

SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



MA in Rural Management

Student Profiles

2026-2028

INTRODUCTION

In September 2023, the Shiv Nadar University launched a first-of-its-kind MA in Rural Management program. This more-than-academic program is unique in many different ways: we have a curriculum, which aims to equip students to become leaders of change in rural India, and an innovative pedagogy, which focuses on field-based learning, aimed at designing the best solutions to the challenges of rural economy and society.

Perhaps the most unprecedented feature of the program is our unique cohort of students who are drawn from extremely disadvantaged regions and communities. In our first four batches, we have had 168 students, of which 93 are women. 73 students belong to Adivasi communities, 39 are OBCs, 27 Dalits and 11 Muslims. They come from 16 States, covering the most deprived districts of the country. What has been most gratifying is the kind of classroom we have, where both faculty and students learn from each other's knowledge and experiences.

Our dream is to create a powerful community of change-makers, all working closely together to support each other and collectively realise the goal of rural transformation, especially in the neglected and under-served geographies of India.

For the fourth batch, we received 244 applications, of which we interviewed a total of 169 candidates. Of these, after an extremely rigorous, multi-stage selection process, we arrived at a final list of 47 students for the fourth batch. We consider ourselves deeply fortunate that we have such excellent 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 47 students represent the diverse richness of this country, coming as they do from across 36 districts in 12 States of India. 29 of them are women. 32 belong to India's neglected Adivasi and Dalit communities.

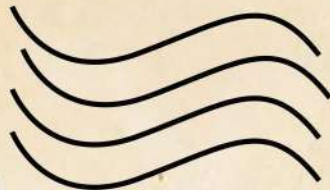
For us, these are the future leaders of our country, providing a new vision for participatory, sustainable and inclusive development based on an ethics of care, not only for India's deprived regions and communities, but also for the country and even for the planet as a whole.

We are thrilled to bring to you a brief introduction to these 47 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

15th September 2026



AJAY KHANDELWAL

DEWAS DISTRICT MADHYA PRADESH



Ajay Khandelwal is seen explaining a chart to members of an SHG

From experiencing caste discrimination and
educational barriers, Ajay now works with
rural communities on public health and
social development.

Ajay Khandelwal belongs to the Dalit community and comes from Bairagada, a small village in Dewas district of Madhya Pradesh. Growing up in a family with limited financial resources, he witnessed the everyday realities of poverty, caste discrimination, and unequal access to education from an early age. These experiences shaped not only his childhood but also his determination to understand why such inequalities persist and how they can be addressed.

Ajay is the eldest of three sons. His parents worked as daily wage labourers for several years before his father began cultivating a small plot of land near a forest. The family's livelihood remains uncertain, as farming depends entirely on a single rain-fed crop each year. Every season begins with borrowed money, and an unsuccessful harvest often leaves the family burdened with debt. Living through these challenges gave Ajay a deep appreciation of the struggles faced by rural households and the resilience required to overcome them.

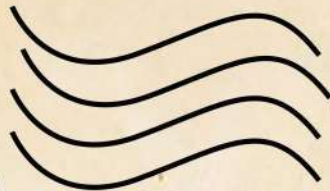
His educational journey was marked by constant obstacles. Like most children in his village, Ajay began his schooling in a government school where poor infrastructure and inadequate teaching affected students' learning. By the time he reached Class 6, he realised that he was still unable to read Hindi fluently. Concerned about his education, his maternal uncle enrolled him in a private school, where he studied until Class 8. However, rising school fees soon became unaffordable, forcing him to return to a government school nearly ten kilometres from his village. Despite these setbacks, he completed his higher secondary education and later enrolled in the Government College at Bagli, where he earned a Bachelor's degree in Arts after financial constraints prevented him from continuing his preparation for competitive entrance examinations.

Alongside these academic struggles, Ajay's understanding of society was shaped by the discrimination he experienced as a Dalit child. In school, Dalit students were made to sit separately from their classmates and were served midday meals apart from everyone else. He vividly remembers being reprimanded for using the village handpump because members of the dominant caste believed he had "polluted" it. During community celebrations, his family was invited to eat only after everyone else had finished and was made to sit separately. Although he did not yet have the language to describe these experiences, they left him with a question that stayed with him throughout his childhood: why should a person's dignity be determined by their caste?

The answers to these questions began to emerge when Ajay joined a local non-governmental organisation in search of employment. What initially seemed like a job gradually became a turning point in his life. Through regular training programmes and close engagement with communities, he was introduced to concepts such as caste discrimination, gender inequality, patriarchy, and social exclusion. For the first time, he realised that the injustices he had witnessed throughout his life were part of larger structural inequalities. This understanding transformed his perspective and inspired him to pursue a career in social development.

Over the past three years, Ajay has worked with the nationally renowned NGO Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS), primarily in the field of community health. His work exposed him to widespread anaemia, malnutrition, poor access to healthcare, and limited awareness of preventive health practices in rural communities. Working closely with families helped him understand that health outcomes are deeply intertwined with social and economic inequalities. These experiences strengthened his desire to work at the intersection of public health, social justice, and rural development.

When Ajay learned about Shiv Nadar University's MA in Rural Management Program, he recognised an opportunity to study the very questions that had shaped his own life. Despite significant financial constraints, he saved money little by little to submit his application. Receiving an interview invitation was the first step towards a dream that had once seemed beyond his reach. Today, he hopes to deepen his understanding of caste, gender, public health, and rural development while learning how research, policy, and community engagement can contribute to meaningful social change. Drawing upon his own lived experiences, Ajay aspires to work alongside marginalised communities and help build a society where dignity, opportunity, and access to basic rights are not determined by caste, gender, or economic background.



AKASH MUKUNDA DHANVE

**BEED DISTRICT
MAHARASHTRA**



Akash belongs to the drought-prone Beed district, driving his passion for rural development, social justice, and community empowerment.

Shaped by drought, caste exclusion and
rural inequality, Akash wants to work
on rural governance, livelihoods and
community development.

Akash Mukunda Dhanve comes from Neknoor, a town in Beed district of Maharashtra, a region that has long struggled with recurring droughts, water scarcity, and agrarian distress. Growing up in this environment, he witnessed how uncertain livelihoods, limited opportunities, and social inequalities shaped the lives of rural families.

Akash is among the first members of his family to pursue higher education. Like many households in his region, his family experienced the challenges that accompany an agrarian economy marked by recurring droughts and economic uncertainty. Watching farmers struggle with unpredictable rainfall, rural youth migrate in search of work, and families cope with limited opportunities, gave him an early understanding of the complex realities of village life.

His perspective on social justice was also shaped by an event that left a lasting impression on his family and community. In the mid-1990s, a young boy from his community entered a temple, triggering caste tensions that escalated into violence. In its aftermath, several families, including Akash's, were forced to leave the main village and rebuild their lives nearly two kilometres away on its outskirts. Although the incident occurred during his early childhood, its consequences continued to shape his family's experiences and deepened his understanding of how caste-based discrimination and exclusion can persist across generations.

Akash pursued a Bachelor's degree in Political Science, where he developed an interest in governance, democratic institutions, and public policy. His studies encouraged him to think critically about the role of government, local institutions, and citizen participation in improving people's lives. At the same time, he remained closely connected to his village and neighbouring communities, where he observed the challenges of inadequate educational opportunities, unemployment, seasonal migration, the vulnerabilities faced by women, and the hardships experienced by small and marginal farmers. These experiences strengthened his belief that meaningful development must emerge from the aspirations and participation of local communities themselves.

Over time, Akash became increasingly interested in understanding the structural causes of rural inequality. He believes that lasting social change requires not only better policies but also stronger local institutions and active community participation. His interest gradually expanded to issues such as rural education, farmers' livelihoods, women's empowerment, employment opportunities for rural youth, and the effective functioning of Panchayati Raj institutions. Living in a region that is highly vulnerable to drought also made him aware of the growing challenges posed by climate change and environmental degradation.

When Akash learned about the MA in Rural Management Program at Shiv Nadar University, he saw it as an opportunity to build the knowledge and practical skills needed to address these challenges. He hopes to deepen his understanding of rural governance, development policy, and community engagement while learning how research and practice can contribute to inclusive and sustainable development. For him, higher education represents not only personal growth but also a responsibility to contribute meaningfully to the communities that shaped his life.

Inspired by the ideals of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and his vision of equality, education, and social justice, Akash hopes to work with organisations engaged in rural development before establishing a social enterprise dedicated to supporting rural and marginalised communities. He aspires to expand educational opportunities for disadvantaged students, strengthen farmers' livelihoods, create employment opportunities for rural youth, and promote community-led solutions to water scarcity and environmental conservation. He also hopes to encourage greater social, economic, and political participation of Bahun communities by supporting leadership development and improving access to opportunities.

For Akash, education is not simply a means of individual success but a powerful tool for strengthening rural communities. Drawing upon his own experiences, he hopes to contribute towards building villages where opportunity, dignity, and sustainable development are accessible to everyone, regardless of their social or economic background.



AKHIRA JAHAN

NUH (MEWAT) DISTRICT HARYANA



Akhira (In the middle) with her students

The first girl in her family to pursue a
postgraduate degree, Akhira wants to
promote girls' education in her
community.

Akhira Jahan is a Muslim woman from Sakras village in Haryana's Mewat (Nuh) district, where 80% of Meo Muslims reside, and communities continue to face significant challenges in access to education, healthcare, livelihoods, safe drinking water and financial opportunities. As a young woman growing up in this environment, Akhira experienced many of these realities herself. Yet, rather than allowing these circumstances to limit her aspirations, she chose education as a pathway to transform her own life and create opportunities for others.

Akhira is the first girl in her family to pursue a postgraduate degree. Growing up in a traditional rural society, she understood from an early age that girls often faced expectations that prioritised household responsibilities over education. For many families, concerns around tradition, social expectations and women's honour could make it difficult for girls to travel outside their villages or pursue higher education. Coming from a modest family, Akhira had to navigate these challenges while holding firmly to her dream of becoming educated and building a meaningful career.

A defining moment in her life came on 11 May 2018, when she lost her father. His wish was for Akhira to receive a good education and become a teacher. After his passing, this dream became a source of strength and determination for her. She resolved to honour his aspirations by continuing her education and building a future through her own hard work.

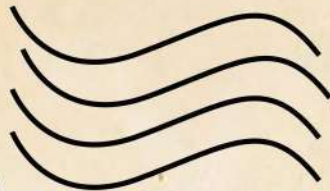
Akhira had dreamed of becoming a teacher from a young age because she believed that education could change lives. During her BA, she began working as a teacher with Impact Spectra Girl Child Education. This allowed her not only to contribute towards her own education but also to support her family financially. After the BA, she started teaching at Madrasa Makhtab Kullihatussulihat.

Her journey into higher education was itself an important milestone. She enrolled for a BA at Government Women's College, Salaheri, Nuh. For Akhira, travelling to college represented a major step beyond the familiar boundaries of her home and community. She recalls that it was the first time she travelled outside her tehsil to pursue her education independently. The college was around 30 kilometres away, and during her first year, a family member accompanied her every day. Gradually, however, she gained the confidence to make the journey herself and navigate a world that had once seemed unfamiliar.

Her experience as a teacher gave her an even stronger sense of purpose. She worked with girls whose families either could not afford their education or were hesitant to allow them to study outside their homes. Seeing their aspirations and the barriers standing between them and their dreams made Akhira realise that her educational journey could not be only about herself. She began organising door-to-door awareness campaigns, speaking with families and encouraging parents to recognise the importance of educating their daughters. Through these interactions, she saw that change often begins with a conversation: when families are given information, encouragement and support, attitudes towards girls' education can gradually change. These experiences have shaped Akhira's belief that education is one of the most powerful foundations for lasting social change. For her, education means much more than obtaining a degree. It represents confidence, independence, dignity and the ability to imagine possibilities beyond the circumstances into which one is born.

Coming from Mewat, gaining admission to Shiv Nadar University is a dream she once could hardly imagine. She had rarely travelled beyond the familiar surroundings of her community and initially felt apprehensive about stepping into an unfamiliar world. Today, that same journey has given her a new sense of confidence. She has learned to embrace new experiences, meet people from different backgrounds and approach challenges with courage.

At Shiv Nadar University, Akhira begins a new chapter in her life. She hopes to expand her knowledge, develop new perspectives and gain the skills and confidence necessary to turn her aspirations into action. She is determined to make the most of this opportunity through hard work, dedication and a willingness to learn. But Akhira's ambitions extend far beyond her own academic and professional success. She wants to become a role model for girls who continue to face social or familial barriers to education. She hopes that her own journey from a village in Mewat to a university campus can demonstrate to other young women that their circumstances need not determine the limits of their dreams. Her long-term aspiration is to continue pursuing higher education while working to promote girls' education and women's empowerment in her community. She wants to return the opportunities she has received by helping other girls discover their own potential and encouraging families to invest in the education of their daughters.



ANIL KUMAR VASAVA RAYSINGBHAI

**NARMADA DISTRICT
GUJARAT**



A farmer's son who works with tribal
farmers, Anil wants to contribute to
natural farming and sustainable rural
livelihoods.

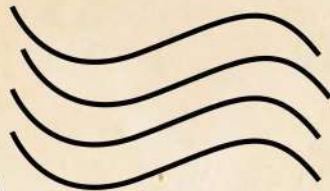
Anil (second from the right) working with tribal farmers in remote areas of Dediapada village in Gujarat to promote sustainable, low-cost natural farming.

Anil comes from Khaidipada, a village in Dediapada taluka of Narmada district, Gujarat. He grew up in a farming family and has spent much of his life closely observing the realities of rural life. Most of his education took place in the village itself. He describes himself as “not a very fast student,” and his family could not afford to send him outside the village for better educational opportunities. Yet this never diminished his desire to learn. As Anil puts it, “If opportunities are limited, the desire to learn should never be limited.” His own experience gradually led him to think about what education could mean for other young people in villages like his and strengthened his desire to work with rural communities.

