

SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



MA in Rural Management

Student Profiles

2025-27

INTRODUCTION

When the MA in Rural Management Program came up for approval before the Board of Management in 2022, the Chancellor raised 5 extremely pertinent questions:

1. Will there be an interest among young people to seek admission for the program?
2. Are there not many similar programs already running across the country? What would be our USP?
3. If we are seeking students from disadvantaged regions and communities, how will they pay the fees?
4. If they are unable to do so, will there be enough donor support for the program?
5. And will there be interest among potential employers to hire students graduating from the program?

Two years since the launch of the program in September 2023, I am delighted to report great success on each of these matters of legitimate concern. The main reason we were confident of success was our assessment that there is an enormous felt need among employers for well-rounded professionals who understand the unique challenges and opportunities of rural India. We also had enough feedback from a multitude of stakeholders that there were innumerable young men and women in the country, with huge potential and a burning desire in their hearts, to lead the process of rural transformation. What they were looking for was an opportunity and some support to be able to play that role. It was also very clear that the existing programs were neither being able to attract the desired profile of students nor were they meeting the specific requirements of potential employers.

And what we have found in our experience with the first 3 batches is something that in many respects far exceeds our initial expectations. From the very first batch we have had hundreds of applications for the program and the number has grown exponentially with every passing year as word has gone out far and wide.

I am reliably informed that you will not find a comparable classroom with the richness of diversity that we have at the SNU RM program. Our students are some of the most outstanding I have had the pleasure of teaching in my several decades long teaching career. But they come from socio-economic backgrounds quite different from those

usually found in leading universities. They belong to India's most disadvantaged regions and communities and also include more women than men (64 out of the total 123 students in the first 3 batches).

The main criteria for selection is their understanding of the challenges of rural India and their unique experience of life in that context. More than anything else, their selection is a testament to their potential to be leaders of a transformative process of change in rural India.

For the third batch we received 346 applications from 17 states, of which we interviewed a total of 219 candidates. Of these, after an extremely rigorous, multi-stage selection process, we arrived at a final list of 40 for the third batch. We consider ourselves deeply fortunate that we have such an excellent third batch of students, who have the qualities of head and heart demanded by this program. We believe that their unique life experience, values and insights will make the classroom a powerful learning arena for all of us, students and teachers alike, and contribute to making SNU an even more vibrant university.

These 40 students represent the diverse richness of this country, coming as they do from across 32 districts in 12 States of India. 26 of them are women and 12 belong to India's neglected Adivasi communities. For us, these are the future leaders of our country, providing a new vision for participatory, sustainable and inclusive development based on an ethics of care, not only for India's deprived regions and communities, but also for the country and even for the planet as a whole.

We are thrilled to bring to you a brief introduction to these 40 gen-next leaders.

Mihir Shah
Distinguished Professor and Chair
MA in Rural Management Program
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence, Delhi-NCR

20th September 2025



ADITI GAJENDRA HARNE

Jalgaon, Maharashtra



Aditi conducting a session on Health Care for college students

Youth leader on health and education in
rural areas

Aditi Gajendra Harne is from Jalgaon, Maharashtra, and has recently completed her Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) from Kavayitri Bahinabai Chaudhari North Maharashtra University, Jalgaon, Maharashtra specializing on health and education in rural areas.

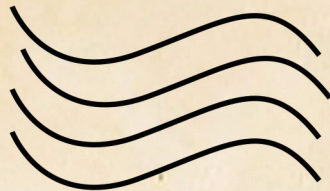
Her inspiration to pursue social work came from her mother, who held a degree in law and was deeply passionate about social causes. Her mother, who bravely fought cancer, is no longer with us, but Aditi chose to fulfil her dreams and passion by entering the field of social work. Over time, through her own experiences, this commitment has become Aditi's personal dream as well, to bring meaningful change in the lives of people in rural areas.

Aditi has completed two years of extensive fieldwork as part of her BSW. In her second year, she worked in a Zilla Parishad school, where she realised the critical gaps in rural education. She observed issues such as the lack of quality education, child labour, substance abuse among children, child marriages, and unemployment. In her third year, she worked with a Gram Panchayat, where she encountered various community challenges, including health problems, lack of seriousness towards Gram Sabha meetings, and caste-based divisions. During these two years, she conducted street plays to raise awareness on these issues.

During her BSW, she also completed a 21-day block placement at Snehalaya in Ahilyanagar, Maharashtra. For the first 10 days, she worked in the Snehadhar project, supporting rescued girls including those who had been victims of child trafficking, early pregnancies, and sexual violence. In the next 11 days, she worked in Snehalaya's hospital for HIV patients, collaborating with the medical team to conduct village awareness campaigns and health camps, which included full health check-ups, blood and sugar testing, cancer awareness sessions, and screenings.

Through these experiences, Aditi realised that while problems exist everywhere, the most severe challenges persist in rural areas. This insight has shaped her focus entirely towards rural development. To strengthen her knowledge and skills, she chose to pursue MA in Rural Management at Shiv Nadar University, where she aims to learn more about rural issues and go on to create as much positive change as possible.

Other than these interests, Aditi enjoys reading mythology books, playing badminton and floorball, and pursuing her passion for art through painting and sketching.



ANGOTHU SWATHI

Nagarkurnool, Telangana



Angothu Swathi belongs to the Lambada Adivasi community in Telangana. Here she is seen with neighbours from her thanda or hamlet

From the Lambada Adivasi community,
Swathi is the first woman in her village
to study for a post-graduate degree

Swathi belongs to the Lambada Scheduled Tribe community. Formerly itinerant transporters of goods across central and peninsular India, the nomadic Lambada community was compelled to permanently settle under restrictions imposed during colonial rule. Swathi's ancestors settled in present-day Telangana. Her family belongs to the Marripally thanda (a thanda is an encampment or hamlet of Lambada households) in Nagarkurnool District, Telangana. Swathi has the distinction of being the very first woman in her thanda who is studying for a post-graduate degree.

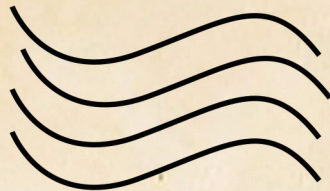
The elder of two siblings, Swathi has a younger brother. Her father is a photographer by profession. Her mother is a homemaker and takes care of their small farm on which they grow cotton, paddy, groundnut, and sometimes chilli.

Swathi went to school in Charakonda Mandal within which her village falls, and completed high school with an exceptional CGPA score of 9.5 out of 10. in the Telangana Secondary School Certificate Examination. This helped her secure admission for intermediate studies, the equivalent of higher secondary school, at the Tribal Welfare Residential Girls College, Jadcherla. Telangana's tribal welfare residential colleges are state-run educational institutions highly regarded for the exceptional quality of their education, including sports facilities. Swathi studied Mathematics, Economics, and Commerce for the intermediate examination. Thereafter, Swathi enrolled for a B.Com. degree with specialisation in Computer Science at the Telangana Tribal Welfare Residential College, Shadnagar.

Swathi was a rebel within her household. She resisted efforts to get her married, even running away from home to escape family pressure. For this she had to endure physical abuse. But she remained fiercely determined to pursue higher education, and enrolled for a college degree on her own. "I want to study further and become independent," she says, "I will take care of my parents, especially my younger brother." Swathi adds that after her father recently met with an accident, Swathi's younger brother put his own ambitions for higher education on hold so that he could contribute financially to the household. He has been a pillar of support for Swathi.

Swathi's academic record and accomplished interpersonal skills helped her secure a job with a finance company by the time she completed her B.Com. degree. However, Swathi applied to the MA in Rural Management program because she believed in a higher cause. She feels motivated to bring about a transformation in the lives of women of the Lambada community who are compelled to marry early and lead a life of domesticity. "I believe that even the poorest people must have access to quality education, healthcare, and steady, sustainable livelihoods," she asserts.

In her spare time, Swathi likes to watch movies. She finds the Telugu film Vimanam deeply moving. It is about a father who tries hard to fulfil the dream of his young leukaemia-afflicted son to fly in an aeroplane. Swathi also enjoys listening to Telugu film songs and folk music.



ANUSHA DAS BISWAKARMA

Kalimpong, West Bengal



A Dalit woman from the Eastern
Himalayas, Anusha has resolved to
transform her village through education
and justice

Anusha Das Biswakarma in her traditional dress

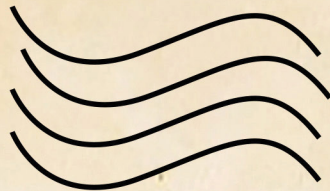
Anusha Das Biswakarma comes from Kagay village in the Eastern Himalayas of North Bengal. A first-generation learner and the middle child in her family, she completed her schooling in her village and later graduated from Pedong College nearby. In school, she was an active member of the children's club, often helping with cleaning drives around the campus- an early glimpse of her instinct to serve her community.

Anusha describes her teenage years as a period filled with challenges and failures, but also with determination. "I have failed in many things, but I never gave up... I never chose the wrong paths even in the worst situations," she says, reflecting the quiet resilience that has carried her forward.

The turning point came in 2024, when she first heard of Rural Management through a local foundation. By then, she had lived long enough with the problems around her- landslides and broken roads, poor access to healthcare, lack of quality education, and the deeply entrenched social issues of caste and gender discrimination. As a Dalit woman, these inequalities were not abstract ideas but lived realities. "In my village, upper caste people would not eat food made or touched by us. And yet, if a lower caste family was rich, they would invite them in. But when poor, they treated them like untouchables."

She also speaks with courage about women's struggles: the restrictions placed on their dreams, and the violence many endure in silence. "Why should women only do cooking and household chores? They also want to explore the world and pursue their passions."

It is these experiences-personal and collective-that have brought Anusha to pursue her Master's in Rural Management. She sees the program as a way to learn how to confront these challenges and to create change. With her blend of resilience, conviction, and hope, she carries the determination to help rebuild her community and transform the society she has witnessed so closely.



BHUSHAN SUDHIR PADHEN

Yavatmal, Maharashtra



A student leader committed to
combating injustice faced by Dalits &
Adivasis in society

Bhushan belongs to the Mahar community (SC) and comes from Mozar village in Yavatmal district of Maharashtra. He is the first from his family to pursue higher education. His admission to the MA-RM Program has brought in a lot of hope for his family and his community, particularly because they have only seen caste-based discrimination and violence in their lives. Bhushan recalls memories of discrimination in school and them not being allowed inside temples in the area. "We have two wells in our part of the neighbourhood but toilet and drainage water from the upper-caste families' houses flow into our part. In fact, they get accumulated right in front of my house. The area smells terribly and our drinking water from the wells has also been affected." He said that he has raised this issue several times with the Panchayat but no action has been taken. Facing such challenges, his family had converted to Buddhism but but violence persisted.

He was exposed to this life of struggle early on. When he was just two years old, he lost his father in a road accident. After which, his mother has taken all the responsibilities in their household. She has educated all of them by working as a labourer on farms. It was on his mother's insistence that he could go to Pune to pursue his graduation. In 2025, he completed his graduation in Sociology from SP College, Pune. During his time in Pune, he engaged in many internships with several organizations such as Sambhavana, Nai Shuruat, among others. He also worked as a 'Mentor' for Eklavya India Foundation throughout his graduation years, guiding and supporting marginalized students in their higher education pursuits. As part of the internships, he had the opportunity to stay in an Adivasi village in Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh. He worked with the Bhil community there who were suffering from Silicosis, a lung disease caused by inhaling silica dust, a mineral found in rock, sand, and clay. Most Bhil men migrated to Gujarat and Rajasthan to work in the mirror-making industry and are exposed to harmful dust in the process due to gross negligence from the manufacturing companies. Bhushan intimately worked with them to ensure that they received rightful compensation and health care from the companies when they returned. This particular exposure to the Adivasis of the country made him understand how narratives of injustice and violence tied the most marginalized in the country – the Dalits and the Adivasis. It opened his eyes to how structures of power are keeping the marginalized powerless. He remains uncertain about how to address these issues. He is joining the MA-RM Program with the intention of finding solutions to several of the issues that have closely impacted him – be it farmer suicides, caste discrimination or exploitation of the Adivasis.

He has always been vocal against injustice – be it in his village or at his college. In Pune, when Marathi students mocked him for speaking in Varhadi dialect (a dialect in Vidarbha), he decided to turn his humiliation into education and resistance. He made a reel talking about his experience and put it up on social media which received wide viewership and support. Many other students from Vidarbha region felt confident talking in their dialect. The college administration also asked him to address and educate other students. "That incident gave me a lot of confidence and showed that even an individual can bring about some change. I had decided from then on that I will be me, very proud of my Dalit and Vidarbha identity and will speak up against any violence."

