

# Coffee, Black and a Sandwich

*Morudyan* is a shelter for Urban, Homeless Men who have a Psychosocial Disability. Iswar Sankalpa runs it in partnership with the Kolkata Municipal Corporation since April 2015. A person from a high socio-economic background comes in as a resident of this shelter. He raises new demands, challenges the processes and the ground rules. How would *Morudyan* and its team respond to the situation? Would the glaring class divide between this newcomer, residents of *Morudyan* and even its caregivers become a barrier to the recovery of the newcomer? Would he be told to fall in line with the general rules of the place? This write up explores the challenges faced by service providers in providing client centered care in situations where clients make demands that they find difficult to meet.

Daal, rice, vegetables were on menu today, but Prajnesh wanted black coffee and a sandwich to go with it. He went up to Sushma di with his demand.

*It doesn't look like I could get some Black coffee and a sandwich, does it? Actually, I cannot have this food.* Prajnesh told Sushma, the Coordinator of *Morudyan*.

*"It is not possible to arrange for it immediately, you see we are an organisation and there is a system in place. I will put in the request, once it is sanctioned we will serve everybody the same. Please do with the regular food till then"*, Sushma replied.

Sushma knew she could arrange for the sandwich and coffee only the next week. She did not refuse Prajnesh's demand outright, just bought some time. Next week! Prajnesh wanted it now. Why the delay? Was it a tactic to politely refuse him? Perhaps, they did not take any demands from residents. After all, no one else was making any such demand. Ok, Narayan wanted a belt for his trouser, and Shambu wanted the full sleeve shirt, and..., maybe a few more. If they are fulfilled, then why not this request, thought Prajnesh.

Sushma, meanwhile, was calculating the amount of money she would have to request from the office to order for the sandwich and coffee. Her budget for *Morudyan* was fixed and she did not currently have any money to spare from the budget. 50 INR per sandwich, which would be 1500 INRs for the sandwiches alone. She had calculated for all 30 residents of *Morudyan*. Then, the coffee. Would everyone like sandwich and coffee? She thought about residents of *Morudyan*. No one would like black coffee that she was sure of! Most people liked coffee but the usual with milk variety, in fact, when was the last time, black coffee was ever made here? Coffee for all, and sandwich, 1700 Rs would suffice, she decided. She would have to place her request for extra allocation this week itself. Only then the money will be available to her next week. All spending will be in cash, so she needs the money by Tuesday at the latest.

*"Can't you get the coffee now?"* Prajnesh interrupted her thoughts!

*"Maybe sandwich can wait, but the coffee, i want it now"*.

*"No, no, wait till next week"*, Sushma replied.

*"Next week! How do i know i still want it next week"*, Prajnesh retorted, he was visibly upset!

*"Don't worry, you will like it when you get it"*.

*"But i want it now"*.

*"Prajnesh, i know you want it now, i understand it, but neither do i have the money nor can i order for you alone. There are 29 more people here, i will have to ask each of them what they want. The*

*petty cash i had is already spent in buying the tube light for the bathroom that broke down yesterday. The doctor's visit is due tomorrow, files have to be arranged, i also have to speak to a few clients and prepare them. I can't order it right now.*

Sushma was upset but she did not allow her emotions get better of herself she had kept her speech firm and even tone.

*"Please wait till next week".*

*"Here, why don't you help me arrange these files by appointment slots?"*

Sitting on the floor of Morudyan, Prajnesh longed to go back home, be with his family like he used to, and simply pick up the phone and order the sandwich while his mom makes the coffee for him. It was that easy! It is not that easy here. It is not easy for anyone, neither Prajnesh to postpone his desire, nor for the team at Morudyan to ask him to do so. But, they know that postponing his demands was a prescribed part of his therapy. Also, as a practice, Sushma will have to ask everyone at Morudyan what they would want when she made the order for special food from outside. How she wished she could have helped Prajnesh out? How Prajnesh wished he could have had his black coffee and sandwich?

At any point in time, *Morudyan* has around 25 or more clients<sup>1</sup>. Almost all its residents come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and belong to rural areas. Suffering from mental illness, each of them had been on the street from days to months at a stretch. Once they come into Morudyan, their rehabilitation starts by ensuring they receive the essential necessities of life in a safe and secure environment. Each person has his own likes and dislikes. Shambu, from Uttar Pradesh, prefers chapatti over rice, but not so for Rehman, he wants his rice with curry. There are varied taste palettes. Experience with different

people, has set up the processes of Morudyan. To serve different taste palettes and to involve residents more, cooking was started at Morudyan itself. Initially, the food was cooked at Sarbari and sent to Morudyan. Cooking by clients has provided better choice of food to the residents. They now decide a menu, calculate their ration requirements, order it to the central ration purchase system of Sankalpa, and then cook their food. There is more choice this way, and also control over taste. Control but with some caution. Bhagwat dada for example, has to be avoided as a cook. When given the chance to cook, he generously adds heaps of red chili powder. He loves its taste and colour. It reminds him of his home town near Guntur. Non vegetarian dishes were cooked every week, and sometimes food came from outside, donated by well-wishers of Morudyan. More or less the menu at Morudyan is regular food that you would find is cooked in most houses, or so it was thought. No one asked for sandwich before, and black coffee not at all!