His connection with farming drew him towards natural farming and questions of the relationship between farmers, soil and the environment. He began organising small meetings in his village, initially speaking with around 10–15 farmers about natural farming practices. He has since worked with the renowned NGO Shroff Foundation Trust, engaging directly with farmers and sharing knowledge about practices such as Jeevamrit, Beejamrit, Ghan Jeevamrit, Dashparni and Neemastra.

Working with farmers has taught Anil that change cannot simply be explained to people. He says, “Explaining change is not enough; it is equally important to understand people’s circumstances, listen to their experiences and build a relationship of trust with them.” These interactions have also made him more attentive to the knowledge already present within rural communities. He believes farmers carry a wealth of experience that can become more useful when combined with education, appropriate guidance and supportive policies. For Anil, learning also finds meaning through sharing. “If I learn something new, I should share it with others. That is when my learning becomes meaningful.” Seeing a farmer apply something he has learnt and benefit from it gives him a sense of purpose.

Studying Rural Management at Shiv Nadar University is an important next step in this journey. Anil wants to understand rural issues beyond his own experience and learn how programmes and policies are designed, implemented and evaluated in ways that respond to people’s everyday realities. In the future, he hopes to work closely with rural communities on interconnected concerns such as education and employment for young people, sustainable agriculture, natural resource conservation, health and access to basic services. He wants to remain connected to villages like his own and help create opportunities for people growing up with circumstances like his. His journey has left him with a simple conviction: “Circumstances are not always in our hands, but trying to change them is.” For Anil, Rural Management is an opportunity to bring together his experience as a farmer’s son, his work with farmers and his continuing desire to learn, and use them to contribute to grounded, lasting change in rural communities.



ANJALI BARA

JALPAIGURI DISTRICT WEST BENGAL



Anjali with children of Damdim Public School in Betbari Tea Garden, Jalpaiguri District, West Bengal. She taught primary school students there as part of an internship during her undergraduate degree.

The first in her extended family to pursue higher education, Anjali wants to create greater opportunities for the Tea Tribe community she grew up in.

Anjali grew up in the Kumlai Tea Garden of Jalpaiguri District, West Bengal. She belongs to the community of Tea Tribes who occupy the Dooars and Terai region of north Bengal. The Tea Tribes comprise multiple Adivasi communities, primarily from the Chotanagpur Plateau, whose ancestors were recruited as indentured labour to work in the tea gardens established by British planters from the latter half of the nineteenth century onwards.

“Both my parents work as tea garden labour,” says Anjali, “I’m the first in my extended family to pursue higher education.”

The achievement matters all the more considering that many young people in the tea gardens drop out without completing school and remain constrained by limited possibilities for employment and social mobility.

“My own younger brother discontinued his education after completing high school, something that disappoints me very much,” Anjali muses.

“The tea-gardens look beautiful from afar and it creates romantic images in the minds of visitors but life within is filled with hunger, poverty, and alcoholism. People get married early and opportunities for social mobility are minimal,” she continues.

The desire to bring about positive social change in this social context was Anjali’s motivation right since school days. The medium of instruction at school was Bengali rather than her native Kurukh or Sadri which is commonly spoken by the Tea Tribes. Yet she completed school with flying colours, scoring 90% in her school-leaving examination. By then she had become a member of Himalayan Prayatn, a pioneering civil society organisation that works with youth in the tea garden community and mentors promising students to help them pursue higher education in prestigious institutions across the country.

Himalayan Prayatn nurtured me academically and helped me find a life beyond the tea gardens. But it also filled me with a desire to work for society. I participated in various activities. One of the things we did was to turn a garbage dump into a garden. This was in a place called Matteli. Can you believe it, the garbage dump was right next to a school! Now it is a beautiful park! Another programme was called Aaja-Aaji which means grandfather-grandmother. We would visit elderly people who were left with no one to take care of them. Some of them suffered from paralysis. We would visit them once a week, clean their houses, and spend the day with them like a picnic, cooking for them and eating with them. We would laugh, talk, and share a little joy with them,” Anjali reminisces.

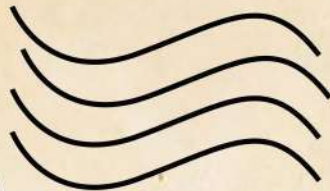
Thanks to Himalayan Prayatn support, Anjali secured admission to a Bachelor’s degree in English Literature from Sacred Heart College (Autonomous), Tirupattur, Tamil Nadu. It was a huge transition.

Sacred Heart College proved to be a steep learning curve. “All teaching, reading and writing was in English. It was entirely new to me and I initially found it hard to keep up. Since I could not afford the fees, I used to work in the library and do part-time jobs during weekends. It was extremely challenging. I went through much emotional turmoil. But the Fathers at the college helped me and I completed my degree successfully,” she says.

Anjali remained in constant touch with her peers from the Tea Tribe community who had stepped out of the tea gardens to study in higher education institutions across the country. She heard about the RM Program at SNU through its alumni and was drawn to it.

“I have experienced intense challenges growing up in the tea gardens and am determined to make things better for future generations. So I felt attracted to this program. But the more I heard about it, the more I began to feel that this program will not only help me find solutions to development problems but it will also help me understand myself as a person,” she asserts.

Anjali enjoys solo travelling to new places, meeting new people, and learning about different cultures. She is multilingual, speaking Sadri, Bengali, Hindi, and English. Among hobbies, she is into dancing and reading.



ANSHIKA MASANI

KHANDWA DISTRICT MADHYA PRADESH



Anshika is a first-generation learner from Madhya Pradesh's Nimar region

The first girl from her village and
neighbouring villages to leave Madhya
Pradesh for higher education, Anshika
wants more girls to participate in deci-
sion-making.

Anshika belongs to the Balahi (also written as Balai) community in the Khandwa District of Madhya Pradesh. Her village Haiderpur is a part of the wider Nimar region. Anshika is the second of three siblings. Her father Dinesh is the breadwinner of the household. He works as an agricultural labourer to support the family.

The Balahi community of Nimar has been immortalised by the ethnographer Stephen Fuchs in his book *The children of Hari*. The Balahi community was traditionally a community of weavers which was driven to indebtedness and bonded labour, a trend accelerated by the industrialisation of textile production from the nineteenth century onward. Remarking on their exploitation and descent into poverty, Fuchs poignantly observes that “[the Nimar Balahis] have been held in their shameful plight by all the holy principles of religion and the most sacred laws of society”. The Balahis are a community of Dalits.

Anshika is a trailblazer for her village community. She says with pride, “I’m the first girl not only from my own village Haiderpur but from all the neighbouring villages to travel out of Madhya Pradesh for higher education.”

Anshika was an outspoken girl, quick to spot and question injustice. Realising that the Gram Panchayat to which her village belonged was being partisan in identifying beneficiaries for the Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana, she questioned the Sarpanch himself. Embarrassed by her questioning, the Gram Panchayat adopted greater transparency in the allocation of funds for constructing houses under the scheme.

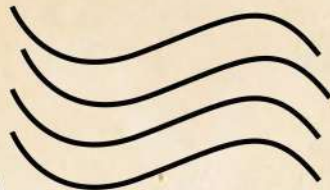
However, her path to the Rural Management Programme at SNU was not an easy one. She says, “As a schoolchild, the school was far away from my village. Consequently, I had to live away from home. I stayed in a hostel till my schooling was complete. Thereafter, I lived with my nanani (maternal grandparents) in the neighbouring Khargone District to complete my BA because the college was nearly a hundred kilometres away from my village.”

Coming from a social setting that believes that a woman’s place is inside the home, Anshika had to rebel against her neighbours and extended family. She found an ally in her father, who resolutely supported her earnestness to study further.

“People would tell my parents ‘what is the point of sending her to study? Teach her to do household chores. Don’t fancy that she will get a job and bring money home’. But my father did not listen to them and encouraged me to study. Both my parents worked hard and supported my aspirations. I am deeply grateful to them,” Anshika says quietly.

“I applied to the Rural Management Programme at SNU because I want to bring about social change in my community, particularly in encouraging more girls to study and become active decision-makers,” she says. Anshika believes that the rural region she belongs to is in dire need of social and material transformation. “I want to empower women to grow conscious of their rights and become an agent for wider societal change. The region I belong to faces acute challenges relating to education, health, and water. I want to address these challenges by getting women to play a more active role in society.”

When she is not thinking about social change, Anshika spends time on the sports field. She is an avid badminton and kabaddi player. In her spare time, she listens to Hindi music. “I’m fond of songs sung by Kishore Kumar,” she says with a smile.



ASHVIN VINZUDA

GIR SOMNATH DISTRICT GUJARAT



Ashvin (right) participating in the celebration of World Environment Day in an Anganwadi with staff and children

From working on his family farm to
working with rural and tribal commu-
nities, Ashvin wants to contribute to
climate-resilient agriculture and liveli-
hoods.

Ashvin Vinzuda grew up in a small village in Gir Somnath district of Gujarat and comes from a Scheduled Caste community. Growing up in a rural environment, he witnessed first-hand the economic vulnerabilities, social exclusion, and barriers to quality education that many families in his community experienced. These experiences shaped his understanding of inequality and gave him a strong desire to use education as a pathway towards meaningful change.

From childhood, Ashvin believed deeply in the transformative power of education. Determined to pursue higher education and expand his ability to serve communities, he earned a Bachelor's degree in Social Work from the MS University, Baroda, one of Gujarat's leading educational institutions. During his undergraduate studies, he also completed a specialized course in Child Development, which strengthened his understanding of the social, educational and developmental needs of children.

After completing his degree, Ashvin chose to take his learning into the field. He spent a year working at the block level in Navsari district of Gujarat, where he worked with tribal children on issues related to education and nutrition. This experience brought him closer to communities and helped him understand the realities that children and families face beyond the classroom. He later continued his work in Dungarpur district of Rajasthan, further expanding his experience of working with rural and tribal communities.

His engagement with rural life began even before his professional work. Coming from a small farming family, Ashvin has himself worked as a farmer. This experience has given him a personal understanding of the uncertainties faced by farming households and the hard work required to sustain a livelihood from agriculture.

Alongside his professional responsibilities, Ashvin has remained closely connected to his own village and community. He has supported and guided children from his village in pursuing education and helped community members access social-security programs and government entitlements. These experiences have reinforced his belief that meaningful development requires not only policies and programs, but also people who can help communities understand, access and make effective use of the opportunities available to them.

Growing up in a rural economy largely dependent on farming, Ashvin has seen how vulnerable agricultural livelihoods can be. He has understood that climate change, water scarcity, limited access to knowledge and changing agricultural conditions can place enormous pressure on farming families. For Ashvin, these challenges are not abstract development issues but realities that he has encountered through his own family and community.

He hopes to develop the knowledge, skills and practical frameworks necessary to work more effectively with farming communities and contribute to building resilient rural livelihoods. He wants to understand how agricultural communities can respond to changing climatic conditions while improving productivity, managing scarce resources and creating more sustainable livelihoods.

Ashvin's long-term vision is deeply rooted in his experiences. He hopes to establish an organisation dedicated to supporting farmers in adopting climate-resilient agriculture and modern farming techniques. He wants to help farmers strengthen their knowledge of water management, sustainable agricultural practices and government schemes related to agriculture. At the same time, he hopes to provide skill-based training to rural youth and women so that they can develop greater economic independence and become less dependent on uncertain sources of livelihood.

Water management is particularly important to his vision. Ashvin believes that responsible and efficient use of water can play a crucial role in improving agricultural productivity while protecting rural communities from increasing environmental pressures. He hopes to promote farming practices that improve crop yields while also making agriculture more sustainable and resilient. Beyond agriculture, Ashvin wants to contribute to the effective implementation of government rural development programs. His experience of helping communities access social security schemes has shown him the importance of ensuring that development programs reach the people for whom they are intended. He hopes to combine his field experience with the knowledge gained through rural management to help design and implement initiatives that create lasting economic opportunities for rural families.

For Ashvin, education is therefore not simply a means of personal advancement. It is a tool for expanding what is possible for communities. His journey from a small village in Gujarat, through social work education and field experiences across Gujarat and Rajasthan, to his pursuit of Rural Management has been guided by a consistent desire to learn and serve.



ASHWIN ADNYANSING BRAMHAN

**WASHIM DISTRICT
MAHARASHTRA**



Ashwin belongs to the Mathura Labhan, Vimukta Jati or Denotified Tribe community

A social worker passionate about issues
faced by denotified tribes.

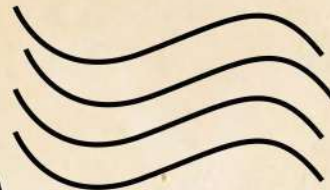
Ashwin Adnyansing Bramhan hails from Ujjwal Nagar village in Manora taluka of Washim district, Maharashtra. He belongs to the Mathura Labhan community, classified under the Vimukta Jati or Denotified Tribe category. Denotified tribes have faced a long history of colonial-era criminalisation, social stigma, displacement, and exclusion, the effects of which continue to limit their access to education, livelihoods, and public services. His community has traditionally depended on livestock rearing, seasonal migration, and trade for its livelihood. Growing up, Ashwin saw how financial hardship, social backwardness, and limited awareness about education often prevented young people from his community from pursuing higher education.

Ashwin completed his primary education at the Zilla Parishad School in his village and continued his secondary and higher secondary education with determination. After completing Class 12, his family faced a major medical emergency that resulted in severe financial suffering. The financial strain forced Ashwin to discontinue his education for a year, creating an interruption at a crucial stage of his studies.

Despite this setback, Ashwin resumed his education and went on to enroll in a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program. His fieldwork brought him into close engagement with rural communities and exposed him to a range of development concerns. He worked with women's self-help groups, participated in health camps, and gained experience in disaster management and the implementation of government welfare programs. These experiences helped him understand how social and economic vulnerabilities intersect in the lives of marginalized communities.

