hard work, ultimately becoming financially independent.



The Courage to Be Me : Rajkumar's Story

"My journey has been full of struggles, but today, I stand proud of who I am. I live life on my own terms and have realized that success brings acceptance, no matter one's gender identity. I am no longer afraid of people's judgments or the stigma attached to being transgender."

"Gender identity is an intrinsic part of a person's sense of self, yet our society remains largely non-inclusive, making acceptance a challenge for gender-diverse individuals. The third gender continues to face deep-rooted social discrimination, limited opportunities, and stigma that hinder their growth and inclusion. Rajkumar's journey reflects the struggles of being a gender-diverse person and the stigma and prejudices he had to overcome." Rajkumar was born on February 11, 2003, in Jaipur, Rajasthan. His early childhood was marked by immense loss—his mother passed away when he was just a year old, and by the time he was three or four, he lost his father as well. Left with only two close relatives—his father's brother and sister—his life took a difficult turn. While his aunt was married and settled in her own life, his unmarried uncle took responsibility for him and his younger brother.

Initially, his uncle believed they would have a better life with their aunt, so he sent them to live with her. However, he soon realized that she did not treat them the same as her own children. Concerned for their well-being, he decided to raise them himself. But financial struggles made it difficult for his uncle to provide them with good food, proper education, and a stable life. In search of a better future for the boys, he enrolled them in Anchal Care Home, an NGO that provided shelter and education.

For Rajkumar, life at the NGO was a new beginning. He started attending an English-medium school and gradually adjusted to his new environment. However, at the tender age of seven, something happened that he couldn't comprehend. A resident of the NGO sexually molested him. It happened twice before Rajkumar even realized what was going on. The third time, he remembers feeling deeply confused—part of him wanted to resist, but another part of him, not fully understanding what was happening, experienced pleasure that left him conflicted and embarrassed. Soon, Rajkumar discovered that he was not the only victim. Another child at the NGO suffered the same fate. However, the organization was shut down for unrelated reasons, and Rajkumar never found out why.

Following the closure, the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) relocated him and his brother to another NGO called Raise Asha ki Ek Kiran. On his very first night there, he was made to share a bed with an older boy, around 12 years old. That night, Rajkumar was abused again by that boy. He felt helpless, wondering why this kept happening to him. Was there something about his behaviour that made people target him? When he confronted the older boy the next morning, threatening to report him, the boy begged for forgiveness, pleading with Rajkumar to stay silent. Scared and unsure, Rajkumar chose to keep quiet.

Yet, amidst all these painful experiences, his time at Raise Asha ki Ek Kiran marked the beginning of his journey of self-discovery. He started recognizing differences in himself—his mannerisms, the way he walked, the way he danced. People around him frequently commented on his behaviour, telling him he should act "more like a boy." Until the fifth standard, he tried to ignore their remarks, but deep inside, he was growing more aware of who he was.

Until the 5th standard, some other people from the NGO molested him. They never instructed him to keep their names confidential, but Rajkumar chose not to discuss it with anyone because he was frightened. He believed that what he experienced as a child was something that happened to every child and that as they grew older, they would improve and change. His friends and those at the NGO expected him to become more masculine as he reached a certain age.

Rajkumar still recalls pretending to have a crush on a girl in the 6th standard just to impress his friends, who often teased him for behaving like a girl and being friendlier with girls. By the 7th standard, the instances of sexual interaction became more frequent, involving multiple individuals. Over time, it turned into a pattern, and he gradually developed a sense of familiarity with it. As he entered puberty, he found himself increasingly drawn to such experiences.

During his 7th and 8th grades, Rajkumar's behavior became a concern for those around him, as society failed to accept his identity. He faced constant ridicule, being called derogatory names like "chakka" and "hijra," which left him feeling ashamed and isolated. Though academically bright, he had no male friends—only two female friends who stood by him. Despite excelling in studies and helping classmates, he remained an outcast.

At 15, Rajkumar developed feelings for a boy who never defended him when others mocked him, leaving him feeling isolated. The NGO warned him after catching him being intimate with other boys and occasionally invited transgender individuals to speak with him. However, like other children, he felt transphobia and fear. Unaware of the LGBTQ community, he struggled with rejection and self-doubt.

Dance was his escape, bringing him happiness. But even in that, he faced restrictions—when he performed at the NGO owner's birthday, he was told not to dance to girls' songs but to choose more masculine routines. He obeyed; whatever was happening to him, he accepted and cooperated out of fear that if he denied it, people would spread rumours about him, making it too overwhelming for him to handle.

In 11th grade, he was harassed and blackmailed by a classmate who pressured him into a physical relationship. Initially, Rajkumar agreed, believing that after a few encounters, it would stop. However, when the boy continued to torment him, it became extremely irritating and unbearable for Rajkumar, prompting him to report it to the NGO authorities. The classmate was expelled but retaliated by falsely accusing Rajkumar, leading to his own rustication. He was asked to leave after his exams and was isolated in a separate room until then. When the news reached his family, his uncle was deeply disappointed. "Without education, what will you do? You'll end up washing dishes in a hotel," he said, making Rajkumar even more anxious about his uncertain future. Though his brother supported him, the weight of his tarnished reputation, people's judgment, and his self-doubt troubled him deeply. This made Rajkumar anxious about his future in the outside world. He began questioning his character, overthinking how others perceived him. Amid this emotional turmoil, when everything became unbearable, he attempted suicide by drinking acid. Though he survived, instead of receiving support, he was blamed for his actions and accused of bringing a bad name to the NGO.

