

## ► Light In The Abyss

A tall, lean man stands in front of a dimly-lit room. Behind him is a white board scribbled with words like “conflict” and “leadership.” It’s another youth training program held by an INGO operating in Janakpur, among other places. The man conducting the session is wearing a plain white shirt. Scars are apparent on his forearms, each carrying a story of its own.

The story of Alok Thakur, 31, although poignant, is also one of inspiration. This is a man who spent over six years of his life spiraling downwards, caught in the tangles of substance abuse. And upon receiving one phone call, he decided to call it quits and fight back.

Born in Mazasspur, a border town in India, Alok grew up in his maternal home because his father was a bank employee in Nepal and constantly on the move. “Between the ages of four and I spent only one and a half years in Nepal,” he says.

“As a kid, I was sojho (naive). I didn’t even take supari (areca nut).” It was only when he returned to his hometown of Janakpur in Nepal that things began going awry. As a 17-year-old with a truckloads of aspirations, the realization that home wasn’t all that he expected marked the beginning of his struggle with life and himself.



“When life doesn’t move in the direction that you expect and had hoped for, you find yourself leaning towards a different outlook,” he explains solemnly. He had hopes to pursue further education, but the economic situation at home dictated otherwise. And with his wishes unfulfilled, and adolescent curiosities brewing, he started indulging in the immediate gratification granted by marijuana.

His daily routine soon became synonymous with satisfaction brought about by the drug. There was something wrong, he knew. His family was only beginning to form an inkling of doubt. Assuming that his mental state was caused by his family’s inability to educate him, his father dug into his social security savings and found an inexpensive college in Bangalore to send Alok to. Little did they know that his state was no longer grounded in reactionary habit but had become a defining element in their son’s life.

“After reaching India, I was given freedom that I couldn’t handle,” he says, voice filled with lament. “I was always high, and failing in everything.” He explains the cyclical mentality in which his thinking was wedged: failing classes because of his addiction, his failures inviting depression, this in turn increasing his dependency on drugs.

This cycle was his life for many days to come. School was not going well, and his addiction unending.

“There came a time when I started using my school fees to feed my addiction.” All the while, back home, he was informing his family that he was passing with flying colors, that all was going splendidly.

“Soon after, I left school and moved in with some friends. That was when I began exploring my substance options. I tried every drug under the sun – crack, cocaine, and heroin.”

For a tall man of 5’ 10’, his habit had taken a heavy toll on his physique, leaving his figure slightly crooked. He was lost, with nowhere to turn.

“If I went home, what would I say? How could I explain my appearance? How could I justify the fact that I never called or kept in touch?” Alok had unknowingly lost the very will to live, and found himself constantly mapping his exit from this world.

Fate would, however, have it otherwise. One morning, he made a decision; that day was going to be his last. He made all the necessary arrangements.

"As I was preparing to say my final goodbyes to everything, I heard the voice of my next-door shopkeeper, and it turned out to be a lifesaving phone call." His mother's voice pleaded that he come home, if only for once. He could tell she was in tears, and it was her sobs that brought revelation to him.

"Regardless of my condition, I knew I had to go home. My life was over; my studies had gone down the drain. I couldn't even recognize myself. All I wanted was to be at home."

Crossing the border into Nepal, Alok made a decision. He tossed all the drugs he had, leaving his past behind. The next months at home were the most difficult.

"Sometimes, when I didn't have any substance to fall back on, I felt as though I had completely lost my mind. I must've been going crazy."

As his compulsion towards drugs slowly recessed, he tackled any urge with a blade to his skin.

"When people see my scars, they feel pity for me. But for me, cutting myself was the only way I could deal with my mental state." Alok has counted his scars, and each carries with them a victory over his addiction. With more than 150 scars all over his body, he doesn't feel any shame when questioned about them.

Why?

He says without a glitch. "If someone like me can make such progress, then why not others? I want others to realize that they too can radically alter their lives."

Alok soon learned that change didn't come without resistance. His neighbors and relatives made it common practice to humiliate him in his very presence.

"People talked about me everywhere, and it hurt me. All this made me more determined."

He then obtained a BA in IT. However, living in Janakpur became apparent to him that the youth around him were still trapped in the same cycle that he had just made his way out of. As all these thoughts fermented in his mind, Alok took up photography. He even made it as a finalist in an international photography competition.

Through this kind of work at the local level, Alok was often sought out by those who were associated with various efforts in civil society. He met many personalities who provided him with just the drive he needed. "Some of the people I came across, like Prashant Jha helped me realize how important it was for me to go back to my roots and work in a community deeply fragmented by conflict and which had far too many troubles," he says gravely. By utter chance, Alok ran into Search for Common Ground, and after an hour's discussion with its members, he knew this was something he had to be a part of.

While running youth leadership training programs, Alok now enthusiastically counsels the youngsters with whom he works, taking experiences from his own life and guiding them away from the wrong choices that he made for himself.

"Alok is always one of our first sources of information, and he's always reliable. He's a genuine person," says a good friend of his. This is the journey that Alok has made. His parents and friends now take pride in his accomplishments, and for himself, this is his "source of happiness."

Now a happily married man with a two-year-old son, Alok is hoping to further his education in Peace and Conflict Development Studies. With a broad smile on his face and a heavy sigh, he says, "If as individuals we can transform ourselves, then collectively we can also change our society."

#### UNREPORTED LIVES

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