Through his work, Ashwin developed a particular interest in the challenges faced by Denotified Tribe communities and rural populations, especially in accessing education and opportunities for development. Having experienced the financial barriers to education himself, he became increasingly committed to working towards greater educational access and creating pathways for communities that have historically remained excluded from opportunities for advancement.

At the MA in Rural Management program, Ashwin hopes to deepen his understanding of rural development and strengthen his ability to work with marginalized communities. He brings with him both lived experience of the barriers faced by his community and practical exposure to grassroots development through his social work training. He hopes to build on these experiences to contribute to the education, empowerment, and development of Mathura Laban and other rural communities.



ASHWINI PURUSHOTTAM BAWANKAR

BHANDARA DISTRICT MAHARASHTRA



Ashwini during one of her snake rescue operations in Bhandara-Maharashtra.

After more than three years of
volunteering in wildlife rescue and
conservation, Ashwini wants to
connect environmental work with rural
development.

Ashwini comes from Pauni in Maharashtra's Bhandara district, where agriculture and forests define everyday life. Raised in a farming family, she grew up witnessing the challenges of uncertain agriculture, water scarcity, limited educational opportunities and inadequate healthcare. Living close to forests also meant experiencing the fragile relationship between people and wildlife, where crop losses, livestock attacks and occasional threats to human life existed alongside the need to conserve biodiversity. These experiences nurtured her commitment to rural communities and environmental conservation.

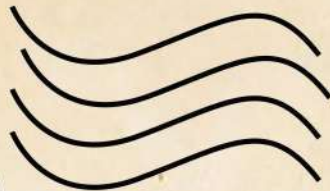
Soon after completing higher secondary school, Ashwini began volunteering with the Wildlife Conservation and Development Multipurpose Organization, an engagement that has continued for more than three years. Her work has included wildlife rescue, tree plantation drives, river conservation campaigns and environmental education in schools. She particularly enjoys using pathnatya (street theatre) to engage communities on issues of conservation and collective responsibility. During school vacations, she has also organized environmental and recreational activities for children, believing that meaningful change begins with the younger generation.

Her work later expanded into disaster preparedness through the Disaster Management Friend initiative, where she received training in first aid, CPR, emergency planning and community response during floods, fires and other disasters. Participating in village awareness campaigns strengthened her confidence in working with communities while reinforcing the importance of preparedness, collective action and local leadership.

Yet, years of volunteering also taught Ashwini an important lesson. While organizing awareness programmes and interacting with villagers, she often encountered questions she could not answer and problems she could not fully address. She realized that commitment alone was insufficient without deeper academic and field understanding. This recognition motivated her to pursue Rural Management, where she hopes to integrate her field experience with rigorous learning in agriculture, ecology, public health, education and rural institutions.

Ashwini's years of grassroots engagement have strengthened her communication, leadership and organizational skills. Whether working with children, coordinating volunteers or mobilizing communities, she has learnt that lasting change depends on listening carefully, earning people's trust and working alongside them rather than prescribing solutions from outside.

Looking ahead, Ashwini hopes to establish her own organization dedicated to rural development, focusing on women's empowerment, children's education, environmental conservation and sustainable livelihoods. She also wishes to continue her education, believing that learning is a lifelong process. She brings to the program not only three years of sustained grassroots experience but also the humility to recognize the limits of what she knows and the determination to keep learning from both communities and classrooms alike.



CHAMELI PURTY

EAST SINGHBHUM DISTRICT JHARKHAND



Chameli (in the middle) making a seasonal calendar of crops with farmers in West Singhbhum

Balancing education, work and family
responsibilities, Chameli wants to work
with Ho Adivasi women on education,
livelihoods and natural resources.

Chameli Purty comes from Salgajhari village in Jamshedpur, East Singhbhum district, Jharkhand, and belongs to the Ho Adivasi community. She was raised in a farming and daily-wage labour family, where her parents worked hard to support their five-member household. Her childhood taught her the values of hard work, resilience, and responsibility, but it also gave her a close understanding of the economic challenges faced by rural families.

A turning point came when her father suffered a serious leg injury in an accident. With him unable to work, much of the family's financial responsibility fell on her mother. Supporting three children's education while managing household expenses became extremely difficult. The family's financial circumstances created many challenges for Chameli's own education, but she remained determined to continue studying. With the support of scholarships, she completed her undergraduate degree in History. Alongside her studies, she also contributed to her family's responsibilities. Although she wanted to pursue higher education, she understood the pressures her family was facing and decided that she would continue learning while also working. This decision became an important part of her journey and taught her how to balance education, work and family responsibilities.

Chameli began her professional journey with the renowned NGO Kalamandir, where she worked as a handicraft artisan. Her work involved creating handicraft products as well as gaining experience in their promotion and sale. The opportunity allowed her to travel to different places, meet people from diverse backgrounds and work closely with others. Over time, these experiences strengthened her confidence, communication skills and ability to work with communities.

In 2025, Chameli took another important step in her journey when she joined the Jiwi Da Hasa project of the nationally recognized NGO Bharat Rural Livelihoods Foundation (BRLF) in Chaibasa block of West Singhbhum district as a Social Mobilizer and Motivator. Her work brought her directly into rural communities, where she collaborated with people on the ground and supported initiatives such as the MGNREGA Mate Forum, Marang Didi Sahayata Kendra and Chuppi Todo ('break the silence')

Through this work, Chameli had the opportunity to engage closely with rural women, MGNREGA mates and community members. She listened to their experiences, understood their concerns and learned how community-level organisations can help people come together to address the challenges they face. Her work taught her that meaningful development begins with communities themselves and that people need both information and platforms through which they can participate in decisions affecting their lives.

At the same time, Chameli continued her own education while working in the field and completed her postgraduate studies. Balancing work and education was not easy, but she remained committed to both. Her experiences taught her that formal education becomes even more meaningful when it is combined with practical engagement and a genuine understanding of people's everyday lives.

Growing up in a rural and Adivasi community, Chameli has seen the challenges faced by families around her, particularly women. Access to education, employment, livelihoods, water and natural resources remains an important concern for many communities. For Adivasi families, forests are also closely connected to everyday life and livelihoods, with many households depending on forest produce and other natural resources. These experiences have strengthened Chameli's desire to work for her community. She wants to better understand the social, economic and environmental challenges affecting Adivasi communities and contribute to solutions that strengthen women's voices, livelihoods and participation.

For Chameli, studying at Shiv Nadar University is an opportunity to take the knowledge and experience she has already gained and give them a new direction. She hopes to develop a deeper understanding of social and development issues, acquire new skills and learn approaches that can make her future work more effective. After completing her studies at SNU, Chameli wants to work closely with the Ho Adivasi community, particularly with women. She hopes to contribute to women's education, empowerment and livelihoods while also working on issues related to forest produce, water and natural resources. She wants women and families in her community to have greater awareness of their rights, resources and available opportunities so that they can participate more actively in decisions that shape their lives. Her vision is rooted in the belief that communities become stronger when people have knowledge, confidence and the ability to make informed choices.



DEEPIKA

JODHPUR DISTRICT RAJASTHAN



Deepika handing over a letter of invitation to attend an all-women labourers' meeting

From an MGNREGA worksite to
starting her own organisation, Deepika
works with widowed women labourers
from marginalised communities.

Deepika's story is one of tireless work with marginalised labourers in Rajasthan. She comes from Keru block of Jodhpur district of Rajasthan and completed her BA Program in distance mode from Jai Narain Vyas University, Jodhpur. Her father, a driver, has stood by her like a rock in her journey of acquiring education. At a time and place where women's education was not looked at all favourably, Deepika's father insisted that she complete her higher education which inspired other young women in her village to pursue further education. Her mother, a farmer and MGNREGA worker, too supported Deepika in following her dreams.

In 2019, she started working as an MGNREGA Mate, a worksite supervisor, in her village wherein she ensured that workers were getting work, overseeing the work done by them, getting their job cards made and ultimately ensuring that they were getting duly paid for the work done by them. It was during that time that she met a few members of Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), a frontline NGO best known for its mobilisation and advocacy for the Right to Information (RTI) Act, which grew out of the demands for minimum wages for workers. A team of MKSS had visited her worksite and on conversing with them she became deeply inspired by their work. Shortly after, she joined MKSS as the Keru Block Resource Person (BRP) and worked extensively with social audits, particularly surrounding MGNREGA. MKSS was vital in her journey of acquiring new leadership skills and understanding of the socio-political world that she is immersed in. "It was only after MKSS that I became aware of the 'social sector' and that my passion, which is helping the marginalised, particularly women and labourers, can be a profession too. MKSS gave me a new lease of confidence and I learnt a lot", Deepika admits.

In 2023, she started working with ActionAid, where her role not only involved social audits but also working closely with mine workers and MGNREGA labourers. She particularly worked with widowed women labourers and workers from Dalit and Adivasi communities. "Most young girls are married early and then most poor or Dalit and Adivasi families who do not own land send their male members to work in the neighbouring mines here. These young workers often die due to silicosis, and several young girls are left widowed, landless and helpless." Deepika works with such young widowed marginalised women labourers who often seek work through MGNREGA. Besides ensuring that they have work and are paid duly, she also ensures that they receive support from other government schemes such as receiving a pension, having a proper job card, creche facilities for their kids, among others.

In 2026, she formally opened her own organisation – Jodhana Mahila Shakti Sangathan that will work towards supporting widowed women labourers from marginalised communities. She believes joining the Rural Management Program at SNU is a necessary step and an important opportunity in her journey towards creating meaningful social change. "Till now I have only seen problems but not many solutions. I am doing a few things at my level but knowing the intensity and gravity of the problems that I regularly encounter in the field, I know that these will not be enough. Through MA-RM, I want to get a deeper understanding of the problems, their root causes and learn various strategies and long-term solutions for addressing them."

In future, while continuing to work for and support her organisation, she wants to learn different strategies, skills and experiences by working with other organisations in other parts of the country. "I have a long road of learning. I want to use all my learning for the betterment of young widowed women and marginalised labourers in my area. I know the situation can change and will change. I will make sure of it." Deepika's assertion, her unwavering determination, empathy and courage is the story of leadership that the MA-RM Program at SNU exists to support.



ELIYA SABAR

GAJAPATI DISTRICT ODISHA



Eliya comes from Odisha where he has worked with the nationally recognized NGO Gram Vikas

From collecting firewood to continue
his education to working on water
security, Eliya wants to work with rural
communities on water and livelihoods.

Eliya Sabar comes from Khiliganda village in Rayagada block of Gajapati district, Odisha. He grew up in a farming family and has closely experienced the realities of rural life. Most of his education took place in and around his village, and he completed a BA in Education with distinction. Eliya's educational journey was not easy. To support his studies, he collected firewood from the forest and sold it in nearby villages. This experience taught him the importance of hard work and persistence. That determination eventually led him to the nationally recognized NGO Gram Vikas, where he spent four years working with rural communities across Ganjam, Gajapati and Kalahandi districts.

At Gram Vikas, Eliya worked on water and natural resource-related activities, collecting groundwater data, mapping aquifers and conducting water-source inventories. He used this information with communities for groundwater recharge and water security planning, while also mobilizing and training village groups. His work included household and area surveys, village meetings, plantation activities and implementing measures to address water shortages.

One experience particularly shaped his understanding of working with people. When a land-development activity was planned in Jharakona village, the community was initially hesitant because Eliya had not yet built a relationship with them. Rather than pushing the work forward, he spent two months getting to know the villagers and building trust. Once the relationship developed, they worked with him on stone-bund construction. Over time, they became so close that the villagers began seeing him as a brother. Eliya's lesson from the experience is simple: "If there is no relation with people, it becomes difficult to work effectively." His work has exposed him to water shortages, limited awareness of government schemes, migration, uncertain agriculture and school dropouts. Through Village Protection and Resilience Plans, he has helped communities identify their needs and take their demands to the Gram Panchayat and Sarpanch. These experiences have taught him to begin with people's own experiences and priorities.

After four years of field experience, Eliya now wants to strengthen his academic and professional skills. He says, "I have field level experience, but my theory knowledge is less," and wants to understand rural issues more systematically. At Shiv Nadar University, he hopes to learn about rural livelihoods, natural resource management, governance and social entrepreneurship, as well as how programmes are designed, implemented and evaluated. In the future, Eliya wants to continue working with communities in Odisha, particularly on water and livelihoods. He hopes to take greater responsibility, lead projects, contribute to fund mobilization and design programmes that respond closely to community needs. He also wants to share what he learns with the communities he works with.

For Eliya, hard work, strong relationships and honesty have guided his journey, from collecting firewood to continue his education, to building trust with villagers, to working on water security. He now wants to bring his field experience and new learning together and continue working with rural communities in ways rooted in their realities.



GAUTAM BALWANT BETHEKAR

AMRAVATI DISTRICT MAHARASHTRA



Gautam is an Adivasi youth from one of India's most deprived regions Melghat in Maharashtra

An Adivasi youth from Melghat,

Gautam's journey through residential

schools and rural service has shaped

his commitment to rural education and
development.

Gautam Balwant Bethekar is from Bodu, a small village in the Melghat region of Maharashtra. Growing up in one of the state's most underserved regions, he witnessed firsthand the challenges of inadequate infrastructure, limited educational opportunities, water scarcity, poor healthcare access, and unreliable electricity and communication networks.

Gautam's educational journey began in his village before he was enrolled in a government-aided Tribal Ashram School. Over the years, he studied at several Ashram schools across the Melghat region, completing his entire schooling from Class 1 to Class 12 in residential institutions designed for tribal students. Living away from his parents from an early age was challenging, particularly because his mother tongue differed from the languages used in school. Studying in the Marathi medium while gradually learning both Marathi and Hindi demanded persistence and determination. Through these experiences, Gautam developed resilience, self-reliance, discipline, and a strong sense of responsibility.

While the Ashram school system provided him with access to education, it also exposed him to the limitations faced by students from remote and marginalised communities. Inadequate facilities and the lack of essential resources often affected students' learning experiences. Witnessing these realities prompted Gautam to question why so many communities continued to remain deprived of opportunities and why their voices often went unheard. These reflections strengthened his resolve to pursue higher education so that he could contribute towards creating more equitable opportunities for rural communities.