Despite scoring well in his 11th exams, the NGO refused to take Rajkumar back. However, they continued supporting his education for the 12th standard, during which he lived with his elder brother, who was working. Around this time, he met Girish, the founder of the Care Leavers Inner Circle (CLiC) Forum. Girish was the first person to introduce him to the concept of sexual orientation and help him realize that he was a trans person. Accepting this truth was difficult for Rajkumar. Struggling with his identity and thoughts, he often argued with his elder brother. However, over time, he came to terms with himself and developed a warm, cordial relationship with his brother, which remains strong to this day. Rajkumar worked hard and excelled in his 12th exams, scoring 82%. He had a keen interest in art and pursued a three-month internship in Hyderabad, but he lacked career guidance and was unsure of his next steps. Upon returning, he reconnected with Girish, who guided him toward the Wiley Foundation in Bangalore, which could provide him with housing, education, and career support.

In 2023, after much internal struggle, Rajkumar finally revealed his sexual identity to his brother. Expecting rejection, as he had faced from others, he was instead surprised when his brother accepted him wholeheartedly and offered unconditional support. This acceptance gave him newfound confidence, and he moved to Bangalore, where he completed a three-month job-oriented course at the WeLive Foundation. After completing the course, Rajkumar briefly worked as a Junior Executive Officer at Axis Bank before joining a fashion brand. However, he left due to workplace challenges.

In July 2024, he enrolled in a four-year BSW program. Adjusting to Bangalore was daunting—he was unfamiliar with the language and still carried the emotional scars of his past. Late one night, he booked a Rapido ride due to the lack of public transport. During the ride, the driver repeatedly placed his hand on his lap. When he objected, the driver responded, “You’re a boy, so why does it matter?” Rajkumar firmly replied, “Consent matters regardless of gender.” Feeling unsafe, he remained silent until reaching his center. Once there, he confronted the driver, warning him never to repeat such behavior with anyone. However, at WeLive, he was treated with respect and given equal opportunities. He even hosted the WeLive Annual Day in full feminine attire, marking a moment of true self-acceptance.

That same year, he was selected for the third batch of the LIFT (Learning in Fellowship Together) Fellowship, a milestone that made him immensely proud.

Looking ahead, Rajkumar aspires to undergo gender transition and participate in Miss Trans Queen India. His ultimate dream is to work in the modeling industry and represent India on international beauty pageant platforms, carving a name for himself in the fashion world.

Rajkumar reflects on his journey, saying, “I faced every challenge on my own, but my brother’s unwavering support was always there, and I am forever grateful to him. It is because of his support that I have come this far. When I look back, I feel incredibly proud of how far I’ve come. Hearing that I inspire others is truly fulfilling.”

He also expresses gratitude to the WeLive Foundation for their immense support, which not only changed his perception of the third gender but also provided him with a career coach who helped him find purpose in life.



The Road Ahead: Ram's Story

"Ram's story is the tale of a child who, despite numerous challenges, chose the path of education and progress. His journey highlights the systemic loopholes that exist, particularly how the lack of proper guidance leaves many young individuals struggling to secure meaningful employment. It also sheds light on the critical gap between Child Care Institutions (CCIs) and aftercare support. Without adequate support during this transition, children are at risk of being pushed back into a world of vulnerability. Addressing these shortcomings becomes essential to ensure that such youth are empowered to build stable and promising futures.

Ram never saw his father; he was very young when his father passed away. Ram only heard from his relatives that his father had TB and passed away because of it. Ram's family lived in Armanar village of Bijapur district, Chattisgarh. Ram had four brothers and two sisters. After the death of his father, the responsibility of raising all the children fell on his mother.

However, managing such a large family and ensuring the children's education was not feasible for her. Therefore, she enrolled Ram and his younger brother in the government-run residential program, Porta Cabin in Bijapur. After two weeks, some orphaned children were transferred to an NGO Ram and his brother were among those sent to the organization. The foundation provided a residential shelter home and facilitated the children's admission to a government school.

Ram began living at the shelter home and attending school along with the other children. The organization fostered a lively and engaging environment by frequently hosting volunteers and tourists from different countries. These visitors conducted a variety of creative and interactive activities such as games, art workshops, and competitions, which not only brought joy but also helped the children explore their talents. Sports were also an integral part of life at the shelter, and Ram, along with other children, learned to play games like football, which soon became a favorite pastime.

As the days went by, Ram began to adapt and enjoy his new life at the shelter. The structured environment, the opportunity to study, and the chance to learn and try new things brought a sense of stability and optimism to his life. For the first time, he felt a sense of belonging and hope for a better future.

During his time there, Ram discovered a love for creative and artistic activities. He learned a variety of skills, including dance, acting, singing, rangoli making, and mehndi design. Ram and his friends even prepared and performed a dance drama on Chhattisgarh Sthapna Diwas (Chhattisgarh Foundation Day). These experiences not only enhanced his skills but also boosted his confidence and broadened his horizons.

The shelter became a home for Ram, where he spent his entire childhood. He rarely visited his family home and barely knew his relatives. While staying at the Child Care Institution (CCI), Ram completed his 12th grade. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Ram and the other children attended online classes from the CCI itself, with the organization providing all necessary facilities such as mobile phones, tablets, and internet connections.