In future, he wishes to work for a few years in an organization before starting his own organization. It is his dedicated dream to provide higher education to every Dalit and Adivasi student, and his organization will strive towards fulfilling that.



DAWA JANGBOO SHERPA

Darjeeling, West Bengal



Dawa Jangboo Sherpa addressing the audience at an NSS event

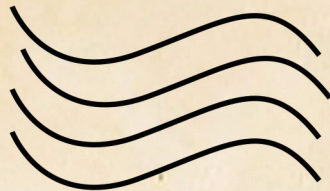
Dawa's journey reflects his
commitment to transforming
Himalayan rural futures

Dawa Jangboo Sherpa comes from Upper Relling Sherpa Gaon, in Darjeeling district of West Bengal. Growing up there meant walking more than four hours each day to reach school and back. "I used to carry a torch in my bag," he recalls, "so that if I got late from school, I could use it to see the road." Those long walks through the hills shaped his resilience as much as his learning. Dawa had to sacrifice his private school education due to financial constraints, as his family prioritized his sister's aspiration to study in a good college.

The first in his village to join NCC, Dawa completed his schooling at Relling Higher Secondary School and later graduated from Bijanbari Degree College, the only college near his locality. Along the way, he began to recognize the gaps in the education system that left so many children in his community uncertain about their future. Determined to make a difference, he started giving free tuition for two years and, with a group of village youths, took up community initiatives such as clearing plastic waste and pebbles. Together, they ran a Zero Waste Project that left their college 90% cleaner than in previous years.

His passion for social change deepened through his work with two organizations: Ajeevika Bureau of Rajasthan, for which he conducted migration surveys in tea estates, and the Eastern Himalayan Foundation in Darjeeling, which he describes as "like a home to me... it made me realize I had capabilities I never knew, and gave me the mindset that I will never step back from any point in life." One of his proudest efforts was a Higher Education Project that guided local students towards new possibilities—five of them went on to secure admission with nearly full scholarships at Azim Premji University. Dawa has always aspired to be a role model for his juniors, someone they could look up to and draw inspiration from.

Dawa now comes to Master's in Rural Management, carrying with him the hope of transforming not only his own village but also rural areas across the country. "I will give my all to be the best version of myself," he says, with quiet determination.



DEVLA MURMU

East Singhbhum, Jharkhand



Devla Murmu addressing women on the occasion of World Indigenous Day

An Adivasi leader, Devla brings 16
years of grassroots experience to her
pursuit of rural transformation

Devla Murmu comes from Rasunchopa village of East Singhbhum, Jharkhand. Belonging to the Santhal community, she grew up in a family where her father's poor health placed the burden of survival on her mother's shoulders. Through contract labour and farm work, her mother kept the family afloat, carrying within her a dream: "Education has the power to transform life." That dream became Devla's own guiding light.

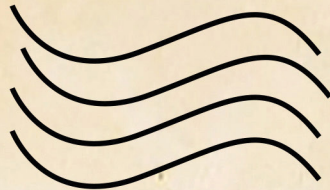
In her village, education for girls was rarely imagined. Most married early or left for wage labour in towns. Devla, however, charted a different path. A turning point came when she joined Kalamandir: The Celluloid Chapter Art Foundation. Her work began with bringing women together in villages, listening to their concerns, and organizing them. She soon realized that real change would come only when women could build their own livelihoods.

In 2007, Devla began working with Biponi- a rural mart that connected women artisans' products to urban markets. What began as a small effort grew into a movement that brought visibility to bamboo, grass, textile, and nature-based crafts made by Adivasi women. With her efforts, sales grew, exhibitions across India opened new doors, and most importantly, incomes rose. For over 40 women's groups and more than 500 Adivasi women, this meant their daughters went to school, their households became more secure, and their confidence soared.

Balancing day-time work with night-time studies, Devla completed her BA By 2011, she was leading programs at Kalamandir that wove together art, culture, and livelihoods. Recognized for her skills in fieldwork and documentation, she became Head of Communications, and in 2016, she was elected Secretary of Kalamandir Saksham SHG Federation.

Yet her journey of learning did not stop. Encouraged by her mentor Amitava Ghosh of Kalamandir, Devla chose to join MA in Rural Management. With over 16 years of experience in cultural and livelihood initiatives, she sees this program as a way to deepen her expertise and return to her community with renewed strength. Her dream is to guide Adivasi youth- especially girls- to dream bigger, to study further, and to believe in their power to change their lives.

"My life is proof that the determination of a single woman can change the destiny of an entire community," she says. Devla's journey stands as a testament that with courage and commitment, even a girl from a remote village can become a leader for her people.



DHANASHRI DESHATWAR

Yavatmal, Maharashtra



Dhanashri Deshatwar (left) working with an Auxiliary Nurse Midwife on analysing health data for high-risk babies in Lakhisarai District, Bihar

Selected for the prestigious Gandhi
Fellowship in 2023 to improve public
health systems in Bihar

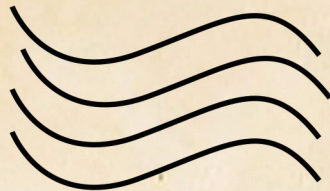
Dhanashri Deshatwar belongs to the Umarkhed block of Yavatmal district, Maharashtra. She grew up in a family of four, where her father now works as a watchman in Pune and her mother is a homemaker. Her mother, despite being one of the few women in their village to clear Class 10, was forced to discontinue studies under social pressure. This shaped Dhanashri's own resolve to pursue education, even when faced with restrictions. She completed her schooling specialising in commerce, and later earned a Bachelor's in Commerce degree from Sant Gadge Baba Amravati University. She had always wished to study social work, but since the course was not available in her block and the family could not afford to send her outside, she settled for Commerce.

From her school years, Dhanashri was deeply involved in extra co-curricular activities. She played kho-kho and athletics at the district level, and though an injury kept her from competing at the state level, she channelled her energy into dance and reading. She was also actively engaged in the National Service Scheme (NSS), serving as a leader in Classes 11 and 12 and continuing her participation through her three years in college. These experiences cemented her conviction that education and leadership were key to solving entrenched problems, such as water scarcity and gender discrimination in villages.

After her degree, she initially worked as an accountant but secretly applied for the Gandhi Fellowship to fulfil her dream of working to bring about a larger social change. Though her father strongly opposed it at first, her elder brother encouraged her to apply, and after much persuasion, her father relented. When she was doubting her decision right before boarding her train, it was her father who assured her that she must go and give this her best shot and that she would always have her home to come back to. This encouragement marked a turning point, and since then, her father has stood firmly by her side.

As a Gandhi Fellow with Piramal Foundation, Dhanashri worked for two years in Lakhisarai district of Bihar in the field of public health and digitalisation. Her work spanned multiple levels—village, block, and district. She trained ASHAs, ANMs, and Anganwadi workers on digital health portals, monitored Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Days and the Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan, and conducted health camps. She also worked on Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission programs, creating ABHA IDs and promoting digital health records. Alongside this, she engaged in awareness campaigns on menstrual hygiene, worked with dropout students, and designed nukkad naataks (street corner plays) to spread health and education awareness.

Outside of her professional work, Dhanashri enjoys dance, drawing, and reading. Her journey from a small village in Yavatmal to working in public health in Bihar reflects her resilience and determination to move beyond the limitations placed on women in her community. At the MA in Rural Management program, she aspires to develop a deeper and more holistic understanding of rural health and education challenges, and to design innovative solutions that ensure girls and women like her mother do not have to give up their dreams to social pressure.



INAYAT AHMAD CHOPAN

Shopian, Jammu & Kashmir



First-generation post-graduate keen to
explore possibilities of technology for
rural transformation

Inayat is from the pastoral Chopan community that has its home in the mountains of Kashmir

Growing up in a small village in Shopian district, Jammu & Kashmir, Inayat witnessed first-hand the challenges of rural life, particularly the limited access to education that young people in the mountains were confronted with. He is the first in his family to graduate from university. His father is a farmer and his mother a homemaker. He drew strength from his parents' resilience as members of the Chopan pastoral community. Throughout his growing up years, Inayat supported his family on their farm at the same time as pursuing his education.

Upon completing school, Inayat secured admission to the prestigious undergraduate program in Physics at the Centre for Excellence in Basic Sciences hosted by the University of Mumbai in collaboration with the Department of Atomic Energy (CEBS, UM-DAE).

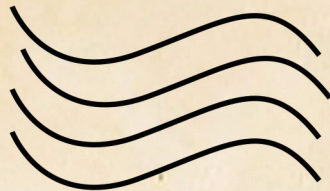
Coming from a small village in Jammu & Kashmir to the bustling metropolis of Mumbai was a transformative experience. Witnessing the stark contrast between urban and rural life, Inayat felt that cities are abundant with opportunities but rural communities continue to lack even basic essentials such as quality education, healthcare, and access to modern infrastructure. This exposure deepened his resolve to bridge these divides and work towards creating equitable opportunities for rural people.

At the same time as learning complex scientific concepts in physics Inayat led an active life within the student community, captaining the cricket team and serving as Sports Coordinator. He also developed a keen interest in the possibilities of using technology for addressing the many concerns that afflict rural India. His passion for community work grew alongside his academic pursuits. During semester breaks at university, Inayat began to lead workshops in rural Kashmir as a member of the civil society organisation KIMS. The workshops counselled youth on the importance of education and the role of technology in shaping their futures.

Inayat's decision to pursue the MA in Rural Management program at Shiv Nadar University is deeply rooted in his commitment to bridge the widening gap between rural and urban India. Having closely experienced the educational and technological challenges faced by his native rural area, Inayat is determined to harness his scientific training and field experiences to drive meaningful transformation in marginalized communities.

Inayat is eager to collaborate with a diverse cohort of peers and professors to broaden his understanding of the multifaceted rural realities of India. He wants to deepen his knowledge of these challenges and work collectively to devise effective, scalable interventions in education, technology, and community development. Inayat aspires to become a catalyst for change, especially for underserved regions.

A native speaker of Kashmiri, Inayat can read and write Urdu and English, and speak Hindi and Punjabi. In his spare time, Inayat enjoys playing cricket and trekking in the mountains, activities that nurture his love for teamwork, leadership, and self-reflection.



KAVITA CHAKRAWARTI

Mandla, Madhya Pradesh



Kavita with a group of women before commencing a meeting. She received training from the NGO PRADAN and worked with them briefly in Mandla District, Madhya Pradesh

Worked as a Digital *Sakhi* and Udaan

Fellow with PRADAN

Kavita belongs to eastern Madhya Pradesh's Chakrawarti community, which is traditionally engaged in mud-work and pottery. Kavita's mother makes mud idols while her father and elder brothers engage in construction labour. Kavita is the only one in her household to have completed schooling and acquired a college degree. She has lived all her life in Khairi Village, Mandla District.

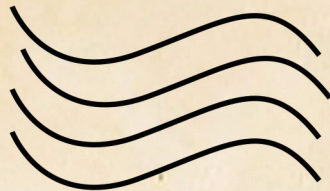
When Kavita entered her final year of school, Kavita was sure that she wanted to study for a college degree but encountered resistance from her family. She says, "My family wanted me to start helping at home so that I could learn household work and get married. But I studied hard and received more than 80% marks in the school leaving examination. I pleaded with my father to let me study further." Her father agreed and convinced the rest of the family that they should let Kavita go to college.

Kavita enrolled for a BSc in Botany. But her college lay in the district headquarters at Mandla, which was nearly 40 km away. A newcomer to the city, Kavita unwittingly fell victim to a fraud that forced her to relocate back to her village and study from home. She suffered much humiliation within her family.

Undeterred, Kavita began to look for ways to earn a small income around her village. She got a break through the Gram Panchayat Secretary, who engaged her for a household survey to identify potential beneficiaries of different government schemes. Soon thereafter, she met a former schoolteacher who had started working with the well-known NGO PRADAN. Kavita began working for PRADAN as a Digital Sakhi and then an Udaan Fellow teaching village women to use a mobile phone, and introducing the Digilocker mobile app to youth for safekeeping of their documents in electronic form.

Kavita's exposure to the field filled her with an ardent desire to bring about social change in her own rural setting. She realised how people suffered from a severe lack of access to government schemes due to the absence of information and the lackadaisical state machinery. She met many bright young women who had quit studying and married due to social pressure. Kavita experienced the oppression of a life undergirded by social norms that prevented promising young girls and boys from realising their full potential. She says, "I wanted to make people in my parts realise that education can make one's lives truly meaningful. But I did not know what to do or how to begin. Then I heard about the MA-RM program through the PRADAN team."