Following the completion of his schooling, Gautam moved to Pune to pursue his undergraduate studies. Although he had initially hoped to study a different subject while preparing for competitive examinations, he was admitted to an English Literature programme. Given the language barriers he had faced throughout his childhood, this presented a significant challenge. Rather than viewing it as a setback, however, Gautam embraced the opportunity to strengthen his communication skills and broaden his academic perspective. During this period, financial constraints made continuing his education difficult, but support from the Eklavya India Foundation enabled him to pursue his studies without interruption.

Alongside his academics, Gautam actively participated in the National Service Scheme (NSS), where he gained practical experience in community engagement and rural development. Through residential service camps, he worked with villagers on initiatives such as constructing small check dams and drainage channels for water conservation, cleaning village roads and cremation grounds, and undertaking plantation drives. These experiences deepened his understanding of collective action and reinforced his commitment to addressing rural challenges through community participation.

Gautam's perseverance and dedication eventually led to his selection at the Rural Management Program at Shiv Nadar University. For him, this opportunity represents far more than academic achievement - it is a chance to deepen his understanding of rural development while learning alongside a diverse community of scholars and practitioners. He hopes to develop the knowledge, skills, and perspectives necessary to contribute meaningfully to the development of rural and marginalized communities.

Driven by the belief that India's progress depends upon the empowerment of its villages, Gautam aspires to work towards improving the lives of disadvantaged communities by expanding access to education, strengthening rural institutions, and promoting equitable development. He believes that lasting social change can only be achieved when every individual, regardless of their background, has access to opportunities that enable them to realize their full potential.

For Gautam, education has been a journey of perseverance, self-discovery, and purpose. As he begins the next chapter of his academic journey, he hopes to use his experiences, knowledge, and determination to contribute towards building more inclusive, resilient, and equitable rural communities.



GEETA SOREN

EAST SINGHBHUM DISTRICT JHARKHAND



Geeta (third from left), with the Hon'ble President and Prime Minister of India, along with Sabar Adivasi artists at Rashtrapati Bhavan, New Delhi

From teaching tribal children to
participating in Adivasi cultural
programmes at Rashtrapati Bhavan,
Geeta has worked across education,
livelihoods and culture.

Geeta Soren comes from Keenudih, a small village in Jamshedpur, East Singhbhum district, Jharkhand, and belongs to the Santhal Adivasi (Scheduled Tribe) community. Raised in a modest farming family, she grew up closely connected to rural life, the people, and traditions of her community. Her journey is one of determination, learning, and a deep commitment to creating opportunities for others.

Geeta completed her schooling at a government school and went on to pursue her B.Com. and M.Com. degrees from Jamshedpur Women's University, securing first-class in both. Her educational journey strengthened her confidence and opened new possibilities, but it also deepened her awareness of the many children in her community who continued to face barriers to quality education and opportunities. From an early age, she began to believe that education could be a powerful pathway to greater dignity, confidence and opportunity.

She began her professional journey by teaching young children. In 2019, she learned about Kalamandir, a non-profit organisation working to strengthen livelihoods in Jharkhand's Kolhan region by building on indigenous culture, natural resources and local knowledge. She joined its Tribal Girls Child Education Programme, Medhavini, as a faculty member. The programme sought to provide quality education to children from Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste communities, while helping protect them from social challenges such as child marriage.

Working with children became a transformative experience for Geeta. She saw first-hand how the right guidance, encouragement and educational opportunities could change the direction of a young person's life. It strengthened her conviction that education is not simply about academic achievement, it is about giving children the confidence to imagine a different future and the tools to build it. Her journey then took her into the world of rural livelihoods. As a Sales and Billing Person at Biponi, operated by the Kalamandir Saksham Self Help Group Federation, she gained practical experience in sales, billing, inventory management and customer relations. More importantly, she witnessed the potential of rural women and artisans when they are given access to markets and meaningful economic opportunities. She came to understand that with the right support, skills and platforms, rural women can become financially independent and powerful contributors to their families and communities.

Geeta subsequently had the opportunity to work with the Panchayati Raj Department as a Gender Trainer and Resource Person. She trained ward members and women village heads (Mukhiya) across East Singhbhum and West Singhbhum districts on women's empowerment, gender equality, leadership and good governance. This experience expanded her understanding of leadership and taught her an important lesson: lasting social change becomes possible when people are informed, confident and actively involved in shaping decisions that affect their lives.

Her work has also been deeply connected to the preservation and celebration of Adivasi culture. As a Coordinator of the Adivasi Cultural Troupe at Kalamandir, she selected artists, coordinated rehearsals and accompanied performers to district-, state- and national-level events. She helped create platforms for artists from different Adivasi communities to share their rich cultural traditions, including the Sarfa, Dashai, Rinjha and Baha dances of the Santhal community, the Mage dance of the Ho community, the Pata Jhumar of the Sabar community and the Karma dance of the Bhumij community. For Geeta, this work was much more than organising cultural performances. She saw culture as a source of identity, dignity and livelihood. By creating opportunities for artists to showcase their traditions, she helped them gain recognition while also contributing to their economic well-being. Her work taught her that development should not require communities to leave behind their culture and traditions. Instead, culture and indigenous knowledge can become important foundations for a more confident and sustainable future.

One of the proudest chapters of her journey has been the opportunity to meet the President of India on three occasions and the Prime Minister of India once. Among these experiences, accompanying Sabar Adivasi artists to Rashtrapati Bhavan to present their traditional folk art remains particularly meaningful to her. Standing alongside artists from her region on such an important national platform reinforced her belief that Adivasi cultures are an essential part of India's identity and deserve recognition, respect and opportunities to flourish.

Growing up in a rural environment and working closely with communities have shaped Geeta's worldview and strengthened her sense of purpose. Her experiences across education, livelihoods, women's empowerment, local governance, handicrafts, traditional knowledge and Adivasi culture have given her a broad understanding of both the challenges communities face and, more importantly, the enormous potential within them.

Becoming a student at Shiv Nadar University is a dream come true for Geeta. She sees this opportunity not simply as the next step in her education, but as the beginning of a new chapter in her journey. She hopes to gain knowledge, develop a broader perspective, strengthen her confidence, and learn new ways to turn her experiences into meaningful action. For Geeta, education is ultimately about creating possibilities. She wants to use what she learns to contribute to the communities that have shaped her and to help create a future in which children have access to quality education, women have greater opportunities to become economically independent, and Adivasi communities can preserve their cultural identity while moving forward with confidence.



KANKU RAWAT

DEVGARH DISTRICT RAJASTHAN



Kanku speaking at a meeting outside a government office in Devgarh, Rajsamand district, Rajasthan, demanding the right to work

From working at construction sites to
mobilising families around their rights,
Kanku's grassroots work has centred on
education, entitlements and collective
action.

Kanku Rawat, 20, comes from Chundi, a village near Devgarh in Rajasthan. The eldest of four siblings, she took on significant responsibilities early in life. Her father, whom she remembers as being unwell for most of her childhood, passed away when she was in Class 5. Her mother continued to support the family through daily-wage labour, while Kanku helped care for her younger siblings and worked during school holidays at construction sites and on farms. Despite the family's difficult financial circumstances, her mother remained determined that her children should continue their education.

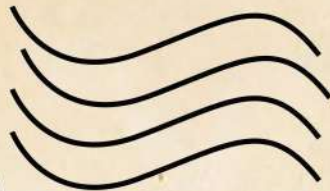
There was a point when Kanku herself considered leaving school. After completing Class 10, she thought it might be better to work full-time, but her mother encouraged her to continue. "I have learnt from her how to face even the most difficult circumstances," Kanku says. In 2022, she completed Class 12 with 85 percent marks, standing first in her class. With no one to guide her through college admissions, she approached a local e-Mitra centre for help. Since travelling daily to a college 17 kilometres away was unaffordable, she enrolled as a private B.A. student at Amet College, affiliated with Mohanlal Sukhadia University, allowing her to continue working alongside her studies. She completed her degree in 2025, becoming the first person in her family to receive both school and college education.

Kanku's interest in social issues had begun even before she encountered organised social action. She remembers questioning officials at the panchayat when work was delayed, speaking with families when children dropped out of school, and raising concerns about child marriage. During the second year of her B.A., she learnt about Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) and School for Democracy (SFD). Their work around MGNREGA, ration, pensions, democracy, and constitutional rights resonated strongly with her. Kanku worked with MKSS & SFD for 3 years, managing the community library and the samvidhaan kendra.

One experience brought these ideas particularly close to home. A ration dealer had recorded ration as distributed to families in the village even though most had not received it. When Kanku's own family was refused its share, she used information available on Rajasthan's Jan Soochna Portal to question the discrepancy. With support from MKSS colleagues, she spent several days preparing a list of around 80-90 affected families with their signatures. After their efforts reached the local MLA, ration was distributed to the families the following day. The experience strengthened Kanku's belief in collective action, transparency and accountability. It also brought resistance. Some people criticised her mother for Kanku's actions. Her response was clear, "I had done nothing wrong. It was our right, and we fought for it."

Kanku subsequently ran a community library through SFD and worked with children, young people and women on education, sports, constitutional values and access to entitlements. For the past year and a half, she has worked full-time with MKSS and SFD, while also contributing financially to her household and supporting her siblings' education.

The MA Rural Management program is an opportunity for Kanku to deepen the understanding she has developed through experience and grassroots work. She wants particularly to stand with those who are denied educational opportunities, challenge practices such as child marriage, and work alongside citizens whose rights are ignored. Her own journey has taught her that having information matters, but so does finding the confidence, and the collective strength, to act on it.



KAUSHAL KUSHRAM

**MANDLA DISTRICT
MADHYA PRADESH**



Kaushal (left) with Nivedita Banerji, co-founder of the renowned NGO Samaj Pragati Sahayog, during a photography exhibition at the Green Hub Fellowship, Bhopal

After financial hardship interrupted
her education, Kaushal returned to
university and went on to work with
rural women and on environmental
conservation.

Kaushal Kushram comes from Garam Madhwa, a village in Mandla district of Madhya Pradesh. Growing up in a rural family with limited financial resources, she learned early in life that pursuing an education often requires perseverance as much as opportunity. Despite the economic challenges her family faced, Kaushal remained determined to continue learning, believing that education could transform not only her own life but also the lives of people in her community.

Kaushal completed her schooling in government institutions in Sarsadoli and Mawai. Like many young people from deprived rural backgrounds, her journey did not follow a straight path. After completing Class 12, financial hardship forced her to put her education on hold. With her mother working as a daily wage labourer to support the family and limited educational guidance available at home, continuing her studies seemed beyond reach. Instead, Kaushal began working to contribute to the household income. Her first job was as a member of the cleaning staff in a private school. Although she worked outside the classroom, being surrounded by students every day reinforced her belief in the value of education and strengthened her determination to one day return to her own studies.

A turning point came when Kaushal joined the National Rural Livelihood Mission as a Community Resource Person in her village. Working closely with rural women and self-help groups introduced her to the realities of grassroots development and community mobilization. For the first time, she witnessed how collective action and community participation could improve people's lives. The experience broadened her perspective and inspired her to pursue a career in rural development.

She later volunteered with Udyogini, where she became involved in a range of community-based initiatives. These experiences deepened her understanding of the social and economic challenges faced by rural households and encouraged her to resume her education. Determined to build the knowledge needed to serve communities more effectively, Kaushal enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Work programme at Mahatma Gandhi Chitrakoot Gramodaya Vishwavidyalaya. Her studies helped her connect the practical lessons she had learned in the field with a deeper understanding of community engagement, social development, and the challenges faced by marginalized populations.

Another defining moment in Kaushal's journey came when she applied for the Green Hub Fellowship. Although her first application was unsuccessful, she refused to give up. She applied again the following year and was selected for the one-year fellowship. The programme provided intensive training in biodiversity conservation, environmental stewardship, community leadership, communication, and video documentation. More importantly, it strengthened her confidence and reinforced her belief that environmental conservation and rural development must go hand in hand if communities are to build sustainable futures.

Following the fellowship, Kaushal was selected to work as a Technical Assistant to fellows at Green Hub, a role through which she continued to work closely with rural communities. Her field experience has strengthened her commitment to supporting community-led development while promoting sustainable livelihoods and environmental awareness. Looking back, she sees every stage of her journey - from leaving education because of financial hardship to returning to university, working alongside rural women, and contributing to conservation initiatives - as an important step in shaping the person she has become.

Today, Kaushal hopes to deepen her understanding of rural development, community institutions, and sustainable livelihoods through the MA in Rural Management program at Shiv Nadar University. She believes that meaningful development is possible only when communities are empowered to shape their own futures. Drawing upon her own experiences, she aspires to work at the intersection of rural development, environmental conservation, and women's empowerment while inspiring more young women from rural backgrounds to pursue higher education and leadership roles. Through her work, she hopes to contribute towards building resilient rural communities where education, opportunity, and sustainable development are accessible to everyone.



KUSUM KASHYAP

DANTEWADA DISTRICT CHHATTISGARH



Kusum belongs to the Naxal-affected Bastar region of Chhattisgarh

The first in her extended family to
pursue higher education outside her
state, Kusum worked with children in
Dantewada to help them continue their
education.

Kusum belongs to the Halba Adivasi community. Her home lies in a village called Kuakonda in the Dantewada District of Chhattisgarh. Dantewada is named after Mata Danteswari, the presiding deity of the erstwhile Bastar princely state who continues to be revered by the residents of Bastar, an Adivasi-dominated region.

The elder of two siblings, Kusum has a quiet personality that hides her remarkable consistency of achievement in a region characterised by disruption and violence in recent decades. She went to primary and middle school in her village and completed higher secondary school at the block headquarters. Thereafter, Kusum enrolled at the ITI Dantewada for a one-year COPA (Computer Operator and Programming Assistant) course. Subsequently, she enrolled at the Government Danteshwari Post-Graduate College in Dantewada for an undergraduate degree in Biology.