Everything was going well. Ram chose commerce as his subject in 11th grade, aspiring to become a Chartered Accountant. However, he lacked proper guidance and knowledge about how to pursue his dream. When Ram turned 18, he had to leave the CCI as per the rules. After leaving the CCI, he found himself lost, unsure of how to move forward to achieve his goal.

Ram shares the challenges he faced after leaving the CCI: “My younger brother Laxman and I struggled to find a room for rent because we weren’t earning and didn’t have money to pay the rent. It was a very difficult phase of our lives—a time when even securing food and shelter was a struggle. To meet their basic needs without any external support, Ram started working at a hotel. He worked there for about three to four months, but the job proved to be extremely challenging for him as the earnings were very low. The amount he made was barely enough to pay the rent for his room, leaving him struggling to afford food and other essentials. Moreover, Ram faced difficulties because he lacked additional skills that could help him secure a better-paying job. This phase of his life was marked by significant hardship and struggle. In that desperate situation, a kind clerk madam from our previous school stepped forward to help us. She took us into her home and gave us shelter and food for nearly seven months.” Ram says.

About six months later, when Ram and his brother started receiving aftercare support from the government, they moved out of the clerk’s house and rented a room to live on their own. Ram is deeply grateful to the clerk madam and says, “If she hadn’t helped us, I don’t know what kind of situation we would have been in.”

Currently, Ram is pursuing a Computer Operator course from ITI, while his brother is studying for a B.Com degree, both funded through the government’s aftercare program. With the support of this program, Ram and his brother are able to cover their daily expenses, pay their tuition fees, and purchase books.

Ram still aspires to become a Chartered Accountant but remains uncertain about how to achieve this goal. He shares, "I have always wanted to be a CA, but due to financial constraints, I couldn't prepare for it earlier. However, I still have the same dream. I am learning computer skills because I know that Tally and other computer-related expertise are essential for accounting. I am now considering starting my preparation for the CA exam."

Ram still struggles to receive proper career guidance and mentorship for his future. He shares, "Currently, my brother and I are living on our own in a rented room, but we have no idea what to do next or which path would be best for us. My mind isn't working; I just keep studying without any clear direction. There's no one to guide us or show us the right way to move forward and secure a good job." However, he also mentions a recent development that gives him hope. "Recently, a WhatsApp group has been created by representatives from Aide et Action. They provide us with guidance and regularly check on our progress, asking about any difficulties we face. Slowly, I am becoming hopeful that I will receive the support I need and will eventually be able to chase my dreams," Ram adds with optimism.



Cradled by Guardian Spirits : Saqib Rehman's Story

Saqib's journey highlights two significant aspects: the practical life challenges faced by care leavers, emphasizing the need for emotional and well-being support for them, and the transformative power of structured care, guidance, and life lessons provided at CCI which can shape a child into a confident and strong-willed adult. His story serves as an inspiring example of how such an environment can foster strong, determined individuals who rise above their difficulties and emerge empowered.

When a child is sent to a childcare home due to difficult circumstances, the transition is not just a one-time event but happens multiple times throughout their life. For children whose living arrangements keep changing, "adjustment" becomes much more than just a word. Leaving their home and adapting to an unfamiliar environment is only one part of the struggle. Years later, returning to the same home is often not as easy or welcoming as one might imagine. Transitioning from a structured environment back to the home, family, and community often feels alien, as they find themselves feeling like strangers in their own homes and among their own relatives. In essence, adjustment becomes a significant issue in the lives of care leavers, often leading to mental turmoil. This is why ensuring aftercare support, including strong mental and emotional counseling, is essential for all care leavers. Saqib Rehman's story sheds light on this internal conflict and the emotional challenges faced during such transitions.

Saqib was living a happy life with his family in the picturesque Shopian district of Jammu & Kashmir, until a road accident turned his world upside down. The tragedy, which occurred in 2004, claimed the life of his father. When the devastating news reached Saqib and his family, they couldn't believe their ears. It was unimaginable that life could be so cruel to them. Yet, they had no choice but to accept the harsh reality.

After his father's death, Saqib's mother, who was unable to support the entire family on her own, was compelled to admit him to the Baitul Hilal Child Care Home in Kulgam. At Baitul Hilal, Saqib met other children who, like him, had faced the harshness of life in different ways. Together, they shared similar experiences, creating a sense of understanding and connection among them.

Saqib spent the next ten years at the Child Care Home, where he gained numerous life lessons. The most important lesson he learned was how to face challenges head-on, which transformed him into a resilient individual for whom struggles no longer seemed daunting. He remained focused on his studies and excelled, passing his 10th-grade examination with flying colours. After completing his 10th grade, Saqib was transferred to another Child Care Home at Baitul Hilal, Jawahar Nagar, for further studies. There, he received invaluable guidance, mentoring, and emotional support from the guardians of the J&K Yateem Foundation.

Saqib remains deeply thankful and forever indebted to them for their unwavering care and support during his most challenging times. Under their mentorship, Saqib passed his 12th-grade examinations with distinction. The nurturing environment not only strengthened his academic foundation but also prepared him to face the hurdles, difficulties, and emotional challenges of life as an orphan with courage and determination.