At 21, Kavita is one of the two youngest students in the MA-RM class, and her class-mates often tease her, calling her *baalak* or child. But she is enjoying every moment both in and out of the classroom. "I am learning many new things here and there is so much more to come. I am getting a sense of direction. I will change things for the better in my area once I go back," she says with quiet resolve.



KIRAN KAILAS CHIKANE

Yavatmal, Maharashtra



A first-generation learner and
grassroots activist empowering rural
women and youth

Kiran addressing the audience at Operation Prasthan, organized by Yavatmal Police, Maharashtra

Kiran Chikane hails from Digrah, a small village in Umarkhed Taluka, Yavatmal District, Maharashtra. She belongs to a Nomadic Tribe Dhangar community and comes from a low-income family. Her father works as a daily wage laborer, her mother is a cancer patient, and her elder brother is pursuing postgraduation. Kiran is the first in her family to study in a leading University.

Kiran faced multiple challenges throughout her education - financial struggles, her mother's illness, and caste-based discrimination - during school. She used to cycle 10 km every day to attend school. Her hard work bore fruit when she stood third in her district in Class 12. When her mother's health worsened, she switched to open university and completed her BA in Marathi and History while supporting her family.

Kiran's interest in social work began with her involvement in the National Service Scheme (NSS). Through camps in villages like Bittergaon, Rupada, and Vidur, she worked on issues such as women empowerment, environmental awareness, and agriculture. She led a protest that resulted in the approval of a bridge in Bittergaon and actively raised awareness about female foeticide, girl child education, and discriminatory menstrual taboos in rural areas.

Kiran also volunteered with Operation Prasthan, an initiative by the Yavatmal Police, which trains girls in self-defence and educates them about women's rights and protection laws.

She chose the MA in Rural Management program to understand how to address deep-rooted issues in rural communities, especially those related to gender, health, water conservation, and education. After completing her degree, Kiran hopes to return to her area and work for social change and sustainable development.

In her free time, Kiran enjoys reading Marathi literature (favorites include *Kolhatyacha* Por and Bhura) and drawing. Her journey is deeply inspired by her father's strength and her family's support during difficult times.



KRUSHNA DIGAMBARRAO NILWARN

Parbhani, Maharashtra



First-generation graduate from
Marathwada, committed to improving
rural education, water security, and
healthcare

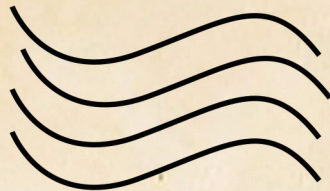
Krushna presenting his views on patriarchy during his interview for the MA in Rural Management program

At 22, Krushna carries with him the lived experiences of growing up in Mangrul Palampat, a village in the drought-prone Marathwada region of Maharashtra. Farming is his family's only source of income, and with his parents not being formally educated, the odds of continuing education were often against him. Yet, through their determination and his own resolve, Krushna is the first in his family to graduate, earning a BA in Economics from Fergusson College, Pune.

Life in his village has been a lesson in resilience. Summers often meant queuing up for water despite the presence of the Dudhna River nearby, while healthcare facilities were distant and hard to reach. Schools lacked basic infrastructure, a reality that hit home sharply in 2017 when a wall collapse at his school killed a 10-year-old girl. The tragedy led to student dropouts and left an indelible mark on Krushna's heart, mind and soul. It was at that moment he decided that he would dedicate himself to improving life in rural areas, ensuring that no child's education is cut short by unsafe conditions.

Beyond his own studies, Krushna has always engaged closely with his community. He spends time speaking with farmers, attending to their struggles with water scarcity, crop losses, and financial pressures. He lives by the very principles and values he stands for, as seen in his decision to take a firm stand against his parents when they pressed for the early marriage of his younger sister. These conversations, layered over his own lived hardships, have given him a practical understanding of rural challenges that statistics in reports alone cannot capture. In his free time, he loves to play Badminton and looks forward to getting better at the sport during his time at SNU.

For Krushna, the MA in Rural Management at SNU is more than an academic step, it is a way to connect the lived realities of villages like his with actionable solutions. With undying compassion and perseverance, he is determined to work in the areas of water security, education, and healthcare, building systems that not only address immediate needs but also create long-term resilience. His journey from a drought-prone village to an eminent institution is driven by the belief that change in rural India must come from those who understand its struggles firsthand.



LAKSHMI MANSARE

Khargone, Madhya Pradesh



Lakshmi Mansare belongs to the Balai community (Scheduled Caste, SC) and hails from a small village named Padalya Babaji in the Khargone district of Madhya Pradesh

A champion on gender justice and

women's empowerment

Lakshmi Mansare belongs to the Balai community (Scheduled Caste, SC) and hails from a small village named Padalya Babaji in the Khargone district of Madhya Pradesh.

She completed her schooling from her village and from nearby village called Shakargaon. She had to travel long distance from her home to Bhikangaon for her higher secondary education. There were no proper means of transportation for commuting to school and often she had to walk several kilometers. Her regular attendance at school was disrupted as she had to work as a labourer for a few days every week. Despite these hardships, Lakshmi successfully completed her higher education. Her mother always encouraged her, never allowing her to give up. Her mother's hard work and struggles deeply inspired her, and she holds immense respect for her dedication and commitment. Lakshmi comes from a family of four sisters and one brother, all of whom have received love and support from their mother.

She later pursued her graduation from Khargone, located 50 kilometers from her village, earning a BA degree with Hindi Literature, Political Science, and Sociology as her subjects. During her graduation years, she managed both household responsibilities and work. Lakshmi is now taking a new and historic step as the first girl from her village to pursue education in another state. She sees this as a significant opportunity and aims to set an example for her community, hoping her achievement will inspire other girls to follow their dreams.

Women's empowerment is a cause close to her heart. She believes that empowering women is essential for improving their position in society. She advocates that women should be aware of their rights and pursue their aspirations with determination. Lakshmi is committed to working for women's empowerment and raising awareness about women's rights. Her goal is to bring positive change to communities and make a meaningful difference in people's lives. She aims to work on improving education and healthcare in rural areas. Through her efforts, she hopes to bring progress and uplift the lives of rural communities.

In addition to her social commitments, Lakshmi has a deep interest in religious activities and a strong belief in devotion to God. She finds that her spiritual engagement strengthens her from within and guides her on the right path.



MAIMUNA KHAN

Shahdol, Madhya Pradesh



Maimuna taking an art and craft class during a summer camp in a local school at Shahdol

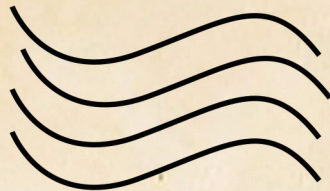
A youth leader committed to improving
education, healthcare and livelihoods in
Adivasi regions

Maimuna comes from Shahdol town in Shahdol district of Madhya Pradesh. Her family shifted from her native village Patasi early on as her father insisted on getting his children educated. However, it has not been easy for her. She had to continuously resist attempts by her community's elders to get her married and discontinue her education. It was her father, a lawyer by training but farmer by profession, who strongly supported her desire to pursue higher education. She completed her BSc in Mathematics from Pandit Shambhu Nath University, Shahdol. After which, she pursued an MBA on the hopes of finding a job.

However, as part of an internship during her MBA, she worked in a private bank at the border of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Those few months exposed her to the practices of how privatized banking system in the country exploited the poor, vulnerable Adivasis for their profit. Though she resisted, her voice was silenced. That exposure brought sleepless nights and a gamut of questions as she increasingly realized that she wanted to work towards changing that situation and empowering the most marginalized.

Of course, her desire to change society is not new. After her 12th class exams, Maimuna started giving free tuitions to Adivasi students in the neighbouring villages, a practice that she still continues. Living around Adivasi villages, the Gonds and Baigas have taught her a lot about their rich culture and history while being increasingly aware of their current marginalization. "But the main reason to sincerely pursue this now is my father. My father has provided free legal help to several poor farming families during their land conflicts. And he used to say that the fact that he could help them and that so many people approach him and see him with respect keeps him alive, content and happy. I want to live like that too." She considers him as her source of strength and determination. In the past, she has also provided paralegal services in the district court and has worked as a school teacher in a local school for a few months. While those experiences taught her a lot, they also enabled her to become financially independent and take her own decisions.

In future, she wants to work with an organization that focuses on issues of improving education and healthcare along with creating sustainable livelihood opportunities in marginalized areas, particularly Adivasi dominant regions. She believes that the program will enable her to contribute significantly towards rural transformation as "that is the foundation for national progress."



MOHD SABIR

Nuh, Haryana



Worked with both rural and urban
communities as part of Goonj in Uttar
Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Telangana

Mohd Sabir trying to lift a load of leaves of the pine tree typically gathered by Garhwali women in Uttarkashi

Sabir belongs to the Mewat region that straddles the states of Haryana and Rajasthan. Mewat is among India's most disadvantaged regions with poor development indicators. A large number of people in the Meo community to which Sabir belongs are truck drivers by profession. "You will find at least one truck driver in every house. My own younger brother is one," says Sabir.

Sabir's parents raised their five sons (of which Sabir was the second) from their meagre farming income earned from a small patch of land. The Meos in Sabir's village Bainsi share a reciprocal relationship with the dominant landed community. "In return for providing agricultural labour we are allowed to carry home the farm waste – the 'weeds' that we clear from the paddy fields and the crop residue that is left after the harvest," explains Sabir. "My parents worked on our neighbours' farms and sold some milk to make ends meet," he continues, "but this left little money for anything else. So my initial years were spent in the local madarsa where education was free."

While many class-mates dropped out, Sabir's academic inclinations led him to pursue his education further. He enrolled in the Jamia Islamia Sanabil Madarsa in Delhi, where he completed his madarsa education successfully, becoming a *Maulana* or scholar of Islam in the process.

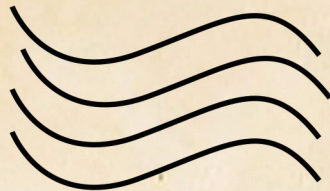
Thereafter, Sabir enrolled for an undergraduate degree in Urdu Literature at Jamia Millia Islamia. Given the financial circumstances at home, he supported himself by taking tuitions during this three-year period. Sabir has been particularly influenced by the works of Sadat Hasan Manto, Munshi Premchand, Ismat Chughtai and Rajinder Singh Bedi.

Upon completing his degree, Sabir found an opportunity to work with Kayantar Foundation, an NGO that was looking for educated youth to extend its activities in the Mewat region. Sabir facilitated the construction of a library in the school of his own village. The following year, he became an Urban Fellow with the well-known NGO Goonj, which works on rural change using unused and underutilised material, particularly cloth, from urban homes. At the end of the fellowship, Sabir joined Goonj as a full-time team member.

At Goonj, Sabir had the opportunity to work with communities in different parts of India. He spent three months in rural Telangana, where local communities were engaged in making ponds. Subsequently, he was based in Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh, and then in Uttarakhand, where he assisted in the collection of underused material through collection camps in Dehradun. In Uttarakhand, he went on to spend three months in the Uttarkashi region amidst the mountain-dwelling Garhwali community.

Sabir found his experience with Goonj fulfilling but it also left him searching for answers. "How can we bridge the gap that exists between the urban and the rural worlds in our country? Maybe villages cannot become cities but can we strengthen our villages such that people can find livelihoods locally so that their standard of living improves and they do not have to migrate? Such questions began to plague my mind" says Sabir. He felt the need to equip himself better to strengthen his understanding and become a better development practitioner. This led him to apply to the MA in Rural Management program.

"I want to work for my people of the Mewat region once I graduate," says Sabir with quiet resolve. While this goal drives his work and study hours, Sabir finds the time to relax by reading Urdu literature and writing prose. He is also an avid player of cricket.



NITESH KUMAR

Sitamarhi, Bihar



Nitesh (second from right) mobilizing youth for awareness on maternal health

Gave up the dream of a government job
to work for Gram Swaraj, agroecology,
and gender-just rural change

Nitesh Kumar was born in Bishanpur Gonahi village of Bihar's Sitamarhi district, close to the Nepal border- a place, he says, "where people step onto the road only when they are unwell, not for leisure." Growing up as the youngest in his family, many of his early choices were not his own. Even studying Mathematics in college or preparing for a railway job came less from his conviction and more from family direction. Until the age of 20, he believed, like many around him, that a government job was the only path forward.

But while preparing for the railways, Nitesh stumbled upon the life and ideas of Gandhi. Reading about Gram Swaraj and Gandhi's struggles and movements, changed the course of his life. "It felt as if by preparing for a government job I was getting ready to jump into a stagnant pond," he reflects. That realization turned him towards his village, stirring both affection and a conviction that meaningful change must begin there. He decided not to pursue a government job and instead to dedicate himself to community life.