Prajnesh's house, barely a kilometer away from the Shelter, was locked. There was no one in his house. There was no one to support him as he recovered from an acute mental breakdown. This was during the time his mother passed away, in early 2018. A software engineer, who had worked with leading technology firms in India, Prajnesh had lived a life of an urban elite. He had had his psychological problems for which he took treatment from NIMHANS<sup>2</sup>, Bengaluru. Like hundreds of other persons with mental illnesses he had discontinued his treatment once he felt better. Soon his illness, tamed by the treatment, resurfaced. He lost his job and started leading the life of a recluse. He lived with his mother in Kolkata. His father had passed away a few years ago and his elder sister, the only other sibling, was herself waging a battle against her psychological problems. She was admitted at a

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<sup>1</sup> **homeless person with psychosocial disability have been referred as clients of Morudyan**

<sup>2</sup> **National Institute of Mental Health and Neurological Sciences is a premier institute**

**in India. It provides outpatient, inpatient care for mental health problems and people from all over the country, and even outside it seek its clinical services. Besides clinical care, it is engaged in several other activities as well.**

government hospital for persons with psychosocial disability in Kolkata.

In 2018, Prajnesh's mother had a fall in their house. Prajnesh did not respond to her fall. No one knows how long the old lady lay unattended in her own house, in pain and distress. Eventually, she was rescued by her neighbors who took her to a hospital where she breathed her last. While his mother was being taken for her final journey, Prajnesh disappeared from the crematorium grounds. He went missing for nearly six months. The local Police locked up the house and took possession of the keys.

One rainy evening of August, 2018, Prajnesh was found, by a neighbor, outside his house, drenched, alone, disheveled. His neighbors and others in the community where he lived, approached the local councilor to help Prajnesh. They did not want him locked away. The councilor referred Prajnesh to Morudyan. Morudyan was known to the locals. Not only because it was a unique shelter, and many had seen it inaugurated by the local leader but because many of them had come across its residents as they too came to the local park for their morning walk. Some of them had attended awareness campaigns organized by Morudyan on Homelessness and Mental Health. There was no need to hunt around, everyone knew that Morudyan was the location best suited for Prajnesh in his current condition.

*"You go to the shelter, take treatment, recover and come back." they said to him while Prajnesh sat outside his house.*

*"But my mother is not home yet, I need to tell her. I will not go." Prajnesh reasoned in spite of his disheveled state.*

*The Councilor took charge, he said, "Don't worry. I will make sure she knows. I have spoken with the people at the shelter, they will take good care of you. You need to eat and change right away, come let's go."*

*Prajnesh entered Morudyan.*

*"Can I have a spoon, please?" he asked most politely while he was having his first meal at Morudyan.*

The caregivers were a little taken aback, their clients generally don't ask for cutlery.

*"Even dogs have better food! I will not eat this." he shouted one afternoon.*

The daily rice and dal did not please Prajnesh. Even though he had gone hungry on the streets, was famished, food to him meant pasta, pizza, continental cuisines on a regular basis, he was perhaps used to that. Here at Morudyan, the food could not be more different. He found it difficult to adjust to the place, the people, and the facilities.

*"This is the food everyone eats here Prajnesh Da. If you want to eat something else, tell us. We will try and get it for everyone some other day."* Sushma, the coordinator at Morudyan said calmly.

She had understood by now that Prajnesh was an understanding person. This was a strength to be worked on. His demands should not be denied. His outburst had to be taken in the context of his life and his likes and dislikes.

One day Prajnesh stormed towards the door of the Shelter shouting, *"How can I be living with these beggars? I want to go home now!"*

The counsellor at Morudyan, Maithili was present at that moment, she knew that this could not be allowed, for although the other residents at Morudyan were used to new persons coming and speaking nothing of consequence, he had to be explained.

*“Prajnesh Da<sup>3</sup>, No one is rich or poor here. Everyone has come here to recover, start life afresh, like you!”*

Prajnesh looked at her from the corner of his eye. He resonated with this thought, of course he was here to recover, the Councilor had assured him so, and it only made sense that everyone else was here to do the same.

*“No one wants to live here. Neither do we want anyone to live here, the sooner you recover and go, the better it is because then we can help others who are suffering out on the streets. All I request you is to treat everyone with respect here. You can choose to do whatever you want, no one will disturb you.”*

Prajnesh, says Maithili, understood this point. This thought was shared with him a few more times and eventually he made peace with the situation.