Recalling his journey at the Child Care Institution, Saqib reflects, "During my time in the orphanage, I learned many new things. There were moments of emotional breakdowns—missing my family, feeling the absence of my father, and grappling with the thought that I was an orphan. Despite these challenges, the time I spent there was incredibly precious and fruitful. I met new people, explored different perspectives of the world, and worked on building myself to rise above the stigma of being a fatherless child. The environment at the CCI constantly reminded me of the reality of my situation, but it also shaped me into who I am today. By Allah's blessings, I have moved forward in life, but I still cherish the time I spent there. It holds a special place in my heart." Saqib feels that life in the Child Care Institution (CCI) and life after leaving it are entirely different experiences. He describes the post- CCI phase as one of the most complex and challenging times of his life. After leaving the CCI, Saqib returned home, but the experience was far from what he had imagined. Everything felt unfamiliar—he had no friends, no connections, and even within his family, he felt like a stranger in his own home.

This period brought immense challenges for Saqib, from understanding and managing his own emotions to adjusting to the dynamics of family life and meeting societal expectations. At the CCI, life had been well-organized, with a clear routine and a strong support system. However, at home, that structured existence was gone, leaving Saqib to fend for himself.

This was a transitional phase in his life—a moment where he stepped into an entirely new segment of his journey. For the first time, he had to take full responsibility for his actions, manage his resources independently, and adapt to a life that was no longer guided by the CCI's protective framework. The emotional turmoil of reuniting with his family, coupled with the struggle to cope with sudden change, tested him in ways he hadn't anticipated.

Saqib often reflects on how his life feels divided into two distinct chapters—his time in the CCI and the life that came after—each with its own set of challenges and lessons.

Recalling his emotional journey, Saqib says, "Reuniting with my siblings after such a long time was one of the most challenging aspects of returning home. Emotionally connecting with them, rebuilding trust, and understanding their now-grown personalities—with their choices, likes, and ways of living—felt like stepping into unfamiliar territory. Adjusting to this atmosphere took time, patience, and effort. Shared responsibilities and open communication eventually strengthened our bond, but building trust and turning them into a support system was a gradual process.

This transition also brought challenges in forming new relationships outside the family. Introducing myself to new people, meeting societal expectations, and building connections felt overwhelming at first. Interacting with relatives was equally unfamiliar yet exciting, requiring me to step out of my comfort zone and slowly foster deeper bonds.

Over time, these connections grew stronger, creating a new network of support. Balancing all this while managing financial challenges and adapting to new roles and responsibilities made the journey both demanding and transformative." Saqib reflects that his time at the CCI played a crucial role in shaping him into a strong-willed individual capable of facing challenges. While losing his father and entering the CCI was a necessity at the time, Saqib chose to see it as an opportunity to rebuild and nurture himself.

He firmly believes that those years prepared him to tackle the complexities of the outside world with confidence. Currently, Saqib is pursuing his professional studies while also engaging in social work by volunteering with various organizations. He remains deeply grateful to the J&K Yateem Foundation and his caretakers for guiding him during his most vulnerable years and providing the care and protection he desperately needed. His involvement in social work serves as both a way to give back to society and a source of motivation to help others in need.



A Name of His Own : Shantanu Pravin Parmar's Story

Shantanu Pravin Parmar's journey from abandonment to empowerment exemplifies resilience and highlights the transformative impact of supportive care systems. His story underscores the importance of nurturing care leavers and providing them with the tools to build successful, fulfilling lives. Shantanu's transformation serves as a powerful reminder of how structured aftercare services can create meaningful change and inspire hope for others to realize their potential.

For some children, childhood is a journey marked by absence rather than warmth, a path filled with uncertainty and the longing for a sense of belonging. Shantanu's story is one of those journeys. Orphaned at a tender age, he and his younger brother entered the care system with no recollection of their family, birthplace, or even their own names. Despite this, Shantanu's story is one of self-discovery, resilience, and a commitment to building a better future. Shantanu's early life remains a mystery. He does not remember his parents, his place of birth, or anything about his family. His only memory of family is his younger brother, Gurjala, who was also placed in institutional care. Their journey began at Shraddhanand Mahilashram, Matunga, Mumbai, a childcare institution where they spent several years as young children. The exact circumstances of their separation from their family remain unclear.

Shantanu recalls that both he and Gurjala were put up for adoption. Unfortunately, they were not adopted, spending six to seven years at Shraddhanand Mahilashram. At the institution, Shantanu attended school from Balwadi to the fifth standard. When no one adopted them, they were subsequently shifted to B.J. Home, Matunga.

Shantanu spent a year there, completing his sixth standard, before being transferred to Narayan Chandra Trust, Nallasopara, while Gurjala remained at B.J. Home. At Narayan Chandra Trust, Shantanu attended school from the seventh to the tenth standard. During this period, he experienced a sense of stability and personal growth. After passing the tenth standard, Shantanu was shifted to Aditya Birla Center (ABC) for further education. The most significant turning point in his journey occurred at ABC, where he received guidance to pursue technical education. He completed Classes XI and XII while living at ABC and enrolled in a Technical Course in Electronic Technology at Mahatma Phule Technical School, Parel, with support from the center. Despite the logistical challenges of traveling daily, Shantanu successfully completed the course alongside his twelfth standard qualification.

However, his journey was not without challenges, as he often grappled with feelings of isolation and uncertainty about his future. The institutions where he lived played a crucial role in shaping his academic foundation and providing him with opportunities for growth.

A pivotal moment in Shantanu's life came when he was informed that he could no longer stay at ABC after turning 18. This transition marked the beginning of a new chapter. Taking the initiative, Shantanu applied to Tarun Sadan, a care institution for young adults. Driven by the hope of finding a job and continuing his education, he recalls, "My thought behind coming to Tarun Sadan was that I could stay here, get a job in a call center or something related to Tally, and pursue my studies simultaneously through distance mode."