Nitesh began his journey with Gram Chetna Andolan, contributing as a prahari (sentinel) while also nurturing his own growth as a community worker. He then joined the Gandhi Fellowship, where two years of grassroots immersion in Karnataka deepened his understanding of rural challenges and his need to strengthen his leadership. Returning home, he realized that working in villages demanded knowledge across many fields- gender justice, natural farming, biodiversity, resource management, and institution building. To learn further, he undertook the Gramin Jyoti Fellowship (on gender and organization development), an Agroecology course (on natural farming), and finally joined the MA in Rural Management program to weave these strands together.

For Nitesh, impactful rural work is about using and strengthening the resources already present in villages. From the MA in Rural Management, he hopes to develop the skills to help build a society that is not just imagined in books but lived in reality- one where rural communities thrive with dignity, equality, and self-reliance.



PHARSHA RAM

Phalodi, Rajasthan



Pharsha (second from left) in conversation with the local mining workers regarding their labour rights in Rajasthan

Committed to working on youth and
substance abuse, health, and rural
livelihoods

At 24, Pharsha Ram, affectionately known as Pharshu, comes from Kheda Bagodia, a border village in Dechu tehsil of Phalodi district, Rajasthan. His family depends on farming, a livelihood shaped by the region's arid climate and limited resources. Growing up here meant learning early how resilience, community, and resourcefulness go hand in hand.

Pharsha's journey in education and social engagement has never been linear. Due to family conditions and little guidance, his studies were interrupted after Class 10th. A year later, he resumed and completed Class 12th, but economic hardships and the absence of teachers during his early schooling meant he often lagged behind his peers. Yet, sustained efforts and mentorship from the Avsar Group eventually helped him find his way to higher education, completing a Bachelor's in Arts from Vardhaman Mahaveer Open University, Kota.

From early on, Pharsha was drawn to the idea that change must come from within communities themselves. He began with Nehru Yuva Kendra, working with village youth to spread awareness about government schemes. This experience grew into active participation in Right to Information and Employment Guarantee campaigns, particularly in social audits and people's movements. Later, with six like-minded friends, he co-founded the Nav Chetna Welfare Society Youth Group, focusing on preparing rural youth for skill development, steering them away from substance abuse, and promoting environmental conservation in drought-prone regions of Rajasthan.

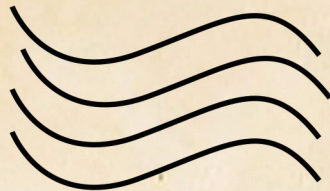
His professional work deepened these commitments. As a Community Facilitator with ActionAid Association India (2023-24), Pharsha engaged closely with slum and mining communities. He organized meetings, mobilized workers to advocate for their rights, and guided unorganized sector workers in accessing government schemes and entitlements. He also documented case studies on the struggles of mining workers, contributing to policy advocacy. Among his most meaningful contributions was assisting silicosis victims, arranging health checkups and linking them to benefits under the Silicosis Policy 2019. For him, each successful claim was not just a welfare measure, but a step toward dignity for those long ignored by the system.

Since 2024, Pharsha has been serving as a District Child Labour Counsellor with Grameen evam Samajik Vikas Sansthan (GSVS). Here, he has been on the frontlines of identifying and rescuing children from hazardous workplaces like hotels, tea shops, and construction sites. Coordinating with the Child Welfare Committee, police, and local authorities, he has rescued 48 children to date, ensuring their rehabilitation and reintegration into education programs.

One incident that left a deep mark on him was the rescue of a boy no older than twelve from a roadside dhaba. Convincing the boy was easy, but winning the trust of his father took hours of patient conversation. Weeks later, when the father shared that his son had started school, Pharsha felt a rare sense of fulfilment. proof that small, persistent acts could trigger lasting change.

Now at SNU, Pharsha is sharpening his skills and knowledge to work more effectively on issues of education, health, and rural livelihoods. Guided by values of honesty, capability, and a positive outlook, he hopes to implement solutions that are deeply rooted in the lived realities of rural communities.

Outside his professional commitments, Pharsha remains deeply connected to the folk music of Rajasthan, enjoys discussions on political issues and history of people's movements, and finds joy in playing cricket with friends. For him, rural change is not about external interventions alone, it is about communities taking charge of their destinies, and he is determined to be part of that process.



POOJA ARYA

Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh



Pooja with children at Eklavya India Foundation, New Delhi

An alumna of Vidyagyan and SNU,
working on education, gender equality,
and community-driven rural change

Pooja belongs to a Dalit community, and her awareness of social inequality has never been textual. It is something she has lived. She often recalls one painful incident that left a lasting imprint on her. During a visit to her village, she was helping to fill water when her hand brushed against an earthen pot belonging to an elderly upper-caste woman. The woman, upon seeing this, refused to use the water. She threw it away, scrubbed the pot with soap, and only then refilled it. For Pooja, it was not just about being excluded from a pot of water, it was the weight of centuries of untouchability made visible in a single moment. The experience shook her deeply, but it also strengthened her resolve: she would not let caste define her worth. Instead, she would dedicate herself to knowledge, equality, and dignity, values she believes can defeat even the oldest hierarchies.

Her life took a decisive turn when she received a scholarship to study at a VidyaGyan school of the Shiv Nadar Foundation. Moving from a small village classroom to an environment that encouraged critical thinking and leadership was daunting, but it revealed how transformative access to quality education can be.

Pooja went on to complete her BA (Honors) in English with a minor in Sociology at Shiv Nadar University, Delhi-NCR. Alongside her studies, she interned with the Eklavya Foundation, contributing to their HITEC project to strengthen teacher education in rural Madhya Pradesh. She worked closely with teachers, parents, and children, learning how systemic barriers affect even the most basic aspects of schooling. As a Teach for India Campus Ambassador, she built bridges between her university and a national movement for educational equity. Beyond academics, she became a founding member of SNU's first women's cricket team, learning how courage, teamwork, and persistence on the field mirror the challenges of real life.

At just 21, having grown up with limited educational opportunities and entrenched inequalities, Pooja is determined to bridge the disconnect between lofty policies and lived realities. The MA in Rural Management program at SNU offers her the chance to deepen her understanding of rural systems, and work toward practical, community-driven solutions, particularly in education, women's empowerment, and grassroots mobilization.

For Pooja, every person carries dignity and untapped potential, regardless of their background. She knows how a single opportunity, given at the right time, can rewrite a life story. It has rewritten hers, and she intends to ensure that others in rural India can experience the same transformation.



POOJA PAWAR

Yavatmal, Maharashtra



Pooja Pawar (sitting in the centre) surrounded by her students

Poet, fighter, and community mobiliser
committed to rural girls' education and
dignity

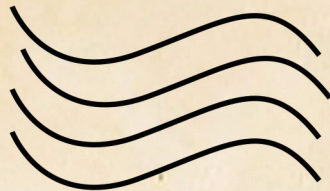
Pooja Pawar grew up in Manjarda village of Yavatmal district of Maharashtra, in a Banjara community, where education was not seen as important for girls. Her father's daily wage labour sustained a family of seven, but it was her mother's quiet support that enabled Pooja to push against tradition and claim her right to study. She became the first girl in her settlement to complete higher education- an achievement won after long silences, arguments, and days of refusing to bend to pressure.

Her journey began with small steps: walking five kilometers daily to reach school, carving a distinct identity through *karate*, and finding solace in reading and writing. Over time, poetry became her way of shaping emotions and making sense of the world. "If you want to bring change, it is important to start with yourself. Only then can we bring about true transformation," she believes.

Pooja's undergraduate degree in Social Work at the Savitri Jyotirao Social Work College opened her to the realities of rural and urban struggles. Fieldwork gave her a close understanding of people's needs, and her curiosity pushed her to learn from every new culture, skill, and experience. A turning point came with the Gandhi Fellowship in Begusarai, Bihar, where she spent a year with the Piramal School of Leadership's "School of Health." Away from home, overcoming barriers of language and culture, she built resilience and confidence.

Despite the financial strain that meant borrowing books to prepare for exams, and family pressure to marry young, Pooja refused to step back. Instead, she helped other girls in her village find the courage to pursue education. In the past two years alone, she has supported five to six girls to enrol in higher studies- small ripples of change that strengthen her resolve.

Now pursuing an MA in Rural Management, Pooja carries the determination to work for girls like herself, who too often drop out of school due to poverty, discrimination, or lack of confidence. Her dream is to create pathways for rural girls to access education and build lives of dignity and choice.



PRAKRITI DHAKREY

Agra, Uttar Pradesh



Prakriti playing basketball at the SNU court

Committed to gender justice,
climate awareness, and community
empowerment

Prakriti Dhakrey comes from Teekaitpura village in Fatehabad tehsil of Agra district, Uttar Pradesh. Her father is a mathematics teacher and her mother a primary school teacher. She has three younger siblings.

Prakriti studied in a government school till Class 5, after which she was selected to study at Vidyagyan School. Many in her village discouraged her parents from sending a daughter far from home, but they supported her. Though her parents wanted her to study science, she chose humanities to better understand people and society.

She completed her BA (Research) in Sociology from Shiv Nadar University. Her professor, Dr. Vasundhara Bhojvaid, shaped her interest in rural societies and climate change.

From Class 6 onward, Prakriti taught two elderly family members who couldn't read or write. Over time, she also began teaching younger children. For the past six years, she has been associated with a local Self-Help Group "Jai Pathwari Maiya Swayam Sahayata Samooh", helping with meetings, documentation, and bank-related work.

She also contributed to the Moolgyan Project, translating articles on livestock into Hindi to improve their rural reach. In her community, she has spoken out against child marriage and raised awareness about caste discrimination, gender inequality, and domestic violence.

Prakriti is also a sportsperson: a state-level basketball player, university gold medalist in cricket, and participant in athletics. She enjoys reading and writing poetry, though she keeps her poems private. Her favourite author is bell hooks.

She describes her journey in three words: Rebellious, Sports, and Perseverance.

Prakriti has joined the MA in Rural Management Program to work towards justice, equity, and dignity in rural India, especially for women and marginalised communities.



PRIYANKA KUMARI

Sitamarhi, Bihar



Priyanka (on the left) dialoguing with women and girls of her village

Miranda House alumna building

pathways for women's political

leadership and Gram Swaraj

Priyanka Kumari was born in Bishanpur Gonahi of Sitamarhi, Bihar. Her early life was marked by rural childhood games, explorations of village landscapes, and the everyday struggles of her family. While formal schooling was irregular and often secondary to domestic responsibilities, these years rooted her deeply in her village environment and community life-experiences she now considers her most valuable capital.

The turning point in her life came when her father began arranging her marriage at the age of thirteen. With the support of her elder brother, she moved to Sitamarhi town to pursue her schooling and later to Muzaffarpur for higher secondary education. Living independently for the first time, she experienced a sense of autonomy and confidence that reshaped her imagination of the future. This journey eventually brought her to Delhi University's Miranda House- an entry she describes as "a dream fulfilled."

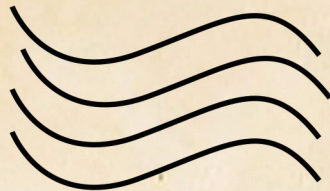
At Miranda, she faced the alienation of elite, English-speaking spaces but found grounding in a commune her brother was part of in New Delhi. The commune, built on values of collective decision-making, democratic participation, and inclusivity, became a formative space where she engaged in deep conversations on politics, philosophy, and social transformation. It was here that she began to connect her village experiences with broader structural questions, and first dreamt of returning to her village to build new possibilities.

Exposure to *Hind Swaraj* and alternative experiments in rural India further strengthened this aspiration. After BA, Priyanka joined Youth Alliance, where the *Gramya Manthan* program in Kutch gave her confidence to overcome language and communication barriers and deepen her perspectives on rural life. Inspired, she chose to leave her Master's studies midway and return to the field as a Youth Alliance Rural Fellow in Kanpur Dehat. This was her first professional experience of engaging directly with caste and gender questions in a village setting, where she experimented with creating safe spaces for dialogue with women and nurturing transformative community conversations.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated her decision to return permanently to her village. In mid-2020, along with like-minded peers, she co-founded *Gram Chetna Andolan*, a collective committed to the vision of Gram Swaraj. Over two years, the group worked on women's empowerment, community-led problem solving, and democratic engagement through Chetna Chaupal dialogues in every ward of her panchayat. One key initiative was the formation of a dairy cooperative society, alongside strengthening women's self-help groups and mobilizing around local governance.