In 2024, Kusum became a Bal Mitra Fellow under a unique education initiative launched by the Dantewada District administration. The Bal Mitra Fellowship is designed and executed by Bachpan Banao, a non-profit, under the aegis of the district administration. It is designed to keep children connected to institutional support systems in order to reduce school dropout rates and prevent the recruitment of young Adivasi children to the cause of Left-Wing Extremism.

The two years as a Bal Mitra Fellow proved to be an exciting part of Kusum's life and motivated her to apply to the Rural Management Programme at SNU.

"I coordinated the setting up of a library for children in my Panchayat. The library provided me the opportunity to work closely with children to build their learning capacities," says Kusum.

She continues, "As a Bal Mitra Fellow, I would visit all the hamlets of my village, seek out parents, and hold meetings to emphasise the importance of continuing formal education without a break. Many children who had dropped out rejoined the village school."

The library, formally called the Bal Mitra Library and Activity Centre, provided the space for Kusum to conduct interactive sessions with children focussing on foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN). Kusum says enthusiastically, "We would use child-friendly pedagogy such as plays, children's songs, dance, painting, innovative games, poetry, and even puppetry to make the sessions engaging and enjoyable for the children!"

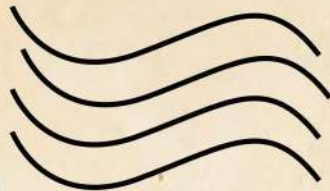
The Bal Mitra Fellowship proved a greatly exciting opportunity for Kusum from which she says she learnt as much as she taught the children of her Panchayat.

Reflecting on how the Fellowship experience helped mould her own personality, she says, "As Fellows we underwent training and participated in skill development programmes. When we started working with the children, the activities focussed on making learning exciting for them and creating a free, open atmosphere where they could laugh and play in the process of learning. In the process, I learnt immensely myself. I gained in self-confidence and learnt how to engage with visitors to the village, and Panchayat and district officials."

Impressed by her performance as a Bal Mitra Fellow and observing her potential, her mentor Dheeraj encouraged her to apply to the Rural Management Programme. Kusum saw in it an opportunity to acquire additional training that would equip her to come back to Dantewada and deepen her work in the region.

"I am a first generation learner, and the first in my extended family not only to receive higher education but also the first to study for a college degree outside the state. I value the opportunity because I come from a region affected by Maoist violence where education facilities and future prospects hitherto have been limited for young people. I want to work particularly with women and children, who suffer the most due to the lack of health facilities and poor infrastructure in the region," says Kusum with a palpable firmness in her voice.

Not surprisingly, Kusum's favourite movie is Phule, a recent biopic on the life of the social reformer Savitribai Phule. In her spare time she enjoys drawing, dancing, and reading. In addition to her mother-tongue Halbi, she speaks Hindi, Chhattisgarhi, and a little Gondi.



LINA DIGAL

KANDHAMAL DISTRICT ODISHA



Lina participating in the Change Maker retreat in Coonoor, Tamil Nadu.

From a village without a school to
working between communities and
institutions, Lina has worked on water,
livelihoods, agriculture and access to
government services.

Lina Digal comes from Patamaha village in Kandhamal district of Odisha and belongs to the Dom community that is categorized as Scheduled Caste. She grew up in a farming family, where her father is a farmer, her mother is a homemaker, and her younger sister, a graduate, currently works in the private sector. Growing up in a rural and tribal community, Lina developed a close understanding of the realities faced by rural households and communities that have historically had limited access to education, infrastructure and economic opportunities.

From an early age, Lina witnessed how circumstances beyond an individual's control can profoundly affect the lives of families and communities. When she was eight years old, she witnessed conflict between Hindu and Christian communities in her area, which forced many families to leave their homes and seek shelter in the mountains and other places. This experience left a lasting impression on her and made her deeply aware of the vulnerability faced by communities during times of social conflict.

The challenges in her village extended beyond social conflict. Educational opportunities were also limited. There was no school within the village, and children had to walk around two kilometres to reach the nearest school. With limited transportation facilities, many students found it difficult to continue their education. Some eventually dropped out, while others migrated to cities in search of work. Growing up surrounded by these realities, Lina began to understand how the absence of basic infrastructure can shape the future of an entire generation.

She completed her schooling in Odia medium at a government school in Balliguda. Her experiences during these years developed in her a strong sense of discipline, responsibility and perseverance. She later pursued a Bachelor's degree in Odia Literature. During her undergraduate studies, Lina began working with a local NGO, gaining her first significant exposure to rural development and the social and economic challenges experienced by tribal communities. Her work not only expanded her understanding of community development but also helped her contribute towards financing her own education.

After completing her graduation, Lina learned about the renowned Gram Vikas Fellowship through an organisation working with tribal communities. Drawn by the opportunity to work directly with rural communities and contribute to their development, she applied for the fellowship and was selected. As a Gram Vikas Fellow, Lina became closely involved with communities on a range of issues central to rural well-being. Her work included supporting piped water supply, improving water quality, strengthening community institutions and promoting sustainable agriculture. She also contributed to the Village Prosperity Resilience Plan, helping rural families connect with government welfare schemes and essential services.

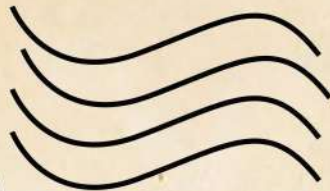
One of the most meaningful aspects of Lina's work was her role as a bridge between communities and government institutions. She helped community members communicate their needs and navigate government systems, while supporting officials in implementing development initiatives at the village level. This experience taught her that development is most effective when communities are not simply recipients of programmes, but active participants in shaping the solutions that affect their lives.

The fellowship also broadened Lina's horizons beyond her own region. Through exposure visits to different States, she had the opportunity to learn about innovative approaches to community development, institution building and resource mobilisation. Her exposure to initiatives such as the well-known NGO Goonj's Gram Swabhiman programme particularly expanded her understanding of how local knowledge, community participation and locally available resources can become powerful foundations for sustainable rural transformation.

Lina's journey has also required considerable personal determination. Her family has faced significant financial challenges, particularly because of her father's illness and the substantial costs of his medical treatment. The resulting financial pressure and loans have made continuing her education difficult. At present, her younger sister, who works in the private sector, is the family's primary earning member.

Despite these circumstances, Lina remains determined to continue learning. Rather than allowing financial hardship to limit her ambitions, she sees education as a way to strengthen the work she has already begun. Her experiences have given her a clear understanding of the challenges faced by rural and marginalised communities, while her professional journey has shown her the possibilities that emerge when communities are supported with knowledge, resources and opportunities.

The MA in Rural Management program at Shiv Nadar University represents an important next step in this journey. Lina hopes to deepen her understanding of rural development, strengthen her analytical and professional skills, and learn new approaches to addressing complex social and economic challenges. She wants to connect the knowledge she gains through the program with the practical experiences she has accumulated through her work with communities. After completing the Rural Management program, Lina hopes to continue working in the social and development sectors, particularly with rural, tribal and marginalised communities. In the long term, she dreams of establishing her own organisation that can work directly with communities to improve access to basic services, strengthen livelihoods, expand educational opportunities and support sustainable development.



MANJIL JANGALE

BHANDARA DISTRICT MAHARASHTRA



Manjil at a rural survey organised by the Eklavya India Foundation in Pithesur, Nagpur.

Having balanced education, work and
life away from home, Manjil wants
to create educational pathways for
young people who have dropped out of
school.

Manjil Jangale belongs to a Scheduled Caste community from Virli, a village in Bhandara district, Maharashtra, where agriculture and small businesses are an integral part of everyday life.

Growing up in an agricultural family, he watched his parents work tirelessly to build a stable life for their family while preserving their sense of dignity and self-respect. His rural upbringing also gave him an early understanding of the challenges many young people face in accessing quality education and continuing their studies.

Manjil's own educational journey has been shaped by persistence, independence and a willingness to take responsibility for his future. Since childhood, he has lived in hostels while pursuing his education, learning to adapt to unfamiliar environments and manage life away from home. Alongside his studies, he also worked and taught younger children from his village. Teaching allowed him to understand the educational needs of children in his community and strengthened his belief that education can be one of the most powerful tools for creating opportunities and changing lives.

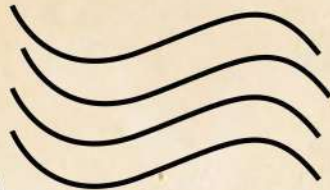
He completed his BSc from Nagpur University. During his undergraduate years, Manjil actively sought opportunities beyond the classroom to develop his leadership skills and broaden his understanding of society. He completed his NCC certificate with an A grade, an experience that strengthened his discipline, leadership and sense of responsibility. He was also associated with the Young Inspirators Network (YIN) of Sakal Media Group. Through YIN, he was selected from his district to participate in a state-level shadow ministry initiative, where students explored politics, governance and public affairs. He has also been trained by the Quality Council of India on leadership for young professionals. The experience introduced him to questions of public policy and governance and strengthened his interest in public life. It also made him increasingly aware of the important role young people can play in shaping the future of their communities and society.

Alongside his academic and leadership experiences, Manjil spent time at Ramakrishna Ashram, where he participated in social activities and volunteering. Working with people from different backgrounds, teaching children and engaging in community activities gradually strengthened his interest in social work and rural development. These experiences have shaped a clear aspiration: to better understand rural India and contribute to the lives of people who remain excluded from mainstream educational and developmental opportunities. One issue that particularly concerns him is the growing number of young people who leave school and gradually lose their connection with education.

For Manjil, dropping out of school should not mean giving up on learning or on one's aspirations. He believes that young people deserve opportunities to return to education, develop new skills and discover alternative pathways towards meaningful livelihoods. His own experience of balancing education, work and life away from home has given him a strong appreciation of the importance of creating flexible and inclusive opportunities for young people.

The MA in Rural Management program at Shiv Nadar University represents an important step towards this vision. Manjil hopes to develop a deeper understanding of rural communities, social inequalities and development processes while gaining the practical knowledge required to work effectively with communities. He is particularly interested in understanding how educational institutions and community-based initiatives can become more inclusive and responsive to young people who have been left behind. In the long term, Manjil wants to contribute to creating educational pathways that help excluded and school-dropout youth reconnect with learning. He hopes to work towards models that recognise that every young person's journey is different and that education should provide multiple opportunities for people to learn, grow and build dignified futures.

Outside academics, he enjoys writing poetry and songs, participating in debates, playing sports and interacting with people. These interests have helped him remain expressive, curious and open to different perspectives.



MANOJ KUMAR

DANTEWADA DISTRICT CHHATTISGARH



From a Maoist-affected village in Bastar, Manoj worked with children and parents to help school dropouts return to education.

Having balanced education, work and
life away from home, Manoj’s wants
to create educational pathways for
young people who have dropped out of
school.

Manoj Kumar is a first-generation learner from Chhattisgarh’s Bastar region. He is a Halba Adivasi from Kuakonda Village in Dantewada District. Manoj is the elder of two brothers. His parents are farmers.

Painting a vivid picture of his growing up years in a Maoist-affected region, Manoj recalls how children led their lives under the shadow of violence – the Maoists lurking in the forests who could demand hospitality and command fear with the barrel of their guns, and the paramilitary and police forces who would be ever-suspicious of village residents.

Manoj studied at a middle school in his village till his early teens. He then completed his schooling at a government school in the block headquarters. Subsequently, Manoj enrolled for a BSc in Biology at the Government Danteshwari Post-Graduate College in Dantewada, the district headquarters.

COVID-19 disrupted the smooth progression of Manoj’s studies. He dropped out of college for a year, spending time on the farm helping his parents. During this period, he became associated with the non-profit Bachpan Banao, which was working with children in his village Kuakonda. In recognition of his skills, Bachpan Banao enrolled him as a Bal Mitra Fellow. The fellowship is a special education initiative of the Government of Chhattisgarh that originated in Dantewada District. Bal Mitra Fellows actively work with children and parents in violence-affected Dantewada’s special context to keep them connected to institutional support systems and strengthen educational outcomes.

The two years as a Bal Mitra Fellow was a deeply satisfying experience. “We set up a small library for children in our Hitawar Panchayat,” says Manoj. “The library became a repository of books and a space where they could read, play, and have fun while learning!”

He continues, “We didn’t stop with the library. We visited every hamlet in the Panchayat to meet parents. We identified children who had dropped out of school or those who had not enrolled despite being of school-going age. We identified issues relating to children’s safety and learning constraints and sought to resolve them together with Bachpan Banao so that parents were reassured and encouraged to send the children to school.”

Meanwhile, the library functioned as an activity centre where Manoj and his colleagues engaged children through simple plays, songs, games, poetry and puppet shows. They organised Bal Sabhas (children’s assemblies) to encourage children to speak and articulate their thoughts. This instilled confidence and helped them develop public-speaking skills. From his extensive account, it is evident that Manoj found the two-year Fellowship immensely fulfilling.

The experience spurred his motivation for higher education. Manoj grew aware of the opportunities for higher education that lay beyond farms and forests of Dantewada where he had spent all his life. He was inspired by a meeting with RM alumnus Rahul Kumar Chaturvedi who visited Dantewada, and spoke to other alumni through his supportive mentor Dheeraj at Bachpan Banao. Eventually, his desire to address the challenges in education and other development issues in Bastar convinced him to apply for the Rural Management program. As a self-trained artist who had found the opportunity to put his skills to use as a Bal Mitra Fellow, he had also developed a keenness to study fine arts. For a while torn between the two, the would-be rural management professional in him eventually triumphed. Manoj chose to make the journey to SNU.

“I enjoy drawing and making portraits of people,” says Manoj with a shy toothy smile. “I enjoy dancing our Adivasi dances. I also like to meet new people and visit new places.” He nurses the desire to fly the skies on an aeroplane. When he has spare time on terra firma though he likes to play badminton and listen to songs of Udit Narayan. Unsurprisingly, given his work with children, his favourite movie is the Hindi film Taare Zameen Par.



