

MUMBAI, INDIA

Amin Sheikh serves up sips and skills

Many of the employees at Mr. Sheikh’s café were once homeless. Now, they have steady work and the space to chase their dreams.

By Anne Pinto-Rodrigues / Contributor

The 10 people seated together one recent morning in the Bombay to Barcelona Library Café have the hearty laughs and easy banter of a close-knit family. Though they are not related, a sign over the cozy eatery’s entrance – “Run by street girls and boys” – explains what unites them.

Amin Sheikh, who founded the café 10 years ago in Andheri, a bustling suburb of Mumbai, calls these young people his children. Many at the table, including Mr. Sheikh, lived on the streets at some point in their lives. Today, they are part of the café’s operations team.

Having run away from an abusive home at age 5, Mr. Sheikh started the café to empower young people who experienced a difficult start to life, just as he did.

“I want to create a better world because I never had it,” he says.

“Nobody judged anybody”

By 10 a.m., patrons start trickling into the brightly lit café, which includes a well-stocked library. One of the earliest visitors is filmmaker Sharmista Nag, who says she frequents the eatery often. “What is unique about the café is the menu they have for the underprivileged,” she says.

Since its opening in August 2016, the café has offered hot beverages and certain food items, including sandwiches, at discounted prices to anyone who cannot afford the full cost. And unlike most other coffee shops in urban India, the café always has its doors open to homeless kids from the neighborhood, who receive free food and drinks.

According to the United Nations Population Fund, an estimated 18 million children live on India’s streets, accounting for nearly one-fifth of the global population of street children. Most resort to begging, performing on the streets, doing manual labor for low pay, scavenging for scraps, or selling drugs.

Back at the café, the tables fill up with laptop-toting professionals, groups of friends, couples on dates, and a few international tourists familiar with Mr. Sheikh’s life story. In his 2012 self-published book, “Bombay Mumbai: Life Is Life, I Am Because of You,” the eatery founder described enduring horrific abuse on the streets, being rescued at age 8 by a Catholic nun, and growing up in a Jesuit orphanage.

In his early 20s, Mr. Sheikh was a chauffeur for a generous employer, who sponsored him to take a trip to Barcelona in 2003. In that Spanish city’s coffee shops and restaurants, the young chauffeur was welcomed and given a seat at the same table as everyone else – unlike in India, where drivers are often asked to wait outside. For the first time, Mr. Sheikh felt seen and respected in public.

“Nobody judged anybody,” he says.

Inspired by his experiences in Spain, he dreamed of opening a café in Mumbai, where everyone – irrespective of their financial and social standing – would be treated equally. He used the proceeds from his book sales to fund the café.

“Opening the café was one of the best days of my life,” Mr. Sheikh says.

Encouragement and pride

Currently, about 15 young people work in the café as cooks, baristas, and servers. Most are orphans and have lived on the street. Some are single mothers, Mr. Sheikh says, while others escaped prostitution.

“I’m so proud of them,” Mr. Sheikh says of the team. “They give me the strength to continue doing what I do.”

While Mr. Sheikh says he doesn’t take a salary from the café – his wife, music teacher Sara Mampel Vallvé, supports their family, which includes two young children – the rest of the team is paid equally, symbolic of their equal contribution to the café’s success. The eatery also funds rented accommodations nearby for team members, and for many of them, this is their first experience of a stable home.

“Earlier, I lacked confidence and would cry if I had to talk to strangers,” recalls Khushboo Ali, who now confidently manages the day-to-day operations of the café.

“Amin made me believe that I can achieve anything,” she adds. “He has done more for me than my own family.”

Mr. Sheikh takes his role as a mentor seriously. Each year, he sponsors one team member for a trip to Barcelona in hopes that they will be inspired by what they experience there.

He also encourages employees to chase their dreams, alongside working at the café. Ms. Ali designs clothes, which are displayed at the eatery and available for purchase. Through an agreement with Charles & Ron, a leading Maltese fashion brand, Mr. Sheikh had arranged for Ms. Ali to complete a three-month internship with the label and for barista Jyoti Yadav to model its clothes.

Some other team members have left the café to pursue their passion, including



former barista Sairaj Babu Methari, who is now a rapper and an author. Over the past decade, the eatery has trained more than 130 young people in café work, Mr. Sheikh says.

Mr. Sheikh helped former café public relations staffer Alumelu Bahadur to follow her dream of opening a school for children from lower-income families. After taking out a bank loan, Mr. Sheikh rented a former butcher shop and transformed it into an early learning center. Little Gurus’ Nest, inaugurated in January 2023, uses the Montessori and Waldorf methods to educate children under age 5 – free of charge.

“We give them a chance to be themselves,” says Ms. Bahadur, who explains that the 29 currently enrolled children learn language, math, and culture.

“We get the kids ready [for elementary school],” she adds. “No matter which school they go to next, they can easily adapt.”

In early April, the tiny tots were rehearsing for their annual celebration, swinging their arms and stomping their feet cheerfully to children’s songs, including “The Singing Walrus.”

In 2024, Mr. Sheikh started the Street Angels Foundation to be able to receive donations to fund various projects, including the preschool. Through a government program, the nonprofit also partially funded six one-bedroom apartments to house members of the café team, and received the keys to the units in early June.

Mr. Sheikh is now fundraising to meet his next goal – expanding the school and the coffee shop.

“I don’t give up,” he says. ■



Amin Sheikh (photo top), who lived on the streets of Mumbai between ages 5 and 8, is the founder of the Bombay to Barcelona Library Café. Patrons (photo above) browse books and read while enjoying their food and drinks.