Priyanka also contested for the position of *mukhiya*, challenging entrenched patriarchal and caste-dominated structures of local power. Though she did not win, her campaign planted the seeds of new conversations on transparency, women's political leadership, and collective accountability in her community. Currently, Gram Chetna Andolan is focusing on mobilizing against the pressing water crisis, facilitating dialogues in gram sabhas and ward sabhas to push for community-led solutions.

Today, Priyanka sees her future intertwined with the life of her village. She aspires to nurture value-based local politics and strengthen women's political leadership, so that inclusive, empowered, and democratic panchayats can emerge. She cherishes honesty, love, and harmony above all else. For her, the journey of transformation is not just personal but collective- towards building a village rooted in *samata*, *swatantrata*, *nyay* (equality, freedom, justice).



PRIYANKA MARAVI

Dindori, Madhya Pradesh



An Adivasi community leader

consistently working for women's

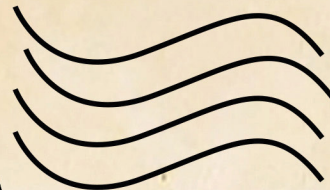
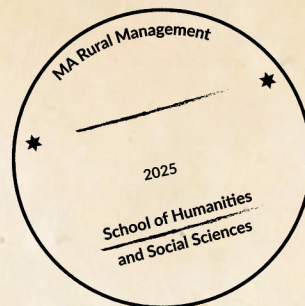
socio-economic empowerment

Priyanka comes from Dudhera village of Dindori district of Madhya Pradesh. Belonging to the Gond community (ST), she is proud of her tribal ancestry and culture. However, she does feel disturbed with the growing problem of alcoholism among men in her community, in and around her village. She has seen how it has increased families' economic debt along with domestic violence in her area.

Witnessing this in her every day, both in her village and her family, made her determined to work towards addressing it. In July 2024, she joined the renowned NGO PRADAN as a Community Resource Person and started working with the women in her community, helping them in forming Self Help Groups or starting kitchen gardens in their homes. She has also helped women to enroll in MGNREGA schemes and earn money through their labour. She believes that empowering women financially can lead to their social and political empowerment and that can help mitigate many issues. "Leave alone stop my father from consuming alcohol, my mother has never raised her voice against him even once. When women will be able to stand up for themselves, voice out their concerns without fear, then many kinds of violence and social evils will stop," she asserts.

She draws inspiration from her grandmother who has always encouraged her to pursue her education. It was because of her grandmother's insistence that she could complete her B.Sc from Pandit Shambhu Nath Shukla University at Shahdol town which is 150 kilometers away from her village. Despite the distance, she was determined to pursue her education and stayed at a rented place in Shahdol to complete her graduation. Staying on her own made her believe that she should never be dependent on anyone to fulfill her dreams and that she is very capable of achieving them on her own. "Except my grandmother, I never received much support, be it financially or otherwise, from anyone. My mother never could say a word for me. I don't know how my grandmother managed to get the money for my college education but she did, she somehow always manages." She feels that she derives her grit and her ability to never give up from her grandmother.

She feels getting selected in the MA-RM Program has been her biggest achievement and turning point in her life. This program, she believes, will be the step and the means through which she could bring meaningful change in society. While she wants to work in policy-making in future, she is keen to first implement her knowledge and skills that she would acquire from the program at the grassroots. She is willing to work in any rural area of the country as she believes that fundamental issues in any rural society, particularly for the marginalized, are the same and resonate across contexts. She is the first woman in her village and community to pursue a Master's degree and she believes that her story will inspire several women from her community to write their own stories and pursue their dreams without fear or hesitation.



PUSHPA LAHRE

Janjgir-Champa, Chhattisgarh



Pushpa Lahre (centre) interacting with children during a survey of Anganwadis in Bastar

Selected for the prestigious Green Hub

Fellowship in 2024 where she trained

to be a filmmaker

Pushpa Lahre comes from Janjgir-Champa district of Chhattisgarh, where her family is the only Dalit household in their village. Growing up, she and her siblings were routinely subjected to untouchability and exclusion, which left her grappling with questions of dignity and justice from a young age. Pushpa is the youngest of seven children—her eldest brother works as a labourer, while her sisters had to discontinue their studies under difficult circumstances. One of them, Chandrakumari Lahre, went on to establish her own NGO after experiencing severe caste-based discrimination, becoming a role model for Pushpa's own pursuit of education and social action.

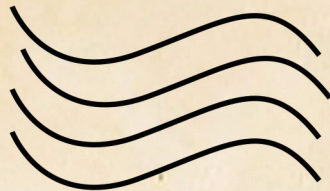
Her parents worked at a brick kiln in Akola, leaving Pushpa and her siblings in the care of their grandparents. Although her grandfather refused to support the education of her sister, the latter fought hard to continue studying, working as a farm labourer to pay for school fees. This struggle opened the door for Pushpa, who managed to complete her schooling despite having to shift between government and private schools. In college, however, she once again encountered untouchability and prejudice that mirrored her village experiences.

Inspired by her sister's determination, Pushpa became actively involved in grassroots social work. She spent six months at the Dalit Shakti Kendra in 2016, training under Martin Macwan, where she deepened her understanding of caste and social justice. In 2017, she worked with Jan Kalyan Samiti, focusing on school dropouts in villages cut off by streams and poor infrastructure. Here she saw firsthand how children were pulled into migration cycles or left vulnerable to neglect and abuse when parents sought work outside.

Pushpa is a breast cancer survivor. Her own working life included two years at a Tamil Nadu-based company, where she endured 12–13 hour shifts with low pay and no overtime during the Covid-19 pandemic. The experience sharpened her awareness of labour rights and gendered exploitation. Since 2020, she has been associated with Akshar Samaj Sevi Sanstha, conducting menstrual health awareness sessions at Anganwadi centres and in village communities. She has worked with adolescent girls on issues of anaemia, maternal mortality, and nutrition, often promoting kitchen gardens as a way to improve dietary diversity and health.

Pushpa has most recently completed the renowned Green Hub Fellowship (2024–25) where she made two movies - one on the inspiring journey of her sister and the other on covering themes of livelihoods, gender and millets-based farming.

Pushpa's life embodies resilience in the face of discrimination and illness. With her deep commitment to ending caste-based injustice and improving rural education and health, she enters the MA in Rural Management program, eager to translate her lived experience and grassroots activism into systemic social change.



PUSHPA SAHU

Raipur, Chhattisgarh



Pushpa (second from left) conducting a health survey near her village in Chhattisgarh

Engaged in anti-caste initiatives,
aspiring to link culture and community-
led rural development

Pushpa is 20 years old, curious, quietly observant, and determined to learn even as the world around her presents distractions and difficulties at every step. She is a middle child among three siblings in her family. Her mother working in a company as a reja (grille) worker and her father employed as a loader (kuli) in transport, have taught her that hard work and patience are not just virtues, but survival skills.

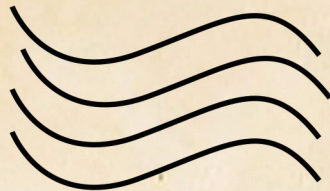
Pushpa is the first in her family to pursue higher education beyond school. During her school years, she boldly shifted from the Chhattisgarh state board to CBSE for completing her 12th class, a leap she describes as "jumping into a fast-flowing river without knowing how to swim." She recalls her first CBSE English exam: the paper was tougher than expected, but instead of panicking, she told herself, "If I can't answer everything, I'll answer everything I know perfectly." That resilience has since shaped her life journey.

She went on to complete her BA from Durga Maha Vidyalaya, Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, Raipur, while also studying political science, history and sociology through the New Learning Centre. The Centre was not just a place for her own studies, it was where she motivated children to learn, often sitting with them to finish assignments, and collaborating on activities like video workshops and educational projects.

One such project was a video workshop where she compared the work of women and men, making a short documentary that drew from her own parents' lives. Although she filmed her mother and father, the focus was on the broader struggles of women's labour- unpaid, unseen, and unrecognized. This was her first attempt to connect personal experience with social critique.

Pushpa also participated in community surveys and health initiatives. In Majdoor Nagar, near her village, she helped conduct a health survey. Afterwards, when doctors from Shaheed Hospital in Dalli Rajhara (Balod district, Chhattisgarh) arrived for a free health camp, she worked alongside them, encouraging basti residents to step forward for check-ups and supporting the medical team. This early exposure gave her a glimpse into the links between health, dignity, and community mobilization. In 2024, she also spent one month in Hyderabad with PACPET, a program focused on anti-caste philosophy, English learning, and political concepts. This experience deepened her understanding of structural inequalities and sharpened her ability to articulate questions of justice and social change.

Her mentors at the New Learning Centre (where she often served as a facilitator from 2016 to 2024) recall her quiet but steady leadership: when others hesitated to take charge during a group project, Pushpa gently assigned roles and deadlines, never raising her voice but ensuring the group stayed on track. She also has a gift for weaving history and culture into everyday life. Once, during a festival, she gathered neighbourhood children and began telling them stories from her history lessons, blending in folk songs and games. Parents soon joined in, and the evening turned into a spontaneous storytelling session for the whole community. Her journey to the MA in Rural Management at Shiv Nadar IoE is driven by a simple but powerful vision: "I want to work in rural areas not just as an outsider bringing change, but as someone who understands and belongs to the rhythm of village life. My dream is to combine education, culture, and community-led development so that no child feels their only choice is to leave home to succeed."



RAMESH GAIKWAD

Latur, Maharashtra



A youth leader working on enhancing
access to opportunities for girls and
marginalized youth

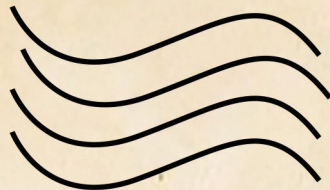
Ramesh Gaikwad (centre) participating in a local cleanliness drive in his village

Ramesh Gaikwad belongs to the Maang community from Tandulja village in Latur district, Maharashtra. The community has long been considered “untouchable” in the region, and Ramesh’s childhood was marked by the social exclusion that comes with this identity. Growing up in Marathwada also meant living with extreme water scarcity, recurrent drought, and cycles of distress migration. Every year, his parents would leave for sugarcane cutting work in other districts, rendering the household vulnerable.

His mother, an agricultural labourer and daily wager, carried the weight of the household, often managing with just one meal a day. Ramesh began working at a young age—taking up watchman duties and daily wage labour—to fund his own education. Despite these hurdles, he completed his schooling in a Zila Parishad school, travelled long distances daily to finish his graduation from Latur, and even after dropping out midway to earn money, returned to complete his degree. He eventually graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in Commerce from Swami Ramanand Teerth Marathwada University, Nanded.

His exposure to village realities—poor roads, lack of clean drinking water, inadequate schools, and absence of health facilities—strengthened his conviction that education was the key to breaking cycles of deprivation. For more than a decade, he has been involved in social work across rural and urban areas, often engaging with local leaders and politicians to understand governance. Through this, he has seen how poverty, discrimination, and poor infrastructure push children, especially from marginalised communities, to abandon education.

Having lived through these struggles himself, Ramesh is deeply committed to creating opportunities for girls and marginalised youth to pursue education and build dignified futures. He believes that social work must not be driven by profit but by the resolve to transform lives at the grassroots. At the MA in Rural Management program, he seeks to build the knowledge and skills required to channel his lived experience into systemic change, ensuring that the voices of his community and others like them are heard in shaping rural development.



RAMIJ SHAIKH

Yavatmal, Maharashtra



Ramij Shaikh (in yellow) working with a local school in Kalamb block on a tree plantation drive

Working on the intersection of
environmental regeneration, social
justice, and youth participation

Ramij Shaikh hails from a Muslim household in Kalamb town of Yavatmal district, Maharashtra. His father, who runs a small scrap business, was determined that Ramij should not limit his education to the madarsa but also pursue regular schooling. This support proved crucial for Ramij, who went on to become a first-generation learner in his family. His mother is a homemaker, while his younger brother has completed his ITI training and now repairs air-conditioners and washing machines.

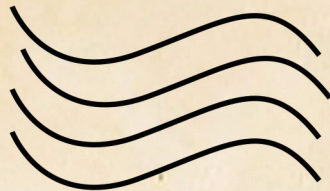
A defining moment in Ramij's life came during his school years in classes 8 to 10, when a teacher asked the students to plant and care for trees. Ramij took this responsibility so seriously that he even skipped vacations to tend to them. When school administrators later proposed cutting down the trees to expand infrastructure, he organised a satyagraha in true Gandhian spirit—holding banners that cheekily read “पेड़ काटने के लिए शुक्रिया” (“Thank you for cutting the trees”). The administrators backed down, and this early victory in protecting the environment gave Ramij a deep conviction in the power of collective action.