At Tarun Sadan, Shantanu received valuable support that transformed his life. The caregivers helped him formalize his identity by publishing his full name, Shantanu Pravin Parmar, in the Maharashtra State Government Gazette. This step was vital in establishing his identity. They also assisted him in enrolling in a graphic designing course, which became a turning point in his career. With their guidance, Shantanu discovered his passion for design and developed the skills needed to succeed in the field. Shantanu's transition from care institutions to independent living was not without its challenges. Leaving the structured environment of ABC and entering Tarun Sadan required him to adapt to new circumstances and take greater responsibility for his future. Despite these hurdles, Shantanu demonstrated remarkable resilience and determination. He faced the uncertainty of securing employment and continuing his education with courage and optimism, relying on the support provided by Tarun Sadan to navigate these challenges.

Today, Shantanu is thriving as a graphic designer, pursuing a career he genuinely enjoys. He has found stability and purpose in his work, which has significantly boosted his confidence and self-esteem. Reflecting on his journey, Shantanu expresses deep gratitude for the opportunities and support he received along the way. He aspires to continue growing both professionally and personally, with hopes of achieving greater financial independence and contributing positively to society.

"My journey has taught me the importance of resilience and self-belief," he says, looking forward to a future filled with possibilities.

Shantanu Pravin Parmar's journey—from abandonment to empowerment—exemplifies resilience and highlights the transformative impact of supportive care systems. His story underscores the importance of nurturing care leavers and equipping them with the tools to build successful, fulfilling lives. Shantanu's transformation serves as a powerful reminder of how structured aftercare services can create meaningful change and inspire hope for others to realize their potential.



From Sinking to Soaring: Soni's Story

"Soni's story is a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit. Her transformation underscores the importance of guidance, education, and unwavering support. Her story also highlights systemic gaps in emotional well-being support, intergenerational dynamics, and societal attitudes towards gender and adolescence. It emphasizes the need for tailored community awareness programs to dismantle stigma and support smoother intergenerational transitions"

Adolescence is a delicate phase of self-discovery—a time when young minds strive to explore themselves and the world around them. However, when parents and society fail to understand the changes associated with this critical stage, adolescents often face significant challenges. Soni's story exemplifies this struggle.

Soni was a cheerful and friendly girl during her adolescence. She cherished her interactions with classmates and embraced life with enthusiasm. However, her spirited nature clashed with her family's and relatives' rigid expectations. They disapproved of her friendships with boys and imposed restrictions, which became a point of contention. Despite repeated warnings to conform to their will, Soni remained steadfast in her choices.

Her defiance pushed her parents to withdraw her from school and force her to take board exams as a private candidate. They also began seeking proposals for her early marriage, casting a shadow over her aspirations. These restrictions and pressures affected Soni's young mind. Seeking solace, she developed a relationship with a boy from her intermediate class. In 2023, the two eloped, hoping to carve out a life together. However, what she envisioned as freedom quickly turned into despair. The boy abandoned her in an unfamiliar place, leaving her vulnerable and alone. Her parents' anguish led to legal action, and she was placed under the care of the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), which referred her to a Child Care Institution (CCI) in Patna. Soni spent the next year in the CCI—a year of introspection and hardship as she never anticipated such a turn in her life. Life in the CCI offered limited opportunities for education, vocational training, and personal development. She wasn't happy and felt stuck.

An assessment drive conducted at the CCI marked a turning point in Soni's life. The drive aimed to identify children aged 16–18 who could benefit from a skilling and employment program initiated by the State Aftercare Cell. Initially, Soni showed little interest but reluctantly joined a hairstyling course at the encouragement of CCI officials. Even after attending a few sessions, she considered quitting. However, persistent counseling from officials, NGOs, and mentors motivated her to continue.

Alongside vocational training, the State Aftercare Cell organized regular life skills sessions on topics such as "Strengths and Weaknesses," "Career Goals," and "Relationships." These sessions resonated deeply with Soni, prompting her to reflect on her life choices, her parents' struggles, and the broader impact of her actions. During moments of introspection, Soni often cried silently, grappling with guilt and pain. Over time, she found the courage to express her thoughts and dreams, trusting the counselors with her innermost feelings.

Interactions with women professionals and officials further inspired Soni. These role models demonstrated that she could rise above her vulnerabilities and shape a promising future. Over the three-month course, Soni underwent a remarkable transformation, regaining her confidence and embracing a new sense of purpose. After completing her training, Soni returned to her parents. It was not a pleasant return; she faced criticism and judgment from neighbours and relatives. However, this time, Soni remained resolute. Her commitment to pursuing her studies and earning her family's trust kept her focused. "I made mistakes, so I have to endure this. But now, I will focus on my studies and prove to my parents that I can make them proud again," Soni says.

While Soni received emotional and educational support during her time in care, challenges like societal reintegration, restarting her education, and proving herself remained significant hurdles. Regular follow-ups with counsellors and mentors helped her navigate these difficulties. Soni is now enrolled in intermediate studies and is steadily rebuilding her relationship with her family. She has embraced her second chance with resilience and optimism.

Her dream of working in the social development sector continues to drive her forward. Soni's transformation has inspired her to give back to society. As a member of the Bihar Care Leavers Network (BCLN), she actively participates in advocacy initiatives and supports other children facing similar struggles. She has applied for the Learning in Fellowship Together (LIFT) program, which nurtures care leavers, and has also contributed significantly to the Vision Document Workshop for BCLN.

