

Arjun's Journey

An indomitable spirit + willingness to work hard + a few helping hands = Success. It has not been an easy journey for Arjun – every step was difficult and the end of the road was uncertain. Arjun's story will tug at your heart and show you that we can make a difference.

It all began one Sunday morning at one of Vinimay's birthday programs. Noticing an odour, all heads turned around to look at a small boy. He was about eight years old and huddled up in a corner. The boy was dressed in a shabby shirt and did not wear the usual shorts; instead, in its place was a stained towel.

Moved by this sight, Vinimay was quick to inquire about his case with the authorities of the child welfare institution where he lived. Arjun had been abandoned by his parents near a government-run hospital, when he was hardly two years old, perhaps due to a deformity he had been born with. Hearing his cries, passers-by admitted him to a state-run home for infants. Once there, he was promptly referred to a government hospital, where he underwent nine surgical operations within a period of two and half years. The child care institution where Arjun was subsequently transferred (and where Vinimay's volunteers worked) had received only a brief description of the operations he had undergone.

To describe Arjun's state then as pitiable would be an understatement. He had absolutely no control over his bladder and was dripping urine all the time. Being only seven or eight years old, he could not manage to keep himself clean all the time. Since he had spent most of the time moving in and out of hospitals, he had not attended school. The embarrassment of being different from others affected him profoundly. He hardly spoke to anyone and preferred to keep to himself. This was the situation when Vinimay came across Arjun for the first time.

There was no doubt that he needed immediate attention. With the consent and support of the authorities at his institution, Vinimay had Arjun admitted to a government hospital for fresh investigations. Since his medical condition was complicated, these investigations took almost a month. The diagnosis was grim: One of Arjun's kidneys was damaged beyond repair; his bladder was open and non-functional since birth. Therefore, he had no control over his urination.

Reconstruction of the bladder was possible and was an option that was considered. But owing to muscular atrophy (due to long disuse), the chances of regaining bladder control were very slim. Also there was a great risk of his other, normally functioning, kidney being damaged due to such an operation. The only real option left then, according to medical experts, was fitting a pouch externally into which the urine could collect. Even this option involved a major surgery.

Considering the seriousness of the case and the risks involved, Vinimay decided to have Arjun treated at Bombay Hospital, one of Mumbai's reputed private hospitals, even though treatment at such a hospital would be very expensive. Vinimay had a series of meetings with the senior pediatric urologist and other authorities of the hospital and could successfully plead for a

significant concessions in the fees. The highly reputed surgeon had many cases on hand and there was a delay of a few months for the date of the operation. Unfortunately for Arjun, communal riots broke out in Mumbai and his operation had to be further postponed.

Thus, almost six months after the preliminary investigations, Arjun was admitted to Bombay hospital for surgery. The staff of his institution and Vinimay's members visited him frequently at the hospital to ensure that he did not feel scared or lonely. The hospital staff too became very fond of the ever-cooperative boy. And finally, on the 8th of April 1993, Arjun underwent the surgery which was to give him a new life. The operation lasted five hours and fortunately there were no post-operational complications. After about two weeks of hospitalisation, Arjun was back at his institution.

Though it took time for Arjun to come to terms with his physical changes, slowly but surely he started mingling with other boys of his age. The pouch gave him a new freedom and the opportunity to move around without any hindrance. He started enjoying himself by playing games that hitherto had seemed out of bounds for him. The other boys also found it easier to accept him in their activities, and, gradually Arjun started feeling that he was no different from his friends; this entire transformation took almost a year.

In the meantime, Vinimay investigated the possibility of further medical treatment abroad for Arjun, including through the route of adoption. It turned out that the best possible treatment had already been rendered and there was nothing more that could be done for him abroad.

Today, the shy, timid and introvert Arjun whom we met about a decade ago is a blurred memory of a distant past. He is a bold and confident young man now.

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A few months ago, when he completed eighteen years of age, he was to leave his institution as per the rules of the government. Vinimay decided to take over the responsibility of his further rehabilitation by granting him admission to Tarun Sadan, a hostel Vinimay runs for homeless youth.

Since Arjun is almost illiterate, and has not had much of interaction with outsiders, we had apprehensions about finding him an appropriate job and about his ability to cope up with the job. True to our fears, Arjun had difficulty in dealing with the first employment we managed to procure for him. But then miracles never cease! Some well-wishers of Vinimay, who had an idea about Arjun's background, decided to give him a break in their office. For Arjun, as well as for us, who had come to the conclusion that he could only get odd jobs here and there, it was like a dream come true. The sensitive handling of Arjun by his employers did wonders and unleashed the enthusiasm and boundless energy that had so far remained hidden in him.

He was liked by the other colleagues and also started cooking for them (young IT professionals) earning some extra income. When they changed their location, Arjun lost that job and tried his hands at a couple of other jobs; as watchman in a housing society, a roadside dosa stall, etc. He was able to move about on his own, search for jobs and discuss job related issues confidently with new employers. Today Arjun is a cheerful and hard-working young lad earning a decent sum of money. He has moved out of Tarun Sadan and stays with his friends at Koparkhairane, Recently he disclosed that he spends only half of his earnings and saves the balance. He is very thankful to Vinimay, his friends, roommates and all others who have helped him to start a life of his own and get integrated with society. Of course, Arjun always has the fall back option of approaching Vinimay for any of his future needs.

Arjun's story has been long but we are happy to note that he is living independently like so many other boys whom Vinimay has helped to integrate with society and start life on their own.

(Story Chronicled by Shri Atul Shah with inputs from Shri L. Venkatraman & Shri C. Subramanaian)