Whenever he would complain, his attention would be diverted.

*“Okay we will look into that, why don’t you sing one of the ragas you sing, it has been a while since we heard them,”* and Prajnesh would lose himself in a melody.

The problem would be dealt with for the moment. This strategy of diverting his attention was used most of the time. Or he was reasoned with, but reasoning only helped after a few months when he recovered to a certain level of functioning.

As promised, all residents at Morudyan had sandwiches that day. It was almost a mini celebration. This satisfied Prajnesh, his faith in the people of Morudyan increased but his expensive needs did not subside. One day Kamal, a caregiver at Morudyan accompanied Prajnesh to the shop to buy eye glasses as Prajnesh now needed to be engaged in some

activity. He was recovering from his severe symptoms.

*“Bi-focal, anti-radiation, wide-angled chashma dekhaben please (show me glasses with these features),”* he said at the counter.

Kamal had a budget of ₹1000 for Prajnesh’s glasses, his demands would cost more than ₹3500. Kamal quickly diverted Prajnesh’s attention to another counter and turned to the shopkeeper.

*“We are from a not for profit organisation and work with homeless persons with mental illnesses. He is one of our clients. He cannot understand our budget limitations. Please show him something within our range and do not encourage his expensive demands.”* Kamal explained.

*“Prajnesh da, I only have ₹1000. In a few months maybe we will get some more money for your glasses, maybe you will start earning by then too. We will buy better glasses then. For now let us get something within our range.”* Prajnesh left the shop with reasonable glasses and Kamal heaved a sigh of relief.

The staff at Morudyan had to constantly evolve their plan for Prajnesh.

*“We had to give him a sense that we are going an extra mile for him. That would make him feel special. It would really backfire if we treated him as the other members of the shelter, blatantly. We did treat him the same, but we also pushed a lot of boundaries for him. He has his own toothpaste, he takes bath alone, no one can walk on the surface near his bed, he decides if he wants to participate in group activities or not. The rules are flexible for him. But only because it would be inhuman to expect him to lower his “standards”. None of us can really do it, especially if we are still grappling with the reality of our situation.”* says Sushma, coordinator of Morudyan.

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<sup>3</sup> **“Da”, in colloquial Bangla, is a reference to a male, who is elder to oneself**

*"I made a notebook! I never thought I could do this. It looks so beautiful. It was fun too. I think mine is not as good as Narayan's but if I practice some more, it will."*

Prajnesh was excited the day he had made his first notebook as part of Morudyan's vocational activity.

Prajnesh was not the only one to have problems with other residents at Morudyan. They too, had their problems with him. He spoke in English all the time. No one could understand what he said, but due to the tone of his voice they often felt threatened. This would ensue into fights. The caregivers would have to physically separate Prajnesh from the other residents. They even devised a strategy to use a folding screen to separate them. This worked well for Prajnesh as he felt a sense of privacy on the other side. His need to remain separated also did not go well with the residents. Prajnesh would get angry if anyone came to his side. In a shared space like Morudyan it is not possible for all residents to respect this.

*"He has just come, you all understand right. Give him some time, he will not be like this for long."* Caregivers would tell the other residents. Some of them respected this but not everyone.

Udit Da was the senior most resident of Morudyan, he takes it as his duty to welcome visitors and donors to the shelter and entertain them. He has been doing so for years. He is also the "leader" among the rest, if someone is not doing their duty he chastises them, if someone takes too long to take a bath he ensures that he has given a mindful to them. Prajnesh did not respect this.

For the past few months, Prajnesh has taken charge of speaking with visitors and this works well for the shelter staff too because English has been never been their strong point. Prajnesh seems to be a trained singer and he entertains the visitors too. This has brought about a divide among the residents, some of them ignore this as

they are not bothered but Udit Da and a few other clients who had lived there for a while were hurt by the change of order at Morudyan.

Since his first coming into Morudyan, in August 2018, Prajnesh had recovered by leaps and bounds. He started assisting the shelter and reintegration team of Iswar Sankalpa by creating PowerPoint presentations, and updating databases. He was a little hesitant when he first sat on the computer system, and felt the keys, but in a matter of few days, he started looking forward to more work.

Prajnesh was helping Sankalpa handle a sudden surge of documentation work in one of its programs. After a few days of work, he asked for remuneration. There were no resources to pay anyone. Prajnesh, too, understood. While the matter was left there, it was a clear signal that Prajnesh was ready to work outside of Morudyan for remuneration.

The reintegration team of Sankalpa approached his ex-employers, and others who could employ him. Usually, the reintegration team searched local food stalls, small shops for work opportunities. But for Prajnesh, they had to look for different work as per his qualifications, skills and capabilities. They knew they had to advocate with potential employers more than usual.