Soni continues to seek guidance from the State Aftercare Cell and organizations like Udayan Care to overcome hurdles in her personal and academic growth. Her commitment to education remains unwavering, and she now envisions herself as a self-reliant and impactful individual capable of inspiring others.

As Soni continues to empower and uplift others, her journey serves as a beacon of hope for care leavers striving to build brighter futures.



Elevated Pursuit : P. Sowmya's Story

Sowmya's journey is a shining example of determination, perseverance, and the transformative power of education. It inspires every student to become a lifelong learner, push boundaries to achieve new milestones, and embrace the belief that education holds the key to a brighter future, no matter the challenges. Her story demonstrates that with a strong desire to learn and a hunger for knowledge, obstacles can be overcome, and opportunities can flourish.

The hunger to learn is a spark that drives personal growth and transformation. It is not just about acquiring knowledge but about embracing curiosity and seeking new opportunities to grow, evolve, and excel. For a person with this hunger, every challenge becomes a lesson, and every experience becomes a stepping stone toward progress. Sowmya's story reveals that no matter how big the challenges are, an insatiable hunger to learn opens up new paths. By walking on these paths, a person not only fulfills their dreams but also reaches new horizons of success and self-discovery.

Sowmya's seemingly ordinary life took a sudden steep turn when she was in the fourth grade. Due to severe financial problems in her family, her parents struggled to meet their basic needs. In such challenging circumstances, they made the difficult decision to send her to a Child Care Institute.

At first, Sowmya found herself lost in the unfamiliar surroundings of the Child Care Institute. The routine was new, the faces were unfamiliar, and the absence of her family weighed heavily on her. However, the warden's patience and constant encouragement made her feel cared for, at the same time, the friendships she formed with other children became her source of comfort and strength. Slowly, Sowmya began to adapt, finding comfort in the structured days and shared experiences with her peers.

At the Child Care Institute, Sowmya discovered a newfound passion for extracurricular activities such as debates, essay writing, and elocution. These opportunities became a turning point in her life, helping her overcome her timidity and fears, developing skills that reshaped her outlook on life. Her warden played a crucial role in this transformation, constantly nurturing a growth mindset in her and encouraging her to dream bigger and aim higher.

When Sowmya found herself in a supportive and encouraging environment, she realized the importance of education in building a better future. Through her hard work and dedication, she secured a merit seat at the Andhra Pradesh Social Welfare Residential Junior College (APSWRJC) after passing her 10th grade—an achievement that marked a significant milestone in her academic journey. Despite the challenges, Sowmya remained committed to her education and personal growth.

After completing her intermediate studies, she pursued a bachelor's degree in Life Sciences, followed by a postgraduate degree in Food Science and Nutrition from the prestigious Andhra University. Her time at the university not only deepened her knowledge in the field but also equipped her with the confidence and skills to navigate the challenges of the professional world.

As the saying goes, "If you develop a passion for learning, you will never cease to grow." This rang true for Sowmya. Alongside her academic pursuits, her eagerness to learn new skills kept her actively engaged in various extracurricular activities. She attended workshops, participated in seminars, and embraced leadership roles, all of which played a crucial role in shaping her into a well-rounded individual ready to make a meaningful impact. After completing her postgraduate degree, Sowmya was ready to step into the professional world. She began her career at Dr. Reddy's Laboratories, where she gained valuable experience in the pharmaceutical and healthcare sectors, laying a strong foundation for her future endeavors. Her journey continued at Cipla, a global leader in pharmaceuticals, where she further honed her expertise in nutrition and food science. These experiences not only enhanced her skills but also broadened her understanding of the critical role healthcare and wellness play in people's lives.

Sowmya's professional path later led her to Oasis Fertility, where she applied her knowledge of nutrition and wellness to support fertility treatments and provide patient care. This role gave her practical insights into how nutrition directly impacts health and well-being, particularly in specialized care. Each of these experiences added depth to her professional journey, equipping her with the skills and perspective to make meaningful contributions in the field of healthcare and wellness.

Lifelong learning and continuing education highlight the importance of consistently developing new skills to stay relevant in a rapidly evolving world. Sowmya embraced this mindset throughout her career, focusing on upskilling and reskilling to adapt to emerging opportunities and challenges. Her unwavering pursuit of excellence eventually led her to explore international academic opportunities, driven by her passion for Food Science and Nutrition. She decided to pursue a PhD abroad, immersing herself in a global academic environment that broadened her horizons and deepened her expertise.

Reflecting on her journey, Sowmya says, "Looking back, I see how every challenge, every setback, and every achievement has been a stepping stone in shaping who I am today. From navigating the struggles of being a care leaver to excelling academically at Andhra University, carving a path with esteemed organizations like Dr. Reddy's, Cipla, and Oasis Fertility, and finally pursuing a PhD abroad, my journey is a testament to the strength of perseverance, the value of resilience, and the transformative power of a lifelong commitment to learning and growth." Sowmya's journey is a shining example of determination, perseverance, and the transformative power of education. It inspires every student to become a lifelong learner, push boundaries to achieve new milestones, and embrace the belief that education holds the key to a brighter future, no matter the challenges. Her story demonstrates that with a strong desire to learn and a hunger for knowledge, obstacles can be overcome, and opportunities can flourish.