While still in school, he attended evening meetings of the NGO Paani Foundation, where he learned about the water crisis in Vidarbha and visited many villages, even those tucked away in inaccessible forest areas. Inspired by young activists working in water-scarce regions, he founded the VanRaaj Group. The group organised a seed collection competition in which students gathered different types of seeds that were later distributed to create nurseries across villages. This initiative continues today, expanding the reach of community nurseries and spreading awareness on water and environment conservation.

Ramij went on to pursue a Bachelor's in Social Work, where he was introduced to the ideas of movement-building and global climate justice, including Greta Thunberg's Fridays for Future. He realised that environmental change requires more than just tree planting—it must also address issues such as mining, Adivasi displacement, and unsustainable farming practices. His postgraduate diploma at the Gandhi Foundation further deepened his reflections on Gandhi's principles and their relevance for living in harmony with nature, though he had to discontinue the program midway due to an illness.

After recovering from his illness, Ramij has been working actively with the Kastakar Group to come up with models of farming that are financially and environmentally viable for the region. The group has come up with systems like running a fair price agri-input shop, a model farm, and a marketing initiative supporting diversified cropping systems. Ramij leads the group's sales and plays a key role in ensuring the financial sustainability that supports its grassroots operations. He also engages children in environmental awareness campaigns, believing that the seeds of consciousness must be planted early. For Ramij, diversifying agriculture is central to reducing farmer suicides in the region.

Despite a serious medical issue that once threatened his mobility, Ramij has shown remarkable resilience. Deeply inspired by Gandhian values, ground-level environmental movements, and his own lived experiences, he is committed to exploring how sustainable agriculture and community-driven action can reshape rural futures. At the MA in Rural Management program, he is eager to learn how to combine grassroots mobilisation with institutional frameworks to create systemic change.



RIYA TIRKEY

Jalpaiguri, West Bengal



Riya Tirkey (right) conducting a village survey

Committed to building dignified futures
through education, livelihoods, and
community development

Riya Tirkey comes from the Oraon tribe and grew up in the Kumlai tea garden of Jalpaiguri, West Bengal, close to the Gorumara forest and the Bhutan border. A first-generation learner, she comes from a family of tea plantation labourers- her grandfather and father both worked in the tea gardens. Life in that community meant witnessing the struggles of low wages, poor healthcare, and limited educational opportunities. “For me, education always felt like something I had to fight for,” she says, and that struggle only deepened her resolve to pursue it.

After completing her schooling in a local Bengali-medium school, Riya graduated with English Honours from West Bengal State University. Alongside her studies, she began mentoring children from tea garden families through the Himalayan Prayatna education model. Guiding them in academics, building their confidence, and opening small doors of opportunity gave her the first glimpse of how education could change lives.

Her perspective widened when she was selected for the Abhijit Sen Rural Internship in Rajasthan. Working in the tribal villages of Chittorgarh, she studied how gender discrimination at home and in schools led to dropout among Adivasi children. The experience connected her personal background with a larger national picture of rural inequality. It convinced her that meaningful change requires both grassroots work and professional skills.

Honesty, gratitude, and empathy are the values that guide her path. These principles, she believes, help her stay true to her purpose and connect deeply with people’s struggles. Now at MA in Rural Management, Riya hopes to build the knowledge and skills needed to design sustainable solutions in education, livelihoods, and community development. For her, this is not just a career choice but a personal mission: “I have seen how inequality limits people’s dreams. I want to dedicate my life to ensuring rural communities get fair opportunities to learn, live with dignity, and realize their full potential.”



SANJAY SANAP

Jalna, Maharashtra



Sanjay (right) during his stay at an Adivasi village in Buldhana, Maharashtra

A trained journalist working on
amplifying rural voices on the issues of
the agrarian crisis and social justice

Sanjay Sanap belongs to the Vanjari community from Chanegaon in Badnapur block of Jalna district, Maharashtra – a region in Marathwada that is perennially scarred by drought and water crises. His childhood was deeply tied to his family’s livestock; he would often graze his herd of goats before going to school. During the scorching summer months he would migrate temporarily with his family to his maternal uncle’s village in Kandari to ensure the herd had enough water and fodder. According to him, the recurring water scarcity in his village was not just a human crisis but also one that affected domesticated and wild animals alike. These experiences of scarcity and migration left a lasting imprint on Sanjay.

Sanjay grew up in the care of his paternal grandparents that helped him enjoy some continuity at school while his parents migrated for work. His grandfather, who lived to the age of 102, was the person Sanjay was closest to. Despite the absence of a school in his own village, his grandfather pursued learning by attending night classes after a long day of labour at various households and fields. His determination to read and his love for the Ramayana and Mahabharata instilled in Sanjay an early respect for education.

During his high school years, Sanjay faced severe economic difficulties and illness in the family, leading him to take a gap year. This period, however, became one of self-discovery. He spent his days watching news and films which sparked his interest in journalism. He explored various forms of the profession online and eventually secured admission in an undergraduate program in journalism at Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University. His early assignments included covering elections, where he reported on political campaigns, surveyed the pulse of the electorate, and submitted reports to agencies such as Third Poll. These experiences not only gave him critical insights into people’s voting choices and the structural issues behind them but also provided him a source of income to fund his studies.

Working with a local newspaper made him confront a recurring question: “Reporting is alright, but what can be done to make positive change happen?” This search for deeper engagement led him to volunteer with organisations such as Team Tarunaai. His work in the tribal village of Nandura exposed him to the severe lack of educational access, where entire schools often functioned at the whims of a single teacher. Through these experiences, Sanjay began to connect the dots between water scarcity, agricultural distress, farmer suicides, caste-based labour exploitation, and educational deprivation.

Influenced by his own history teacher and ground reporters like Ravish Kumar, Sanjay started to see journalism as a powerful tool to speak truth to power. He carries with him not just the voice of his community but also a multidimensional understanding of rural crises—where the struggles of farmers, women, and even non-human life are deeply interconnected. At the MA in Rural Management program, he is eager to bridge journalism and development practice, learning how to move from reporting problems to actively creating pathways for positive social change.



SEWA KUMARI

Simdega, Jharkhand



During a meeting with women farmers to raise awareness about the adverse impact of chemical farming

Passionate youth leader committed to
promoting organic farming

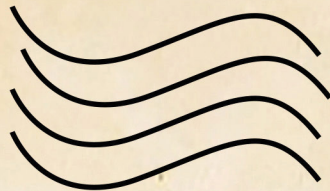
Sewa Kumari is a resident of Toly village in Ranka, Simdega district, Jharkhand, and belongs to the Lohra community (ST). Her parents are farmers and also work as laborers for other big farmers. She has completed her bachelor's degree in Hindi from Simdega College.

Belonging from a farming family Sewa has always seen and experienced the challenges of farmers in her region. Along with the DAYJOY Foundation, an organization working with farmers in Jharkhand, she engaged with farmers in her area about seeds and crops and motivating them. This allowed her to understand the experiences of farmers with various seeds, both hybrid and traditional. She encouraged farmers to use indigenous seeds and trained them in their application so that seeds and crops could be preserved, while also helping them recognize the importance of organic farming. She observed that the increasing use of chemical inputs is harmful not only to crops but also to human health, leading to various diseases. While working with the DAYJOY Foundation, she encountered common challenges faced by farmers in different regions, including the mis-perception among some farmers that chemical farming produces higher incomes, whereas organic farming results in lower output and higher costs.

Sewa looks forward to learning more about organic farming and ways to support farmers and broadly work for the development of rural India. She feels she can be an agent of rural transformation through the SNU MA RM program.

SHARDA RAVINDRA DUGUNLAWAR

Gadchiroli, Maharashtra



During a session with young students regarding the importance of health and education at a local school

Committed to women's participation,
forest rights, and tribal livelihoods

Sharda Ravindra Dugunlawar comes from Wakdi, a tribal village of Gonds in the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra. Growing up in a family of five, including her parents, two sisters, and a grandmother, Sharda has always known the rhythm of a life shaped by farming, shared responsibilities, and close community ties. From a young age, she worked alongside her parents in the fields while also caring for her younger siblings, learning that education and hard work are both essential to building a better life.

Her primary schooling was completed in her village, after which she moved to Etapalli for her higher secondary education. She went on to earn a Bachelor's degree in Social Work (BSW) from the Matru Sewa Sangh Institute of Social Work, Nagpur. During her BSW, she undertook a research project on "Participation of Women in Gram Sabhas", which gave her direct exposure to local governance. She carried out fieldwork in Anganwadi centers, schools, and the Labour Welfare Office, deepening her understanding of the barriers women face in decision-making spaces.

Sharda also gained valuable experience in Mendha Lekha, a village known for its pioneering role in self-governance under the guidance of Devaji Tofa. Here, she studied the implementation of the Forest Rights Act and documented people's experiences with it. She also examined the state initiative "Our Government, Our Village" (*Hamara Gaav, Hamari Sarkar*), producing a short film on the subject. These experiences allowed her to combine academic study with participatory methods of documentation and community engagement. In addition, she became actively involved with organisations like VSM and Beyond You, where she contributed to awareness campaigns on legal rights and government schemes, ensuring that benefits reached the communities most in need.

At just 21, Sharda speaks with pride about her community's resilience but also with clarity about its challenges like limited educational opportunities, inadequate health facilities, and the isolation faced by many villages in the region. She has witnessed how these gaps weigh most heavily on women and children, which is where her commitment to work is strongest. Sharda's decision to pursue her MA in Rural Management at SNU stems from a desire to bridge what she has learned in the field with deeper academic and strategic insights. She hopes to focus on practical, systemic solutions that improve education, healthcare, and livelihoods in regions like Gadchiroli, especially for tribal communities.

When she is not studying or working, Sharda enjoys reading newspapers, books, and magazines, writing essays in Marathi, singing, and playing outdoor games. Along with personal growth, this next chapter for Sharda is about returning with knowledge, skills, and strategies that can help her community move towards a more secure and equitable future.



SHIKHA RAKESH INDURKAR

Nagpur, Maharashtra



Dalit youth leader who dreams
of building more leadership from
marginalized communities

Shikha (right) carried out surveys to understand if cashew plants given by donors were beneficial to people

Shikha comes from Nagpur city in Maharashtra. Her father is a construction worker and her mother works as a baby-sitter. Belonging to the Mahar community (SC) she and her family had to face a lot of violence in her village because of which her family decided to shift to Nagpur city. However, caste-based violence continued in various areas of her life.

Once a teacher in her college casually mentioned how Dalit students in the class should not waste their time educating themselves but spend their energy working in shops and garages. “Hence, I do not like mentioning my caste identity at all. People start behaving differently with us then. This, along with the fact that I am a woman, meant that I faced a lot of struggles getting my education. Girls in my community are married off quickly. I had to fight a lot to get my graduation,” she mentions.

She completed her BA from Rashtrasant Tukadoji Maharaj University. Her education till date has been in Marathi medium and her biggest challenge, she believes, has been engagement in English – “When it comes to speaking or reading in English, I am extremely scared and underconfident. Nobody bothered to teach us this language – a language that is going to be vital for our community’s progress. Even Babasaheb encouraged us to learn the language for our own emancipation.” In fact, Babasaheb Ambedkar remains her biggest pillar of support and inspiration in her life who she believes has been the source of strength for the community and one who has led her community to getting justice and equality.

In 2024, she enrolled herself as an Intern in a project with the Tata Trusts in the tribal villages of Jawhar taluka of Palghar district in Maharashtra. That experience exposed her to the deplorable condition of Adivasis in the country as well as to the terrible condition of India’s rural areas. Being a city-born and bred woman, that exposure woke her up with a sudden jolt. “I saw pregnant women and elderly being carried in stretchers for miles, passing through rivers on the way, simply because neither were there any communicable roads nor was there any hospital nearby. After those two months there, I knew I had to do something.” She also started voluntarily taking tuitions of marginalized students in her neighbourhood to help them with their studies. From time to time, she also takes part in awareness camps surrounding importance of girls’ education, their health and hygiene.

After her two years in the MA-RM Program, she plans to work with an organization in the sectors of health, education and livelihood for marginalized communities, particularly Dalits and Adivasis. She believes that more and more leadership should arise from these communities to build an inclusive and equal society.



SOMA KRISHNAMURTHY

Warangal, Telangana



An engineer whose heart lies in
working for his native Thoti Adivasi
community

Soma Krishnamurthy's motivation for joining the MA in Rural Management program comes from his identity as a Thoti Adivasi. Native to the Godavari River Basin, the Thotis carry a rich and distinctive cultural heritage as a community of balladeers and tattoo experts. They are known for their splendid narration of stories drawing from Gond and Hindu mythology. However, the community has been experiencing steep cultural erosion in recent times, and is greatly affected by poor education levels, low life expectancy, and loss of traditional knowledge. With a population of less than 5,000, the Thotis are identified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) by the Indian government. Krishnamurthy is deeply interested in arresting the cultural decline of his community and addressing its development challenges.