MAYA DEWDA

DEWAS DISTRICT MADHYA PRADESH



Maya maintaining patient files while working as a nurse in Dewas

A Korku Adivasi and former nurse,
Maya wants to work on women's health
in Adivasi communities.

Maya comes from Bagli block in Dewas district of Madhya Pradesh and belongs to the Korku Adivasi community. She comes from a farming family. Her father works as a tenant farmer besides cultivating their own small piece of land. She completed her BSc in Microbiology from Government New Science College, Dewas.

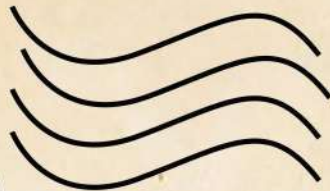
In 2023, she completed a General Duty Assistant Course and started working as a nurse in a private hospital in Dewas. "My job involved providing medicines, stitching, assisting with deliveries and maintaining patient files. I did my work with utmost integrity knowing how crucial my focused attention is for a line of work such as this – I mean, someone's life and death depended on how well I was doing my job," Maya said. Her dedication and integrity to her work was quickly noticed by her peers and superiors and the hospital asked her to join full-time.

"Helping people gave me a strange sense of satisfaction. I remember this family had come to the hospital for their daughter's abortion. Being a private hospital, doctors' fees and medicines can be expensive. They did not have money to buy the medicines and were very helpless. I gave them money and bought those medicines for them. It was not much but I thought even a little help from my end could maybe make a difference, so I did," she said. Her role as a nurse endowed her with many skills, particularly how to calmly handle chaotic situations. She learnt the value of taking responsibility and doing one's job honestly during her time as a nurse. 'There is a female doctor there, Dr. Sulbha Rani, who supported me a lot. She even said that the hospital would be happy to accept me once I complete my Masters from SNU, if at all I would like to continue my work there. Such experiencing of trust and love really helped me build my own sense of self."

She revealed how hospitals and PHCs in and around her village, as with most Adivasi-dominant villages, do not function well. "As a result, women, particularly pregnant women, have faced tremendous issues. Their chances of miscarriages are very high in those areas." Her purpose of coming to the MA-RM program is to find solutions to issues such as this, particularly surrounding women and their health in Adivasi areas. "Women in my community are married off so early. No one really cares about their dreams and aspirations. Then young girls get pregnant without understanding the health risks or the responsibilities. I am going to be one of the first Korku women in my village to come out of Madhya Pradesh to pursue a Masters. I want to inspire more women from my community to do the same – to write their own destinies and follow their dreams."

In future, she wishes to work in villages, particularly with an organisation that focuses on women's health, both within Adivasi communities and beyond.

She loves reading newspapers and folk-stories and hopes that someday she can write down some of her own communities' folk-stories.



MAYUR GANESH RATHOD

YAVATMAL DISTRICT
MAHARASHTRA



Mayur (right) interacting with villagers during community mobilization in Bezonbagh as part of his college's Blood Donation Camp

From a Banjara Tanda where even a bus
ticket could be difficult to afford, Mayur
pursued higher education while playing
Kabaddi at district and state level.

Mayur Ganesh Rathod comes from Anji Naik, a small Banjara Tanda in Yavatmal district of Maharashtra. Raised in a family that depended on farming and daily wage labour for their livelihood, he grew up watching his parents make extraordinary sacrifices so that he and his younger brother could continue their education. Living in a community where higher education was uncommon, Mayur learned early that pursuing his dreams would require determination as much as opportunity.

For Mayur, going to school was itself a challenge. Travelling from his village to the nearby town required money that his family often did not have. There were days when even the cost of a bus ticket had to be borrowed from neighbours. His parents were frequently criticized by relatives and members of the community for spending their limited income on their children's education instead of asking them to begin earning. Rather than discouraging him, these experiences strengthened his resolve to create opportunities beyond the limitations imposed by poverty.

Alongside his studies, Mayur developed a passion for Kabaddi. While many viewed sport as a distraction from academics, he remained committed to balancing both. His hard work earned him recognition as a district-level Kabaddi player during school and later as a state-level player in higher secondary education. He also joined the National Cadet Corps with the dream of building a career in the defence services. However, circumstances beyond his control repeatedly foiled these ambitions. He could not continue with NCC because he did not meet the required height criteria, and financial constraints eventually forced him to give up competitive Kabaddi. The costs of training, travel, and participation made it impossible to continue pursuing the sport he loved.

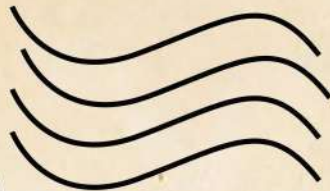
After completing Class 12, Mayur faced another important decision. While many encouraged him to pursue vocational education or begin working immediately, he chose to continue his studies. He enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Work programme at Matru Sewa Sangh Institute of Social Work in Nagpur, becoming the first person in his family to leave his Tanda in pursuit of higher education. Moving to a city was both unfamiliar and financially difficult. To reduce the burden on his parents, Mayur supported himself through part-time work while completing his degree, relying on the encouragement of his family despite their limited means.

At college, Mayur's learning extended well beyond the classroom. Through fieldwork with urban communities, school children, and the Labour Welfare Administration, he gained first-hand experience of community engagement and grassroots social work. He also worked as a mentor with Sankalp Foundation, where his interest in working with young people and marginalized communities continued to grow. At the same time, he remained deeply involved in sports and received the Best Sports Award for successfully balancing academics with extracurricular achievement.

Recognizing the potential of sport as a tool for social change, Mayur joined the Sports for Transformation Fellowship in Gujarat after graduation. The fellowship allowed him to combine his passion for sports with his commitment to education by working as a physical education teacher while engaging with schools and communities through sports-based development programs. The fellowship stipend also became an important source of financial support for his family and contributed towards his younger brother's education.

Unfortunately, health-related challenges forced Mayur to leave the fellowship before completing it. Returning home meant facing renewed financial uncertainty and the same social criticism that had accompanied many earlier stages of his journey. Yet he chose to view this setback not as an ending, but as another opportunity to begin again.

Today, Mayur hopes to deepen his understanding of social development through the MA in Rural Management Program at Shiv Nadar University. Drawing upon his own experiences, he aspires to work with rural and marginalized communities, creating educational opportunities for young people who, like him, come from places where higher education often seems beyond reach. He believes that meaningful social change begins with expanding access to education, nurturing leadership, and ensuring that talent is recognized regardless of economic or social background. Through his work, he hopes to contribute towards building communities where opportunity is shaped not by circumstance, but by determination and equal access to education.



MEGHAMALA KARAKARIA

**RAYAGADA DISTRICT
ODISHA**



Meghamala (right) participating in a Dhamma Mitra meeting in Odisha

Working alongside her studies to
support her family and fund her
education, Meghamala now wants to
work on education and livelihoods in
rural communities.

Meghamala comes from Ambadala village in Rayagada district, Odisha. She grew up in a family of six, where both her parents work as daily wage labourers and her mother lives with a physical disability. Their earnings are largely spent meeting the family's everyday needs, making higher education difficult to imagine. Meghamala is the first learner in her family to pursue higher education. She completed her schooling in Ambadala before moving to Nagpur for her Bachelor's degree in Buddhist Studies. Her educational journey was shaped by persistence. After class XII, her family could not easily afford to support further education. Meghamala, however, was determined to continue. She worked alongside her studies and, after graduation, took a gap year to work in supermarkets in Pune and Kerala. She saved for her education while also sending money home to support her family.

Growing up, Meghamala has seen poverty closely. She says that she once believed that "poor people could not achieve much in life." Her experiences outside her village gradually changed this understanding. Meeting people from different backgrounds, working, and teaching children and young students helped her see education differently as something that can help people understand and respond to the problems around them. Her internship, where she collected the life stories of women, further deepened her ability to listen to people and understand their experiences.

Meghamala describes communication, listening, empathy, leadership and teamwork among her strengths. She is comfortable speaking with people, paying attention to their experiences and working collectively towards a goal. Her three guiding values are honesty, hard work and empathy. She recalls how listening to women's stories during her internship made her more aware of the strength with which people navigate difficult circumstances.

Her motivation for studying Rural Management comes directly from what she has witnessed in her own village: limited educational opportunities, inadequate healthcare, unemployment, weak infrastructure and the migration of young people in search of work.

During her time at SNU, Meghamala hopes to develop the knowledge and practical skills needed to work on these challenges. In the future, she wants to work with organisations or government institutions engaged in rural development, particularly on education, livelihoods and access to government schemes. Ultimately, she wants to return her learning to villages like her own. As she puts it, "I want to make our villages better. I do not want others to face struggles like I did. I want to help others."

Her journey, from a young woman who had to work to make higher education possible for herself to someone who now wants to create greater possibilities for others, gives her aspirations for rural India, a deeply personal foundation.



MRINALINI TUTI

KHUNTI DISTRICT JHARKHAND



Mrinalini (on the right in saree) being felicitated by members of the local community, during one of her field visits

A Munda teacher, researcher and
artist, Mrinalini works to document her
community's language, history, culture
and knowledge.

Mrinalini comes from Khunti district of Jharkhand and belongs to the Munda Adivasi community. She completed her Masters in Geography from Ranchi University in 2012. Her passion for teaching led her to complete her BEd from Loyola College of Education, Jharkhand, post which she went to teach in her childhood school – “Going back to my childhood school as a teacher was a very nostalgic, proud and yet a revealing experience for me. In my one and a half years of teaching there, I understood and experienced how poor our school system's conditions are. It was then I decided I should prepare for exams that will enable me to teach in public schools.” While Mrinalini could not clear that exam, her teaching experience had opened up a world of curiosity to understand her community's and society's issues more deeply.

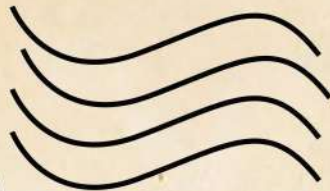
In 2016, she started working as a Research Investigator in the Dr. Ram Dayal Munda Tribal Welfare Research Institute at Ranchi. Her job involved assisting and supervising research projects that were conducted by scholars studying Adivasi communities. She also assisted in Jharkhand's Benchmark Survey that collected detailed information surrounding communities in Jharkhand. Her work with the Research Institute brought her new understanding surrounding Adivasi communities in Jharkhand – “Before my work at the Institute, I was aware but did not understand it deeply or how systemic the deprivation of Adivasis in our country is. My work there helped me deeply understand and appreciate Adivasi, particularly my own community's knowledge systems, history and culture,” Mrinalini explained.

Though she stopped working after she got married, her passion to learn more about her community's history and culture led to her joining coaching classes to learn Mundari language better. Those classes introduced her to Mundari literature and language phonetics and grammar rules. However, tragedy struck when her husband passed away – “Losing him was difficult. I was offered his bank job, but I refused. I wanted to do something for my community, so I decided to come back and live with my mother.”

She started painting again – painting scenes and symbols from the Adivasi communities. Her paintings soon got recognition as she started winning several state-organised painting competitions. “Nowadays I get invited by many places where I train young artists and also paint. I mostly paint Munda community's traditional stories.” In fact, her paintings have repeatedly made covers of books and booklets published by Dr. Ram Dayal Munda Tribal Welfare Research Institute.

Around the same time, she joined Rumbul, a youth-based Adivasi organisation and in 2023, she got involved with a translation project that was led by Dr. Ram Dayal Munda Tribal Welfare Research Institute with Rumbul being part of it too. The translation project involved translating a 100-year-old dictionary that was compiled by Father Hoffman, a British missionary who stayed with the Mundas in the region and prepared a 16-volume dictionary translating Mundari words to English. The current project is to translate that dictionary back to Mundari and Hindi with Mundari phonetics guiding it. “The idea of the project is to recover our words, record our Munda community's knowledge systems and spread this knowledge among wider audience.”

That is precisely also why Mrinalini has joined the MA-RM program – “I am now very clear that I want to work in the villages only – nowhere else. I want to learn more about Adivasi communities across India, not just Jharkhand. I want to learn about our common experiences and the causes of these commonalities. But I also want to learn from the 'outside' world, from others and maybe in the process I can teach them something too. I do believe that if we Adivasis must progress while holding on to our culture and history, we have to engage and understand the non-Adivasi world too.” In future, she is clear that she wants to work with Adivasi communities, ideally in Adivasi regions. “Dr. Ram Dayal Munda sir actually inspired me towards it. I mean here is an Adivasi man, highly educated, who returned back to his land and community for betterment of it. His journey gives me hope, I want to be that hope for my community, particularly younger Adivasi women,” Mrinalini concluded with quiet determination.



MUDAVATH SHAMANTHA NAGARKURNOOL DISTRICT TELANGANA



Shamanta (foreground) during a cleanliness drive

After once being unable to complete an event because of stage fear, Shamanta went on to become a regular anchor for college programmes.

Mudavath Shamantha hails from the Nagarkurnool district in Telangana, where her educational journey has been shaped by resilience, self-belief, and a willingness to embrace every opportunity for growth. Having studied throughout in the Telangana Tribal Welfare Residential Education system, she experienced first-hand the transformative role that quality education can play in creating opportunities for students from underserved communities.

Shamantha began her schooling at Jupally Prathamika Pathashala before joining the Telangana Tribal Welfare Residential School in Jadcherla for her secondary education. The residential school exposed her to opportunities that extended well beyond academics. She actively participated in Multimedia Camp, Abacus Camp, and represented her school as a state-level Badminton player. Programmes such as the E, T & H Club and the Mirror Project encouraged her to develop communication skills, confidence, and leadership, helping her realise that learning extends far beyond the classroom.

A defining turning point in her journey came during her Intermediate education at the Telangana Tribal Welfare Residential Junior Centre of Excellence for Girls in Kalwakurthy. Encouraged by her Political Science teacher, Shamantha participated in an English Elocution Competition despite having little experience in public speaking. To her surprise, she won first prize. The achievement gave her confidence, but an even greater challenge soon followed. She was asked to anchor the Teachers' Day celebration at her college. Standing before a large audience, she was overcome by stage fear and found herself unable to complete the programme. Although the experience left her deeply disappointed, it became one of the most important moments of her life. Instead of allowing failure to define her, she resolved to overcome her fear through practice and perseverance.