Through the Dark : Surja's Story

“While walking home from work today, I came across three children begging on a bustling street. Their eyes looked hollow, their clothes were torn, yet a flicker of hope lingered in their expressions. It struck me deeply, and I couldn't help but think, “If I hadn't been supported by a Child Care Institution, my life might have been just like theirs.” The contrast between where I once was and where I am now felt overwhelming..... Surja”

Surja's story begins in a small town called Gonda in Uttar Pradesh, where she lived with her family. Her father worked as a gardener, and her mother took care of the household while also looking after Surja and her three siblings. As a gardener, her father's income was not sufficient, and their life was filled with hardships. This often led to arguments between her parents. Life was moving along despite the struggles, but tragedy struck the family when, one day, Surja's mother suddenly passed away. At that time, Surja was just four years old. Surja was too young to fully understand what had happened, yet she deeply felt the pain and loss of her mother. At an age when a child needs the care and comfort of their own mother, Surja found herself burdened with the responsibility of looking after her younger siblings—especially her baby brother, who couldn't understand the absence of their mother. He would cry endlessly, longing for her embrace, unaware that she would never return.

Surja's father, overwhelmed by grief, withdrew into himself and became emotionally distant from his children. In this situation, Surja felt the weight of household responsibilities on her small shoulders, forced to take on roles far beyond her years. She couldn't attend school, but watching children her age go to school every day filled her with longing. She yearned to learn, make friends, and share stories like them. Listening to her neighbors' children excitedly talk about their day deepened her desire to experience the same joy of learning and growing. Noticing her eagerness to study, some kind neighbors helped Surja get admitted to a school. For Surja, going to school became a way to escape the hardships and struggles of her home life, even if just for a while. She immersed herself in her studies and began to dream of a brighter future. Surja was happy and felt her life was slowly getting back on track. However, life, in its unpredictable way, changed once again. When Surja turned 11, her father, like her mother, suddenly passed away, leaving Surja and her siblings orphaned. With no one to care for them, they were passed from one relative to another—each seeing them as a burden. Life became extremely difficult for Surja. One day, she made the painful decision to run away from home. Along with her younger brother, Rohan, she fled from Gonda to Delhi, chasing her dreams.

After spending days wandering, sleeping in parks, and surviving on scraps in Delhi, Surja and Rohan were rescued by the Child Welfare authorities. While this rescue brought relief, it was also heartbreak. The hardships they had endured were far too overwhelming for children their age, leaving deep emotional scars that would take time to heal. Yet, through it all, her younger brother Rohan remained by her side—they were not just siblings but best friends. Surja had promised to take care of her brother, and that promise gave her strength. Being placed in a childcare home was supposed to bring Surja comfort, but learning that she and Rohan would be sent to separate homes deeply saddened her. However, they were allowed to meet once a week, and those meetings became a lifeline for Surja. Seeing her brother, even for a brief time, felt like breathing in fresh air—it was the only way she could stay connected to her past.

Despite everything, the care home gave her the opportunity to continue her education. Returning to school felt like reclaiming a part of herself that she had lost. She immersed herself in her studies with determination. One of the tutors at the care home noticed Surja's dedication and saw her potential. She provided extra help after school, offering both academic support and emotional guidance. With her mentor's encouragement, Surja started excelling in subjects she once found difficult. For the first time in years, she dared to dream again. At eighteen, Surja left the care home for an aftercare facility designed to help young adults transition to independent living. It offered vocational training, life skills, and counseling, but adulthood brought new challenges she hadn't anticipated.

Surja had learned a lot, but life beyond the care system felt overwhelming. Despite the facility staff's efforts, doubts haunted her—was she ready to face the world alone? Despite her fears, Surja knew one thing for certain—education had given her hope, and she was determined to keep that hope alive

Surja discovered a support group for care leavers—young adults like her who had aged out of child care institutions. For the first time in a long time, she no longer felt alone. Sharing experiences and finding solidarity with others who had faced similar challenges gave her renewed strength and hope. This newfound support ignited a sense of purpose within her. Surja began advocating for care leavers, shedding light on the challenges they faced and highlighting the gaps in the system that left them unprepared for independent life. Her passion and exceptional communication skills did not go unnoticed. Soon, she was selected for a prestigious program that trained young adults to become change agents. Through this program, she gained the knowledge, tools, and confidence to fight for the rights of care leavers, determined to create a better, more supportive path for those who would follow in her footsteps.

Surja always dreamed of becoming a journalist, using her voice for the unheard. After years of perseverance, she graduated and secured a job as a legal analyst, finding acceptance in a supportive workplace. However, life tested her once more when her brother Rohan's health deteriorated. Torn between work and family, she ultimately chose to care for him, resigning despite the risk of losing her dreams. Just when hope seemed lost, a company recognizing the struggles of care leavers offered her a new opportunity. There, she not only found stability but also became a strong advocate for inclusive workplaces, sharing her story to drive change. She launched "*Wings of Care*", a newsletter offering care leavers a platform to share stories, access resources, and find mentors. As she entered her thirties, she dared to dream again, applying for a fully funded scholarship abroad—an opportunity she once thought impossible. To her amazement, she was selected. There, she connected with care leavers worldwide, empowering them as she had once needed. Meanwhile, the podcast and YouTube channel she started with Rohan grew into a global platform, using humor and practical advice to raise awareness and support care leavers everywhere.

Surja says, "One of the most rewarding parts of my life is watching my children spend weekends at the care home, playing and bonding with the kids there. It fills my heart with warmth. I want these children to feel the same love and acceptance my own kids have."