Growing up in indigent circumstances in a village called Thimmampet in Telangana's Warangal District, Krishnamurthy says that he had first-hand experience of the crippling lack of quality education facilities and limited healthcare access common to Thoti Villages. He lived away from his village to complete his schooling and intermediate education. Thereafter, he enrolled for a B. Tech. in Computer Science and Engineering from the Christu Jyothi Institute of Technology and Science (CJITS), Jangaon, at a distance of a hundred kilometres from Hyderabad.

Krishnamurthy says that his parents are his biggest inspiration. His mother is an Anganwadi worker, dedicated to child nutrition and early education. His father is a social worker involved in community welfare. From them, Krishnamurthy learned the importance of service, empathy, and commitment to society. He has a younger sister who is also pursuing a post-graduate degree. His parents accorded considerable importance to educating their children despite their own limiting circumstances.

Although Krishnamurthy studied engineering, his heart was not in it. Midway through his B. Tech. course, he realised that his passion lay in addressing the challenges that his own community was confronted with. As a forest-dwelling people, the Thoti community depends upon the forest but it has been a victim of land alienation on the one hand, and forest laws that sharply restrict local communities' access to the forest. Krishnamurthy was interested in questions of land rights, forest conservation, and community and individual forest rights that flow from the Forest Rights Act, 2006. He felt the need to acquire the requisite training that would equip him to work for the Thoti community. This led him to apply to the MA in Rural Management program.

In his quest to help his community claim their rights, Krishnamurthy seeks to draw from his training as an engineer. He believes that technology can be a powerful tool for rural transformation and wants to create practical and sustainable solutions for rural challenges. His goal is to establish an organisation that focuses on youth education, healthcare outreach, and sustainable agriculture, while also creating initiatives to document and revive the Thoti community's traditions.

Krishnamurthy enjoys engaging in discussions on social issues, exploring new technologies, and learning from diverse perspectives. He sees himself as part of a new generation of leaders committed to bridging the gap between rural communities and modern opportunities, while protecting the cultural heritage that gives them identity and strength.



SONALI TOPPO

Jalpaiguri, West Bengal



Sonali Toppo teaches young children in the tea gardens of north Bengal's Jalpaiguri District

Wants to work for the well-being of the
tea garden worker community in the
Dooars of West Bengal

Sonali Toppo was born to a tea garden worker couple in the Dooars region of northern Bengal. She is an Oraon Adivasi whose family migrated to the present-day Jalpaiguri District of West Bengal from the Chhotanagpur region three generations ago. Her father is a permanent worker in the tea-garden while her mother is a seasonal worker. Sonali speaks Sadri as her native tongue.

After her early childhood in the tea garden, she moved to a government hostel to continue her schooling. At school, Sonali experienced the discrimination that Adivasi tea garden workers regularly face. Many of her teachers looked down upon Adivasi students and regularly taunted them for attending school instead of grazing cattle. Adivasi children were treated with disdain for their dark complexion.

Upon completing school, Sonali received support to study for a college degree from Himalayan Prayatn, an Adivasi youth collective working in the Dooars region. She was among the first young people from the tea garden community to travel outside West Bengal for higher education. Sonali joined a Bachelor's course in Social Work (BSW) at Mangalore University, Karnataka.

Used to speaking Bangla and Hindi in school, Sonali initially faced an intense language barrier in her new setting. She learnt to speak English first and then Kannada. As she settled down, Sonali grew pleasantly surprised to see how much better schools and Anganwadis functioned in comparison with her native region. She gained self-confidence. "I began to appreciate social issues for what they are," she says, as she closely examined malnutrition, alcoholism, and domestic violence, problems that she was familiar with from her childhood.

The BSW program made it possible for Sonali to make extended field visits to schools, Anganwadis, and Community Health Centres. She learnt from these experiences, going on to participate in household health surveys and door-to-door COVID-19 awareness and vaccination campaigns.

Upon completing her degree, Sonali returned to the Dooars to work with Himalayan Prayatn. Eager to contribute to her society, she taught school children as a residential instructor for three months. She would tell them of opportunities for subsidised higher education beyond the Dooars. Subsequently, Sonali joined fieldworkers for a study of migration from north Bengal being conducted by Aajeevika Bureau. This helped her understand the magnitude of widespread migration from the region.

Sonali was interested in working in the Dooars but opportunities for a trained social worker were hard to come by. She received the Gram Bandhu Fellowship in 2024. This took her to the Lokbharati University for Rural Innovation, Sanosara, Gujarat. After spending time there, Sonali returned to the Dooars, determined to study for a post-graduate degree so that she could place herself on a sounder footing to work with the tea garden worker community.

"I am determined to work for the emancipation of girls and women in the tea gardens," says Sonali, adding, "discrimination against girl children, alcoholism and domestic violence are rampant in the Dooars. I want to put an end to them so that women can live with the freedom that they deserve as fellow human beings."

Sonali enjoys spending time with the elderly as well as with children. She also loves doing craftwork and dancing the *jhumair* dance that is traditional to the Oraons and other Chhotanagpur Adivasi communities.



SUMAN AIMPA

Jodhpur, Rajasthan



Suman (fourth in row from the left on stage) generating awareness about abolishing child marriage in a local school

Dalit rights activist, focused on
strengthening grassroots struggles with
policy for rural transformation

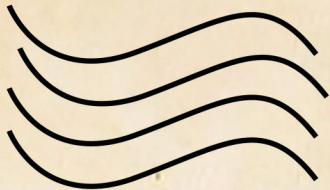
Suman, 25, is a committed Dalit rights activist whose journey reflects both resilience and purpose. She has had a long-standing association with the Samta Sainik Dal, where she currently serves as its Block President. For her, higher education has never been a straightforward path but rather one marked by struggle, recovery, and determination.

She comes from Nandwan, a village in Jodhpur district of Rajasthan, where her father works as a daily-wage labourer and the family's livelihood depends on collective hard work to put food on the table. Suman belongs to the Meghwal community, a Scheduled Caste from northern India. Growing up with limited resources but immense resolve, she drew strength from the teachings of Baba Saheb Ambedkar, whose ideals of equality, justice, and dignity continue to guide her activism. After completing her BA from Jai Narain Vyas University, Jodhpur, Suman reflects on 2019 as a defining year in her life. A sudden and severe illness tested both her physical and mental health, threatening her academic journey. Yet she persisted, completing her degree against all odds. That difficult phase became a lesson in resilience and helped her clarify what she wanted her life's work to be.

Her answer lay in social work. After completing class 12th, she taught at a private primary school for two years, after which she joined a social audit team for six months. This experience gave her first-hand insight into rural governance and accountability. She later worked for sixteen months with the Sochna Evam Rozgar Adhikar Abhiyan, where she engaged directly with marginalized communities, raising awareness about entitlements and constitutional rights. Her next 10 months with the Grameen Evam Samajik Vikas Sansthan (Ajmer) focused on preventing child marriage and mobilizing youth, women, and children. She actively campaigned against superstitions and harmful traditions while ensuring that Dalit, Adivasi, and economically disadvantaged families could access government schemes and essential services. Through these experiences, she has consistently challenged caste-based discrimination and inequality, working to create spaces of dignity and justice for the most excluded.

Having seen families go without food, children denied education, and widening inequalities in rural India, Suman recognizes these struggles not as distant issues but as her own lived reality. This conviction has made her both a voice of resistance against casteism and an advocate for equal rights.

By joining the MA in Rural Management at SNU, Suman seeks to bridge her grassroots activism with academic knowledge, developing practical strategies for rural transformation. Guided by values of truth, honesty, and empathy, and inspired by Ambedkar's vision of social justice, she has dedicated herself to the belief that real victory lies not in personal success but in collective progress.



SUMESH DRAVIDA

Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala



Sumesh speaking at a cultural event at Eklavya Indian Foundation, Nagpur

Passionate youth leader working in

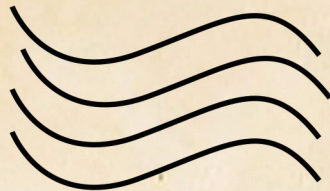
rural and tribal regions

Sumesh hails from Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala and belongs to the Kurava community (SC) community. He has completed his BA in Buddhist Studies in Nagpur, Maharashtra. Coming from a humble background, with his father working as a laborer, Sumesh has faced economic challenges throughout his life. Despite these difficulties, he has remained committed to his education and future aspirations.

He is deeply interested in working for the development of rural areas and in bringing positive change to underprivileged communities. Recently, he completed a two-month internship under the Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) in Maharashtra. This program, focused on the educational development of tribal students, providing him with valuable insights into grassroots work.

His long-term vision is to establish or lead impactful initiatives that empower rural communities by utilizing local resources, promoting participatory decision-making, and enhancing self-reliance. He believes that sustainable development requires integrating traditional knowledge with modern innovations, and he is committed to working on solutions that are environmentally sustainable and culturally respectful, while addressing the needs essential for community development. For the advancement of rural areas, he aims to promote agricultural-based entrepreneurship, enhance digital literacy, and facilitate the adoption of renewable energy, which could be transformative for rural regions.

Sumesh is hardworking, sincere, and passionate about contributing to society, particularly in rural and tribal regions. He believes that MA-RM at SNU will provide him with the ideas, knowledge, and skills necessary to implement his vision.



SUNNY RAJAK

East Singhbhum, Jharkhand



A passionate youth change-maker

Sunny Rajak conducting a session for college students on communication skills

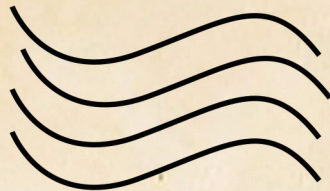
Sunny Rajak hails from Kadma, East Singhbhum district, Jharkhand. As a first-generation learner from the Dhobi community (SC), his pursuit of higher education has been both a dream and a major challenge due to deep-rooted social and economic barriers. His family consists of three members, with his parents working as daily laborers at the Dhobi Ghat. Their work is seasonal, lasting only 8 to 10 months a year, and their income is unstable and insufficient to meet even their basic needs.

Despite these hardships, Sunny has always been determined to educate himself and improve not only his own life but also the lives of others in his community. He recently completed his Bachelor of Commerce (Honours) from Jamshedpur Co-operative College, affiliated with Kolhan University, Chaibasa. His education has equipped him with foundational knowledge in finance, economics, and organizational management, and has sparked a strong interest in addressing the challenges faced by rural communities. Sunny's academic journey has not been easy. Completing secondary education was a major milestone, especially with no one to guide him. The biggest barrier was the cost of studying in an English-medium school, something his mother insisted upon despite the financial burden. His father managed to secure some help for him through a teacher, who provided monetary support, books, and stationery. Through careful cost-cutting and sacrifices, his parents ensured that he could continue his studies.

Sunny's journey toward rural management began when he volunteered in initiatives focused on adult literacy and healthcare. He witnessed firsthand the challenges in rural education and healthcare systems, schools lacking trained teachers, hospitals located far from villages, and children dropping out due to illness and poverty. He also became aware of the struggles faced by farmers, including crop failure caused by climate change, price fluctuations, and the lack of alternative employment opportunities.

These experiences shaped Sunny's understanding of the real issues in rural areas. He realized that the solution lies in collaborative efforts involving local communities, the government, NGOs, and other stakeholders to build sustainable and inclusive development models. His volunteer work taught him how to engage with people, listen to their concerns, and think critically about solving complex problems. Sunny's decision to pursue an MA in Rural Management stems from his desire to create impactful change in rural India. He learned about the program through the Tata Steel Foundation and, upon exploring it further, realized that it aligns perfectly with his aspiration to contribute to social justice and uplift underprivileged communities like his own.

He is particularly drawn to the RM program at SNU because of its unique approach to rural development, which emphasizes research, writing, and practical understanding. The curriculum's focus on real-world rural challenges and innovative, sustainable solutions excites him, especially the opportunity to gain new skills in research, analysis, and community engagement. He also looks forward to collaborating with fellow students who share the same passion for rural development, believing that SNU's environment of diversity, collaboration, and learning will prepare him to become a leader in the field. Sunny firmly believes that rural India needs strong leadership, better education, accessible healthcare, and sustainable agriculture to thrive. He aspires to be part of this transformation. He sees the MA in Rural Management program as an essential step in equipping himself with the tools to contribute meaningfully and help people from communities like his live better, healthier, and more empowered lives.