Meanwhile, he participated in the Annual Program of Iswar Sankalpa, along with other residents of *Morudyan*. He participated in group physical activities, helped set up the place for meals, served food during meal time, helped others who required assistance with their daily activities. It appeared that he had developed a sense of belonging for the place and its residents.

*"When I get out of here and start earning, I will do something for this place. This place has given me so much, I will help you with whatever I can, but I will."* Prajnesh said to Maithili, his counselor. She was touched.

It had taken the team immense patience and strategic communication to find a middle path for

his recovery, and the result was empathy and compassion in a man who is suffering himself. He has a plan for his future and that is a positive sign.

But even if Prajnesh got a job, where would he eventually stay? It wouldn't help him, specially his mental health, to stay by himself. Prajnesh wanted to go back home. He still believed his parents would come back when he goes home. The care providers of Morudyan visited his home and took Prajnesh along. They wanted him to see the reality for himself. His parents were not there to take care of him. But it wasn't of much help. Prajnesh believed that his parents were coincidentally away at that time. If he started living there, they would come back.

Prajnesh did not have any other immediate family member to support him or take his responsibility. His relatives were not keen on taking any responsibility of him. His family, for years, had maintained a distance from them, and now no one felt any attachment for him. They did not feel the need to support Prajnesh despite multiple negotiations with them by Morudyan team.

Members of the community however visited the shelter and asked about Prajnesh. They wanted him to come back and stay in his house. Although concerned, they were not in a position to take responsibility of his wellbeing if he were to stay alone. The team at *Morudyan* wanted to rehabilitate Prajnesh somewhere in this community that he knew, where others knew him, and not send him away to an alien location.

At a chance meeting between a volunteer of Sankalpa and his neighbor at Morudyan, it so turned out that the latter was a school friend of Prajnesh's. The volunteer asked him to visit Prajnesh at Morudyan. He duly came and went out with Prajnesh for a while reminiscing their old time. Perhaps this meeting or others like this could establish a care network for Prajnesh, in the days to come. Creating a support and care

network is not alien to Sankalpa. In fact, it is one of its core strengths. Majority of clients in the Naya Daur<sup>4</sup> program have a care network of people from the local community like a tea vendor, shopkeepers, etc. They support homeless persons who continue to live on the streets recover from their psychosocial problems. These care givers remind the persons of their medicines, in many cases giving the medicines themselves, giving them jobs, keeping an eye out for their safety, informing Sankalpa staff about the clients, etc.

There was no reason why a similar network could not be created for Prajnesh, even though he belonged to a different socioeconomic class. Is class a deterrent in creating such a network? Only time will tell. For now, Morudyan, a transit shelter was always available to Prajnesh. If Prajnesh were to live somewhere in this community, Morudyan would be in his neighborhood. He could access mental healthcare services there, stay for some time, eat meals, hang out with residents, and someone from Morudyan would keep an eye out for Prajnesh and follow him up. Prajnesh would never be alone!

#### **Conclusion:**

It is scary for people with psychosocial problems to come into a new space. Each space has its own character determined both by the idea that led to it as well as the people who occupy it. Morudyan was a shelter for homeless. It provided basic facilities. As homeless people recover, they are able to recollect their past, and with it their old likes and dislikes. The initial period of stay is the most difficult for any new person. They look for anchors to adjust to a place. Sometimes, these anchors are familiar food, or a friendly co-resident, or availability of shelter when it rains outside, or anything that a person likes and clings to. This initial period raises demands on usual practices of a shelter. Caregivers, care for variety of residents, each in his own stage of recovery,

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<sup>4</sup> **Naya Daur is a program run by Iswar Sankalpa in Kolkata. In this program, care and support is provided to homeless person**

**with mental health problems on the street itself. It is a unique program. To read more about it, log onto [www.isankalpa.org](http://www.isankalpa.org)**

illness and life. There is no standard care package. If they meet with each and every demand of a new resident, they are easily blamed by others of favoritism for which the resident might be targeted. If they don't, support the new resident, then he might remain anxious and throw tantrums, try to run away or withdraw completely into himself. Caregivers constantly weigh the idea of fairness, equal treatment to all versus individual attention and care. Communication becomes critical in this endeavor. Tending to several people in a shelter where all actions happen in full view of all residents pose great challenge to caregivers.

The story of Prajnesh in Morudyan provided a first experience to the caregivers and other residents to see a square peg in a round hole. The shelter had to adapt, without forgetting its basic purpose - provide a new resident a safe recovery space, where his needs would be respected, he would feel safe and could recover. It had taken the team immense patience and strategic communication to find a middle path for his recovery. We wait for more such challenges in the life of Morudyan.

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By Nayanika Das

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