Each year, she organizes "*Rise Together*", a celebration of these connections. This year, it was bigger than ever—an outdoor concert, colorful stalls, and a carnival atmosphere symbolizing the love and family they had built.

Recalling the event, Surja says, "As I stood on stage, the setting sun cast a warm glow over the crowd. Children laughed, music filled the air, and with Rohan beside me adjusting the mic, I felt a deep sense of fulfillment. This journey had started from nowhere, yet here I was—surrounded by hope, love, and purpose."



Light Through the Dark Vault: Ulfat Bashir's Story

"Ulfat hopes her story will inspire others, serving as a beacon of hope to those who may feel lost. She believes that no matter how dark the night seems, the dawn will always arrive. Dreams possess the power to transform darkness into light, and no one should ever stop believing in them. She aspires to one day be the person who helps others find their way, just as she once did, offering them the light of hope and encouragement."

Jammu and Kashmir, often described as heaven on earth, is a land of mesmerizing beauty—where snow-capped peaks stand tall, rivers weave through lush valleys, and meadows bloom with wildflowers. However, beneath this breathtaking landscape lies a history of turmoil, a land where peace is fragile, and life is often shaped by uncertainty. It was in this paradox of beauty and hardship that Ulfat Bashir was born. Her journey did not begin in a cradle of comfort but in a world where ease was never promised. She was born in a beautiful place where nature's breathtaking beauty is matched only by the struggles that its people face. Her village, Dolipora Villagam, in the district of Kupwara, was once her home. The fragile cocoon of Ulfat's infancy was torn apart when she lost her father at just six months old. With his passing, the first chapter of her life closed in an aching, irrevocable silence.

Ulfat's mother was left to raise her alone in a world often unkind to single mothers. With no financial support and no family to rely on, the road ahead was steep and uncertain, so her mother made the hardest decision of her life, she sent Ulfat to an orphanage, knowing that for her daughter to have any chance at a future, such a sacrifice had to be made.

At the age of six, Ulfat was sent to Gulistan-e-Banat, an orphanage in Handwara that soon became her new home. It was there that she first learned what it truly meant to survive. Though the walls of the orphanage were humble, they offered her something she had never known before—hope. This place was more than just a roof over her head; it was a sanctuary where she learned to stand tall, to dream, and to believe in herself. The orphanage was not merely a shelter; it became her school, her family, and the core of her existence.

Gradually, as she adjusted and immersed herself in her studies, she completed her 10th grade, and with each passing day, she felt the seeds of possibility being planted deep within her. "Despite the harsh realities of my childhood, I found unwavering support in the staff at Gulistan-e-Banat. They believed in me even when I couldn't believe in myself—their faith in my potential was like a lighthouse guiding me through the storm. I was a girl from a broken home, from a place where the future was often uncertain, yet they saw in me something worth nurturing. It was their belief that gave me the courage to aim higher," shares Ulfat.

After completing her 10th grade, Ulfat was transferred to another branch of the orphanage, Gulshan-e-Banat in Budgam. There, she continued her education, choosing Physics, Chemistry, and Biology—as her core subjects. Although she faced countless challenges along the way, she never lost sight of her dreams. With the support of her orphanage family, she successfully completed her 11th and 12th grades, with each step forward marking a victory and every challenge serving as a valuable lesson.

When Ulfat completed her higher secondary education, a moment of uncertainty arose regarding her future, particularly about continuing her education and managing the financial burden of her educational and living expenses. Once again, the orphanage presented Ulfat with an opportunity through its Child Care Institution (CCI) program—the very chance she had long awaited. This program enabled her to pursue higher education, and she was accepted into Government Medical College Srinagar. There, she began her Diploma in Medical Laboratory Technology (DMLT), a field that had always intrigued her and one in which she believed she could make a meaningful impact. Simultaneously, her thirst for knowledge led her to enroll in a BA program in Sociology and English through IGNOU.

Today, Ulfat stands at a crossroads. She dreams of graduating with a degree in Medical Laboratory Technology (MLT) and one day pursuing a postgraduate degree in Anthropology. Yet, the path ahead is not as clear as it once was. The orphanage that had been her unwavering support through the years can no longer provide the financial assistance she so desperately needs. Despite these challenges threatening to unravel all her hard work, Ulfat remains filled with hope. She is determined to build a career in the medical field, not only to secure her own future but also to extend support and care to those in need.

The road has not been easy for her. Every step forward came with struggles—financial hardships, moments of doubt, and the weight of being an orphan with no family to turn to. Yet, even in her darkest moments, she never gave up. The memory of how far she had come, propelled by the belief of strangers, filled her with strength. Her orphanage, her second family, provided the foundation upon which she built her future. Looking back, she sees that every challenge and setback has led her to this point—a moment when she can now dream for others.

"I am not alone anymore, and I am determined to give back to society, just as I was given a chance to live my dreams. To every girl who feels lost, to every soul who feels hopeless—your circumstances do not define you. Your dreams, your perseverance, and the kindness of those around you are what truly matter," Ulfat says with conviction.

She further adds "I am deeply grateful to the orphanage that gave me a future when there was none. The love and care I received there have allowed me to stand today, filled with hope for a brighter tomorrow. My journey reflects the power of education, human resilience, and the selflessness of those who help. I thank everyone who believed in me, and to my mother, who made the ultimate sacrifice, I carry your love and dreams within me. Despite all the struggles, I am not just surviving—I am living with gratitude, purpose, and the belief that my dreams will take me to places I never imagined."