SUREKHA YADAV

Betul, Madhya Pradesh



Fearlessly challenged social evils, wants
to work with Adivasis and Dalits in her
region

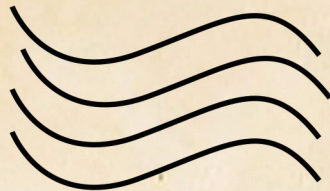
Surekha comes from Hirawadi village in Betul district of Madhya Pradesh. Her village is surrounded by Adivasi villages and she has observed their culture closely. She is aware and appreciative of their culture and heritage from a young age. Her father works as a daily labourer and her mother is a home-maker. Though an extremely bright student, she had to struggle a lot for completing her education. She cycled 15 kilometers everyday to reach her junior college where she pursued BSc Biology (Hons). "After that, my father refused to educate me further and wanted to marry me off. He even refused to fund my higher education but I was determined to study!" She joined the renowned NGO Eklavya who work in the field of education of marginalized communities to fund her graduation. She joined the organisation in 2022 as a part-time community mobilizer and worked with Adivasi and Dalit children who had dropped out along with their parents in an attempt to bring the former back to the educational system.

"Before joining Eklavya, I used to notice how more and more Dalit and Adivasi children were discontinuing their education because they were extremely poor and had to support their parents. Many of them had to work in other's fields or when their parents migrated to nearby towns, they had to stay back and take care of the household. But I was not able to do anything about it. Eklavya changed that. Eklavya used to train us on issues of caste and gender discrimination, land rights etc. and we then further brought these up and discussed with the children and their parents."

Her family members and her village were not happy with her working with Dalits and Adivasis as they considered them "impure". They wanted her to take purificatory baths every time she came back from work. Surekha stood up against them by underlining that such regressive thoughts were theirs and not hers and hence, they should purify themselves, not her!

She found hope and inspiration in Sunita Chauhan, her teacher from college who brought up discussions on resistance and the tools and skills to engage in it. Those discussions resonated a lot with Sunita and her own struggles as a woman. It was through such discussions and her exposure in Eklavya that she became determined to bring in effective change in her area. She is determined to work with Adivasi and Dalit communities in future, preferably in her region - "So many people from these communities are not getting their rightful benefits simply because they are poor and uneducated. They do not know how to resist or the fact that they could resist. I want to change that."

She loves history and reading books. She often takes refuge in Kamala Bhasin's book 'Mitwa', an empowering story of a young girl who despite being refused by her family to learn how to drive a tractor, she does and during a moment of her father's deteriorating health, successfully takes him to the hospital by driving it. In a world of patriarchal violence, Surekha has till now written her own story and set her own goals and dreams on her own terms.



VARSHA KOUSHIK

Dewas, Madhya Pradesh



Dalit youth leader determined to
address and mitigate violence and
injustice against women and girls

Varsha comes from Kanwlasa village in Dewas district of Madhya Pradesh. As a woman from the Chamar community (SC), she had to challenge both patriarchy and caste violence in order to pursue her education. Her mother is a home-maker and her father works as a labourer. He works on farms and often must migrate to nearby areas whenever he finds no work in and around the village. As the eldest child, Varsha had to then help out her mother in the house during those times. She completed her B.Sc with Botany major from Government College, Dewas.

Growing up, she had to encounter caste-based violence on an everyday basis. The Jat villagers around her neighbourhood would never invite them to their festivals. They also took water from their houses to feed their cows which made Varsha realize how Jat households in their area equated them with their animals. In her community and her area, she witnessed how women were not allowed to own property, get educated or take their own decisions. However, she received tremendous support from her family – “My parents have never forced me to do anything. When others bring up the issue of my marriage, they resist saying that the decision is mine to take. They have always supported me in a way. If tomorrow I wish to marry, they will support me then too.”

Her maternal uncle has been her biggest source of inspiration. He is associated with the renowned NGO Samaj Pragati Sahayog which has enabled him to bring big changes in villages in the area. It was through his support and advice that her mother got associated with a Self Help Group (SHG) who in turn educated and empowered her mother with regards to financial management and literacy. Varsha had seen only challenges till then – be it in her community or in the villages around – such as education, health, livelihood, discrimination or inequality but her uncle brought in hope for her. She understood that there remained solutions too. It was her uncle who told her about the MA-RM Program and she thought this was a perfect opportunity – “Till now I was only witnessing problems in the villages and in my life but I could not do anything about addressing them. When I heard about the Program from my uncle, I knew that this could be my opportunity to find solutions to my problems.”

After her two years in the Program, she is determined to work towards education of girls and women as she believes that that remains fundamental to addressing violence and injustice in society. She is eager and willing to work in any organization situated in any part of the country with the aim of putting her learnings from the Program to use.



VARSHA RANI

Rajnandgaon, Chhattisgarh



Varsha (fourth from the left) ready to perform a tribal dance with her peers during her graduation ceremony

Working on women's empowerment,
organic farming, and environmental
awareness

Varsha Rani comes from Belargondi village in Rajnandgaon district, Chhattisgarh, where her family of five including parents, grandfather, and younger brother, embody the quiet strength of rural life. Her father, trained at an ITI, balances his work as a salesman at the PDS center with farming, while her mother manages the household. For the past two years, both her parents have been quite unwell, due to which they are unable to farm. Growing up in such an environment, Varsha learned early that resilience, adaptability, and a strong sense of responsibility are everyday values, not abstract ideals. Varsha also grew up witnessing her father's struggle with alcohol. His drinking often deepened the family's financial strain and created tension at home, leaving a mark on her childhood. Yet, instead of turning away in despair, she learned to understand how such struggles were tied to larger patterns of poverty and hardship in rural life.

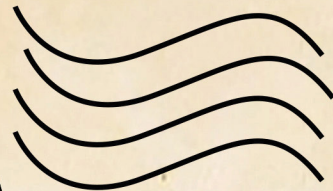
She completed a BSc (Hons) in Rural Technology at Guru Ghasidas University, Bilaspur. Her academic journey reflects both discipline and curiosity. During her bachelor's degree she intently studied the role of arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi in enhancing soil fertility and plant growth, applying both field and laboratory methods to understand sustainable farming practices.

Beyond academics, Varsha has been an active NSS volunteer for three years, participating in special camps that involved health awareness drives, sanitation campaigns, tree plantations, and cultural programs. She often went door to door, listening to people's concerns, an experience that taught her patience and the art of building trust. Under the National Rural Livelihood Mission, she worked on women's empowerment activities, teaching self-defense to schoolgirls and supporting education during the COVID-19 pandemic. She has also trained people in mushroom cultivation, helping them explore small but impactful livelihood opportunities.

Her experiences are complemented by moments of personal growth. A ten-day course in Vipassana meditation at Dhamma Ketu, Durg, left a deep impression on her, teaching her mindfulness, discipline, and an appreciation of impermanence. Participation in national youth programs at New Delhi gave her opportunities to lead cultural activities and work in groups, sharpening her teamwork and leadership skills.

Along the way, Varsha has built a versatile skill set from socio-economic surveys and community mobilization to technical know-how in GIS, mapping tools, and organic farming methods. She sees rural development not merely as infrastructure-building but as a process of listening, empowering, and working alongside people as they navigate their own challenges.

At just 21, Varsha dreams of contributing to grassroots development, spreading environmental awareness, helping people access opportunities they often don't know exist, and bridging the gap between policy and practice. As she reflects, "Early responsibilities showed me that wisdom is not bound to age but grows through lived experiences." For her, real change begins when communities are not passive recipients but citizens who actively build their futures.



YAMINEE SHYAM

Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh



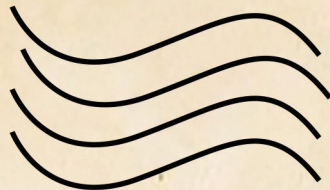
Youth leader working on food and
nutrition among rural and tribal
communities

Yaminee Shyam is from Sarkanda in Bilaspur district, Chhattisgarh and comes from the Gond Adivasi community. She completed her BSc in Clinical Nutrition from Government Bilasa Girls Postgraduate College, Bilaspur, and earned an MSc in Food and Nutrition from the same institution. She completed a three-month internship at SIMS Hospital, Bilaspur.

Her mother, grandmother, and maternal uncle have supported her education. Yaminee's mother is a single parent who, after her father died, raised and educated both Yaminee and her sibling. Alongside her work at the Anganwadi, her mother also does daily wage labour in other households to sustain the family. After school, pursuing further education was challenging as her family was struggling to support her. With the support of her grandmother and maternal uncle, she was able to continue her education and reach where she is today.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, Yaminee provided tuition classes to help with household expenses. Alongside her studies, she also worked as a teacher in a private school, contributing to her mother's income. After the lockdown, in 2021, she began working with the organization *Adivasi Akshar Utthan* with Anita Gond, who is an MA RM first batch alumna. The organization focused on mentally and academically empowering children and providing them with free education. This gave Yaminee valuable learning experiences. During her three-month internship, Yaminee witnessed firsthand the challenges faced by rural communities, especially in terms of health and nutrition. She observed how rural people struggled with diet-related health issues and how, many women, after a certain age, suffered from various illnesses due to a lack of proper nutrition and knowledge about healthy eating. These experiences sparked her desire to work for the well-being of rural people and villages.

With the continued support of her family and the guidance of friends like Anita Gond, Yaminee learned about the MA in Rural Management program. She believes this course is the right platform to fulfil her aspiration of working for rural communities, particularly to educate them about food and nutrition and to help them improve their health and quality of life.



ZAIUR REHMAN

Jashpur District, Chhattisgarh



Zaiur Rehman speaking to a group of women farm workers in his native village

Intent on creating a synergy between
agriculture, technology, markets and
sound human values

Zaiur Rehman was born in Gaya, Bihar, but grew up in a village in Jashpur District, Chhattisgarh. His father, a diesel engine mechanic, had an abiding interest in agriculture, livestock, and aquaculture, and dreamt of building a hi-tech farm in the countryside. Consequently, he migrated to Chhattisgarh with his family and set up house in Bataikela village, close to Chhattisgarh's border with Jharkhand and Odisha. Zaiur's father continued to work as a mechanic, saving up to pursue his dreams of setting up an integrated farm.

As a boy, Zaiur commuted long-distance by bus to his school which offered a higher quality of education than the ones closer by. As he and his siblings travelled up and down every day on the crowded bus, Zaiur began to understand how poor quality school education, bad roads, and lack of health facilities made life hard for people living in villages.

Ill-luck struck in 2019 when Zaiur's father passed away, his dreams yet to be fulfilled. Struggling to come to terms with his untimely demise, Zaiur's mother, maternal cousin, and elder brother kept the household afloat with young Zaiur himself taking on additional responsibilities.

Zaiur remained focussed on his studies. His outstanding school performance helped him secure a scholarship for undergraduate studies from the Reliance Foundation. He enrolled for a BSc (Honours) in Rural Technology at Guru Ghasidas University, a Central University well-known for quality higher education in Chhattisgarh. Zaiur says, "My father dreamt of becoming a farmer – that's why I chose this course. It gave me the feeling that I was walking in the direction in which he himself would have wanted me to go."

In college, Zaiur was actively involved in several social and environmental projects. He led a mushroom production project that helped raise sales by 30% by focussing on planning and local marketing. He also built a low-cost hydroponics model from recycled material, and made vermiwash and designed compost systems to improve soil fertility.

In the final year of his degree, Zaiur worked on a waste management project in the city of Bilaspur. His team surveyed the city's 70 wards to evaluate the status of municipal bins, and interviewed city residents. "The project taught me how to collect data systematically and develop the skill of interacting with different kinds of people," he says with a bright smile.

Zaiur loves teaching. He taught at a local madrasa and inspired many of his students to pursue formal education alongside Islamic studies. He actively participates in youth activities in his village and has been an NSS volunteer. "My experiences have taught me the importance of listening to people," he says.

Zaiur's background in rural technology has imparted him skills that he believes will add value to his capacities as a future rural management professional. Zaiur is currently learning tools such as ArcGIS 10.8 for mapping and Super Decisions v2 which can strengthen informed decision-making.

"My ambition is to start a rural development-cum-livelihoods centre for youth in my native village Bataikela," Zaiur says. "I want it to combine formal schooling and vocational training, and ensure a strong market linkage. And, simultaneously, it will instill the values of honesty, compassion, and accountability among youth," he adds. Zaiur remains a firm believer in the values of justice, compassion and accountability.

By way of hobbies, Zaiur enjoys solo cycling, badminton, and writing Urdu poetry. He likes to meet new people and getting to know about them and the places they come from.



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