

## Sushant's Kitchen



*Sushant at the kitchen counter, shaping dough; unhurried, focused, entirely in his element.*

Sushant (*name has been changed*) does not have a favorite dish to eat. His satisfaction comes entirely from watching others eat what he has prepared. That one detail tells you everything about him. He has been helping out in kitchens since he was a child - nearly five years spent assisting with cooking. He can confidently make dal, rice, sabzi, and chapatis. Sushant also has a speech and hearing impairment, which shapes the way he communicates and interacts with others. Hence, most of the time he prefers to work alone. Growing up, he learned to rely entirely on himself. He likes managing a kitchen single-handedly because he feels that if too many people get involved, they might alter the taste or disrupt the routine.

Despite this, he is generous with what he knows. He has already started advising our center's cook - pointing out that if the chapatis are turning out too hard, the dough simply needs a little more water to stay soft. This is not someone who needs to be taught how to care about food. He already did.

Sushant himself is enrolled in the Food and Beverage service course, which focuses on table service and front-of-house management. But his real interest is behind the kitchen counter. The trainers noticed early on that whenever vegetables needed to be cut for salads during breakfast or lunch breaks, Sushant would voluntarily, step forward, gesture that he wanted to do it, chop them, and arrange the slices into clean, geometric designs.

What followed was a deliberate shift in how the team worked with him. Rather than pushing him to keep pace with standard classroom instruction, the trainers began paying close attention to what he was showing them through his actions. They created space for him to spend time in the cafeteria kitchen; watching the cook, helping with prep, building familiarity with the environment where he was most himself. The learning did not disappear; it simply moved to where Sushant actually was.

The most telling moment came during his job interview at a local hotel. Sitting in the General Manager's corporate office, Sushant was quiet and visibly nervous. The communication gap made the interaction stiff and difficult. But the moment the trainers took him into the commercial kitchen, gave him an apron, and put a chef's cap on his head, his posture changed. His nervousness disappeared.

The Head Chef asked him to prepare a chapati and a dal tadka. Even in an unfamiliar kitchen, not knowing where the ingredients were stored, Sushant worked with remarkable speed. There was one small hiccup; the commercial stove ran at a much higher flame than the one at the center, and his dal browned too quickly on the first try. But the hotel manager was deeply impressed. He observed that Sushant was completely absorbed in his work, entirely undisturbed by the noise and movement of a busy kitchen around him.

In the development sector, success is often measured by placement numbers and starting salaries. But this visit was a reminder to me that skill development does not happen in a vacuum. It sits within the lives of individuals.

For him the kitchen is more than a workplace. It is a space where he has complete control over his task, where his silence is not a disadvantage, and where his effort is validated every time someone finishes what he has made.

Sometimes, development is not about a massive milestone. Sometimes, it is simply a young man putting on a uniform, standing at a kitchen station, and quietly proving what he can do.

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