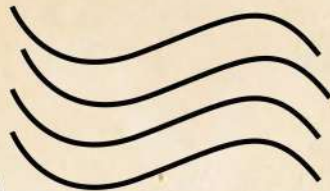
Her determination became evident during her undergraduate studies at the Telangana Tribal Welfare Residential Degree and PG College for Women, Shadnagar. When another opportunity arose to anchor a college workshop, she accepted the challenge with renewed confidence and successfully conducted the event. That experience marked the beginning of a remarkable transformation. Over the following years, she became one of the regular anchors for major college programmes, including Freshers' Day, Independence Day, Republic Day, National Service Scheme events, and numerous academic and cultural programmes. The stage that had once filled her with fear gradually became the place where she discovered her confidence, leadership, and voice.

Beyond academics, Shamantha remained actively involved in community service through the National Service Scheme. She participated in two Special Camps and was selected for the National Integration Camp in recognition of her contribution. She also represented her institution at national-level events, participated in youth development programmes, and completed an internship in Banking, Financial Services, and Insurance. Together, these experiences strengthened her communication skills, teamwork, and commitment to community engagement.

Throughout her educational journey, the encouragement she received from the Esther Foundation played an important role in reinforcing her aspiration to pursue higher education despite financial constraints. Their continued support strengthened her confidence and reminded her that students from modest backgrounds can achieve ambitious goals when provided with encouragement and opportunity.

Shamantha's academic achievements earned her admission offers from both Azim Premji University and Shiv Nadar University. She chose Shiv Nadar University because she believes its interdisciplinary learning environment and emphasis on social engagement will help her deepen her understanding of society while preparing her to contribute meaningfully to it.

Today, Shamantha hopes to inspire young people from backgrounds similar to her own by encouraging them to believe in their abilities and pursue higher education with confidence. Looking back, she believes the greatest lesson of her journey is that failure is not an obstacle but an opportunity to grow. Drawing upon her own experiences, she hopes to continue learning, challenging herself, and contributing towards building a more equitable and inclusive society where education empowers individuals to realize their full potential.



MURARIKAR AKARSH

MEDCHAL-MALKAJGIRI DISTRICT



Akarsh during a visit to Dharpa village in western Uttar Pradesh

When a smartphone became essential
to continue his education during the
pandemic, Akarsh worked at a tailor's
shop to earn enough to buy one.

Murarikar Akarsh, 21, comes from Medchal-Malkajgiri district in Telangana. He grew up in a family in which his mother assumed much of the responsibility for both caregiving and finances. Although she had no formal education herself, she consistently supported Akarsh's education. His elder sister, too, became an important source of guidance during difficult periods. Looking back, Akarsh sees their support as central to his ability to continue his studies despite the family's limited resources.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought one such difficult period. When his Intermediate classes shifted online, Akarsh did not have a smartphone through which he could attend them. He began working at a tailor's shop to earn enough to buy one. He subsequently completed his Intermediate examination in the first attempt, without any backlogs, and was among the top five students in his college. His name appeared in a newspaper, an achievement that made his mother particularly proud. The experience stayed with him partly because he saw several young people around him discontinue their studies during the same period, including some who had greater material resources. "That time taught me that resources are important, but how we respond to a difficult situation also matters," he reflects.

Akarsh went on to complete a degree in Computers from Government Degree College, Malkajgiri, affiliated with Osmania University. It was during his involvement with the National Service Scheme (NSS) that he began looking more closely at rural society. His initial activities included village cleanliness and educational programs, but living and working in villages brought him into contact with questions of health, nutrition, access to resources and caste discrimination.

"I used to think that village life was peaceful and close to nature," Akarsh recalls. "But through NSS I understood that there are many problems which we cannot see from outside." Among the things that disturbed him most was the spatial and social separation created by caste. He encountered the distinction between the ooru, where dominant-caste communities lived, and the wada, where Dalit families lived. He saw dominant-caste villagers refuse food cooked by Dalits and observed restrictions on Dalit residents' access to a common water source. In another instance, wastewater was diverted towards the agricultural land of a Dalit farmer.

These experiences challenged what Akarsh describes as his earlier, more romantic understanding of villages. They also made him think about what access to basic rights and resources means in everyday life. "Before going to the villages, I did not understand casteism so deeply," he says. "When I saw these things directly, I started asking why people are still treated differently and why everyone does not have equal access to resources."

His experiences with NSS also exposed him to other rural concerns, including poor nutrition and the effects of industrial pollution. Gradually, his interest shifted from participating in individual service activities to understanding the larger conditions that produce these problems. Rural development, for him, came to mean more than improving infrastructure. "India cannot develop without rural development," he says, but he is equally interested in what kind of development is possible when inequalities within villages remain unaddressed.

Akarsh is particularly interested in the possibilities of combining technology with sustainable rural development, an interest that also connects with his educational background in computers. He wants to understand how technology can be used in ways that respond to local needs rather than remaining inaccessible to those with fewer resources. His own experience during the pandemic- when something as basic as not owning a smartphone could threaten the continuation of his education- gives this interest a personal dimension.

Akarsh describes honesty, humility and perseverance as values he tries to live by. Outside academics, he enjoys listening to music, planting and cooking. He is also deeply connected to the cultural life of Telangana and speaks with particular interest about festivals such as Bathukamma, Bonalu and the Medaram Jatara.

Akarsh comes to the MA in Rural Management with questions that emerged largely from the contrast between what he had assumed about rural life and what he subsequently encountered through field experience. The program offers him an opportunity to make sense of these experiences more systematically and to deepen his understanding of caste, inequality, sustainability and the possibilities of technology within rural development.



MUSHARRAF AHMED

**NUH (MEWAT) DISTRICT
HARYANA**



Musharraf conducts a career counselling session for first-generation learners at The Hope Project, Nizamuddin Basti, New Delhi

From Mewat to higher education in
Delhi, Musharraf's experiences have led
him towards work in community health,
education and rural development.

Musharraf Ahmed, 24, comes from Salamba village in Nuh (Mewat), Haryana, and is the first in his family to move to Delhi for higher education, where he completed his graduation in Hindi Literature from the University of Delhi. His family has lived in Salamba for seven generations. Growing up there gave him an early understanding of the limited educational and livelihood opportunities available to many rural families. He saw his uncle and several others migrate towards Faridabad and Gurugram in search of work, often not out of choice but necessity. As he puts it, "We don't want to go away from our home, but compulsion takes us away."

Interestingly, Musharraf was not always inclined towards education himself. He remembers leaving his schoolbag at home and spending his time catching fish, bathing in the village pond or accompanying his grandfather to the jungle. His grandfather became an important influence during these years. Drawing from what he had seen in his own lifetime, he would repeatedly tell Musharraf, "You must go out and study." Those words stayed with him. A second-generation learner, Musharraf eventually became the first person in his family to move to Delhi for higher education.

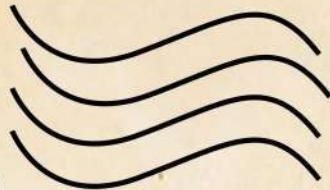
The transition was not easy. Having studied in an environment with limited academic exposure, he arrived in Delhi unfamiliar with English or regular assignments, homework and practicals. The experience made him conscious of the considerable differences in the quality of education available to young people depending on where they grow up. He went on to study Hindi Literature at the University of Delhi, where literature became a way for him to understand society and the inequalities within it. Reading classics such as Joothan and Godaan helped him recognise how literature can bring attention to the lives and struggles of communities whose experiences often remain unheard.

His subsequent work with Kayantar Foundation in Mewat and The Hope Project in Nizamuddin allowed him to engage with some of these questions more directly. While working on community health in Mewat, he became aware that some women continued to use chulhe ki raakh (earthen stove ash) for menstrual hygiene, despite the serious health risks involved. In Nizamuddin, while working with migrant families, he encountered young girls who were sent to work in other households rather than attend school. These experiences led him to question the gap between welfare programmes and their actual accessibility and effectiveness in people's lives.

Musharraf believes one of his strengths is his ability to listen, something he again traces to his grandfather. As a child, he would often interrupt conversations, until his grandfather told him, "First learn to listen. If you don't listen, you will never understand." Over time, this became a principle he carried into his interactions with communities: "Maybe I speak less myself and listen more to others."

Outside academics and fieldwork, Musharraf enjoys reading, writing, travelling and nature photography. Photography, in particular, gives him a quieter space that he describes simply as "my time."

His decision to join the MA Rural Management program comes from a desire to find meaningful ways of responding to the problems he has observed around him. "If someone has trouble, then the person inside me says, do something, do something". At the same time, his expectations from the program are not only professional. Having spent much of his life thinking about his family and others around him, he hopes to reflect more about himself.



NAMRATA BAJPAI

**FARRUKHABAD DISTRICT
UTTAR PRADESH**



Namrata (right) learning sustainable farming practices with a local farmer in Himachal Pradesh during her internship with RRAN

A scholarship enabled Namrata
to pursue higher education, while
her fieldwork with women farmers
deepened her interest in rural
communities.

Namrata is endlessly inquisitive about people and the worlds they inhabit. Energetic, articulate and deeply inquisitive, she enjoys conversations that move beyond the ordinary, often reflecting on society, everyday life and the experiences that shape people differently. She believes learning is a lifelong process, with books and people serving as equally important teachers. Drawn to philosophy, self-understanding and personal growth, she enjoys reading works that encourage reflection and challenge her assumptions. Friends know her as someone who asks thoughtful questions, values different perspectives and believes that knowledge acquires meaning only when it is shared. Kindness, honesty and empathy are values she consciously tries to practice in her everyday life, and she carries the conviction that sharing what one has learnt is one of the most meaningful ways of continuing to learn.

Growing up in Rajepur village in Uttar Pradesh's Farrukhabad district, Namrata learnt early that educational opportunities were rarely distributed equally. Coming from a low-income farming family, she watched girls around her, including members of her own family, receive fewer educational opportunities than boys. Her own life changed when she earned admission to Vidyagyan School on scholarship from the Shiv Nadar Foundation, an opportunity that allowed her to study, while making her increasingly aware of the inequalities many young women continued to face. These experiences nurtured a lasting interest in understanding how social structures shape people's lives and aspirations.

As a history undergraduate at Shiv Nadar University, she sought opportunities to engage directly with rural communities. Her internship with the Revitalizing Rainfed Agriculture Network (RRAN) in Mahunaag village of Himachal Pradesh became one of the defining experiences of her undergraduate years. Living in an unfamiliar mountain village required adapting to a new landscape, food and language, but these challenges gradually became lessons in patience, observation and building relationships. Working alongside women practicing natural farming transformed her understanding of agriculture, revealing it as a way of life embedded in ecology, labour, gender and community relationships. Her field report and case study from the internship were later published by the organization. Conversations with women farmers about the labour involved in preparing Jeevamrita and Beejamrita reinforced her belief that thoughtful interventions emerge only after carefully understanding people's lived realities and the knowledge they already possess. Beyond academics, Namrata has served as Class Representative and a member of the Hostel Committee, experiences that strengthened her communication, leadership and collaborative skills. She also enjoys playing cricket, a sport that has taught her resilience, teamwork and discipline.

For Namrata, enrolling into the MA Rural Management program is an opportunity to channel her curiosity and commitment towards long-term engagement with rural communities. She hopes to work alongside communities, learning from their experiences while contributing to initiatives that strengthen education, livelihoods and social well-being. She is particularly interested in developing policies and community-based programmes that grow from people's lived realities rather than being designed at a distance. She believes that stronger villages are fundamental to India's future and hopes to contribute to this transformation by bringing together thoughtful inquiry, collaborative action and sustained engagement with communities. Her journey is shaped by intellectual curiosity, empathy and the belief that meaningful rural transformation begins by listening before acting.



NILIMA MANIKPURI

**DINDORI DISTRICT
MADHYA PRADESH**



Nilima is from the Dindori district, Madhya Pradesh

A passionate NRLM professional with
grassroots experience of financial
inclusion.

Nilima Manikpuri comes from Umaria village in Dindori district of Madhya Pradesh. She completed her early schooling at the government school in her village before moving to Samnapur for her secondary education. She went on to pursue a B.A. from a government college in Samnapur, navigating her education alongside her growing interest in working with communities.

During her college years, Nilima worked as a Peer Educator with the health department, focusing on issues affecting adolescents and raising awareness about child marriage. This early experience brought her into direct engagement with young people and helped deepen her understanding of the social and health challenges faced by adolescents in rural communities. After completing her B.A., she enrolled in an M.A. program at Government Chandravijay College in Dindori. However, financial difficulties forced her to discontinue her studies.

Nilima's interest in women's empowerment was shaped by watching her mother work as a Community Resource Person (CRP) with the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), supporting women's collectives and helping them explore opportunities to strengthen their livelihoods. Inspired by her mother's example, Nilima joined NRLM as a Bank Sakhi, working with women in self-help groups to help them access banking services and pursue greater economic independence. She also worked as a Business Correspondent Sakhi (BC Sakhi), visiting elderly and sick people who were unable to travel to the bank and helping them access essential financial services from their homes. Through these roles, Nilima saw how support with banking and livelihoods could help women become more financially secure, while also making essential services accessible to people facing mobility and health-related barriers.

Nilima now hopes to work towards creating greater opportunities for women who are held back by the fear of violence and are unable to pursue their aspirations. Her experiences in adolescent health, financial inclusion, and women's livelihoods have shaped her interest in understanding the structural barriers that prevent women from moving forward. She enters the MA in Rural Management program with a desire to build the knowledge and skills needed to support women in pursuing their dreams with greater confidence and independence. Outside of her work and studies, Nilima enjoys applying mehendi and reading stories.



NITESH PAWAR

YAVATMAL DISTRICT MAHARASHTRA



Nitesh (left), at a rural survey organised by the Eklavya India Foundation in Pithesur, Nagpur

A self-taught video editor from a
Banjara family, Nitesh now wants to
use his skills and education in rural
development.

Nitesh grew up in Yavatmal, Maharashtra, and comes from the Banjara community. His upbringing has given him a close and personal understanding of Banjara culture, social traditions, and the challenges faced by such communities in Maharashtra. These experiences have shaped his identity and, over time, inspired him to imagine a future dedicated to creating opportunities for disadvantaged rural communities.

Nitesh's father works as a daily-wage house-painter, while his mother is a homemaker who also runs a small seasonal home business. During the summer, she prepares and sells rice papad to supplement the family income, and Nitesh has always helped her with preparing and delivering the papad. His elder sister works as a social worker, while his middle sister is a nurse pursuing a Post-Basic BSc in Nursing. Their journeys have been an important source of inspiration for Nitesh and have shown him the value of education, perseverance and service to others. His parents worked hard to support the education of all three children. Nitesh completed his primary education in Marathi medium and, as a Marathi-medium student, faced considerable challenges with English throughout his educational journey. He completed Class 10 from Deorao Patil Vidyalaya, Yavatmal, and Class 12 from Amolakchand Mahavidyalaya, Yavatmal.

After completing Class 12, financial circumstances meant that Nitesh had to take a year-long break from formal education. What could have been a setback became an important turning point in his life. Without formal guidance or specialised training, he decided to teach himself video editing. Within a few months, he began freelancing and turned a self-taught skill into a source of income. During this period, Nitesh worked with the video-editing agency Encreators, the Marathi YouTube channel Shahanpan, among others. This experience taught him to learn independently, adapt to new challenges, and take responsibility for his own professional growth. It also gave him confidence in his ability to build opportunities for himself even when circumstances were difficult.

Nitesh later enrolled in the BCA programme at the College of Management and Computer Science, Yavatmal, while continuing his freelance work part-time. During his undergraduate years, he actively participated in various activities beyond the classroom. His efforts led to his selection for the VBYP 2026 state-level competition in Maharashtra, where he had the opportunity to deliver a speech at the University of Mumbai. Experiences such as these strengthened his communication skills and gave him the confidence to express his ideas on larger platforms.

While technology and digital media became important parts of his journey, Nitesh gradually discovered another area that deeply interested him: the social sector. His elder sister's work had a particularly strong influence on him. Whenever she spoke about working directly with rural communities and supporting people on the ground, Nitesh began to imagine himself pursuing a similar path. He realised that he, too, could use his skills and experiences to contribute to the lives of rural people and eventually devote himself to social work.

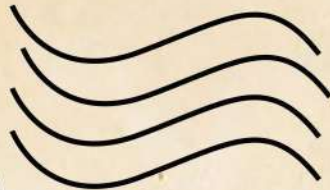
A one-day rural survey organised by the Eklavya India Foundation in Pithesur became another important moment in this journey. The experience gave Nitesh an opportunity to see rural realities more closely and understand some of the challenges faced by people and communities outside urban centres. It strengthened his belief that meaningful social change begins with understanding people's lived realities and working alongside communities to identify practical solutions.

Nitesh believes that his diverse experiences have given him a unique combination of perspectives. His understanding of Banjara culture and rural life, his experience of growing up in a working family, his journey as a self-taught freelancer, his education in computer science and his growing engagement with the social sector have all shaped his desire to contribute to rural development.

The MA in Rural Management program at Shiv Nadar University represents an important step towards this vision. Nitesh hopes to develop a deeper understanding of rural issues and the approaches needed to address them. He is particularly excited by the opportunity to gain practical exposure through field education and to connect his own experiences with broader ideas of rural development and social change.

Reflecting on his college years and the future he imagined for himself, Nitesh says: "Walking alone on empty streets, I used to think that I would be doing something different than usual. Not either as simple as a job nor as complex as a profession but driven by impact which will brighten the name of my parents." This desire to build a life driven by purpose continues to guide him. After completing his MA in Rural Management, Nitesh hopes to work with an organisation that is creating meaningful and lasting impact in rural India. In the long term, he wants to dedicate himself to empowering rural youth by helping them access education, skills, opportunities and the confidence to shape their own futures.

Outside academics and his work, Nitesh enjoys staying physically active. He loves long-distance running and playing cricket, reads books in his free time, and enjoys creating content for social media. These interests reflect his energetic, curious and creative personality.



PANKAJ REGAR

**CHITTORGARH DISTRICT
RAJASTHAN**



During his internship at the Government Upper Primary School, Kir Kheda, Pankaj helped clear a soak pit and dug a channel to drain accumulated rainwater to prevent waterlogging during the rains

From working multiple jobs to support
his education to teaching children and
engaging with questions of caste and
inequality, Pankaj has built a varied
grassroots journey.

Pankaj Regar, 26, comes from Rashmi village in Chittorgarh district of southern Rajasthan. His father works as a labourer and his mother does tailoring. He studied in the government school in his village until Class 12 and went on to complete a Diploma in Elementary Education and a B.Sc. in Botany, Zoology and Chemistry from Sanwaliya Ji Government College, Mandfiya. Supporting his education has meant working alongside his studies, doing daily-wage work in catering and painting, working at a sarl shop, and selling chillies, saris and Diwali stickers as a hawk.

Pankaj's engagement with caste discrimination has grown out of experiences beginning in childhood. "The first time I experienced caste discrimination was when I was in Class VII," he recalls. A friend would neither offer him water at his home nor encourage him to visit. He also noticed that some neighbours would not eat food prepared by his family, although his family ate food prepared by them. "At that time I did not know much about caste," he says. "Today I have begun to understand it more closely, where all it operates, how rigid it is, why we remained poor because of caste, how it stops us from moving forward, and how caste works in politics."

Another incident began troubling him in Class XII. His friend, who belongs to the Valmiki community, told him that Valmiki families were unable to use the village's common cremation ground or dharamshala. At the time, Pankaj felt he had little ability to intervene. A few years later, while organising an Ambedkar Jayanti programme with young people from different Dalit communities, he found an opportunity to raise these issues publicly. At a gathering attended by the local MLA, SDM, tehsildar and other representatives, demands for equal access to the cremation ground and dharamshala were placed before the MLA. Pankaj also proposed that the program itself reflect the equality it advocated, that there would be no garlanding of dignitaries or special chairs, and everyone would sit together on the same jajam (a large traditional floor-spread used for collective seating). In March 2026, when the same friend's grandmother died, her last rites were performed at the common cremation ground, with people from different communities participating.

At twenty-one, Pankaj became involved in another situation over caste, this time during a relative's wedding in Aanjana village in Rajsamand district. Dalits in the village faced discriminatory practices, including being seated separately at community feasts, and there was opposition to a Dalit groom taking out a bindoli (a ceremonial wedding procession with the groom on horseback). The family was initially apprehensive, but Pankaj encouraged them to proceed. Drawing on contacts he had developed with lawyers and activists, he helped prepare applications seeking police protection and spent nearly two weeks accompanying the family through meetings and negotiations with the police and district administration.

The bindoli was eventually taken out amidst a substantial police and administrative presence. "For those fifteen days I was tense because the entire responsibility was on me," Pankaj remembers. "If there had been a fight or any loss of life or property, it would all have come upon me." But the experience also gave him confidence. "Although I was only twenty-one, everyone was listening to me and doing what we had decided." The procession remained peaceful despite considerable opposition along the route.

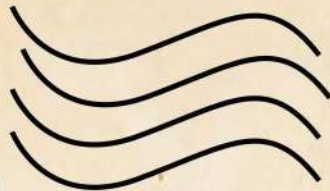
Pankaj's concerns are not limited to caste. His interest in the environment began in Class VI, when, after reading about tree planting in a schoolbook, he filled an earthen vessel with soil and planted a sapling in it. By Class VIII, he was planting mango saplings on his family's farm and carrying water for them from neighbouring fields because their own land had neither a well nor a tubewell. Later, he helped organise plantation drives in schools and cremation grounds, encouraged teachers and students to care for the plants, and worked with school gardens, seed balls, vermicomposting and natural farming.

Education has been another area of sustained involvement for Pankaj. While preparing for the REET examination, Pankaj began spending time at a government Sanskrit school attended largely by children from the Bhil community. He found that the malnourished children were struggling with basic reading and arithmetic in a school with too few teachers and began teaching there voluntarily. "The children wanted to study and their parents wanted to educate them, but they did not have the resources and the government school did not have enough teachers," he says. Some of the children he taught have since completed Class XII. Yet Pankaj remains measured about his own contribution, "I regret that I could not bring much change in that village."

His travels have also unsettled some of his assumptions about rural India. During a stay in Falasiya in Udaipur district, he encountered Adivasi settlements where roads, cultivable land and basic amenities were far more limited than in his own village. "I used to think that kutcha houses no longer existed, that villages now had pucca houses and we had moved quite far ahead," he recalls. "But after seeing that village, I realised that there are also villages in India where development has hardly reached." Encounters with other communities and regions have similarly generated questions for him about caste, poverty, gender, livelihoods and the uneven reach of development.

Outside these engagements, Pankaj enjoys swimming, cooking, travelling and literature. He has won a gold medal in Taekwondo and has spent time learning meditation in Wardha. He has also volunteered and interned with organisations working on education and social justice.

Pankaj thus comes to the MA in Rural Management with an unusually varied set of experiences- of caste and social action, teaching, environmental work, community mobilisation, travel and engagement with public institutions. The program offers him an opportunity to bring these experiences together, reflect critically upon them, and develop a more systematic understanding of rural society and processes of development.



PAYAL RAHATE

**PANDHURNA DISTRICT
MADHYA PRADESH**



Payal comes from Pandhurna district on the border of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh

Working in the fields since she
was sixteen, Payal learned farming
alongside her grandmother while
pursuing her education in Economics.

Payal Rahate comes from Pandhurna, a border district in Madhya Pradesh, and completed her schooling in a village in neighbouring Maharashtra. Growing up in a rural setting, she experienced both the opportunities and the challenges that shape everyday life in villages across central India. Watching families work hard to sustain themselves while facing limited educational and employment opportunities instilled in her a deep appreciation for education and a desire to contribute to the development of rural communities.

Payal's educational journey was shaped by perseverance. Financial constraints meant that continuing her studies was often difficult, and she regularly balanced her education with agricultural work to support her family. She began working in the fields when she was in Class 10, at the age of sixteen. Farming was not merely a responsibility but a skill she learned alongside her grandmother, who remains the greatest source of inspiration in her life. During her childhood, when she often lacked support from others, she accompanied her grandmother to the fields, where she learned the value of hard work, patience, and resilience. Whenever Payal faces challenges or self-doubt, her grandmother encourages her to keep moving forward with courage and determination.

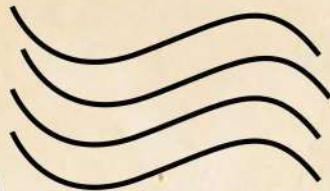
After completing her schooling, Payal enrolled at the Government Arts and Commerce College, Pandhurna, University of Chhindwara, where she pursued a Bachelor's degree in Economics. Studying economics introduced her to questions of rural livelihoods, agriculture, and development, allowing her to connect classroom learning with the realities she had witnessed throughout her childhood.

Growing up in a village also gave Payal a close view of the everyday challenges faced by rural families. She observed how limited access to education, inadequate employment opportunities, and the lack of essential services often restricted people's choices and aspirations. These experiences encouraged her to think beyond individual hardships and recognize the importance of community-centered development that responds to local needs. They also strengthened her belief that education has the power to create lasting change when combined with informed policies and active community participation.

Throughout her journey, Payal has treated every obstacle as an opportunity to learn. Balancing academic responsibilities with family obligations taught her resilience, patience, and self-discipline. Rather than allowing financial hardship to discourage her, she continued to move forward with determination and the conviction that education could create new opportunities. Inspired by her grandmother's example, each stage of her journey reinforced her understanding that meaningful progress begins with determination, hard work, and the courage to overcome immediate challenges.

Today, Payal hopes to deepen her understanding of rural development through the MA in Rural Management Program at Shiv Nadar University. She wants to learn how research, policy, and community engagement can work together to improve education, livelihoods, and access to opportunities in rural areas. Drawing upon her own experiences, she aspires to work alongside underserved communities and contribute to creating sustainable solutions that improve the quality of life for rural families.

Inspired by her own journey and the unwavering support of her grandmother, she hopes to contribute to building a society where every young person, regardless of their economic background or where they grow up, has the opportunity to realize their potential through education and equal access to opportunity.



PINKI BACHHANIYA

DEWAS DISTRICT MADHYA PRADESH



Pinki (centre) in village Jhikadi, training the members of Bagli Pragati Samiti in sustainable menstrual health management

A Korku sustainable menstrual-health
trainer and educator.

Pinki Bachhaniya comes from Sal Khetiya village in Dewas district of Madhya Pradesh. She belongs to the Korku tribe, an Adivasi community that originally dwelt in the forest near the Satpura Range and is now spread near the same region in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. The community is known for its relationship to the forest, land, and agriculture. Pinki lives with her family, including her father who is a farmer and agricultural labourer, her mother, and her three siblings. She and her siblings are the only ones in the village to have studied beyond the 10th grade with her elder sister and younger brother both currently pursuing higher education.

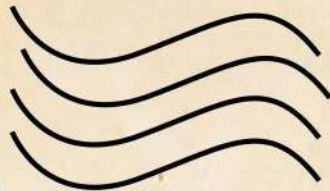
The circumstances under which Pinki studied have been extremely challenging. She went to government schools where she and her fellow female classmates lacked any academic support from teachers or family which resulted in many girls dropping out of school after failing to clear class 10. Determined to study, Pinki worked hard to overcome her circumstances and eventually completed her undergraduate degree as well as a B.Ed. from a college in Dewas.

Although Pinki was interested in teaching and was offered a teacher position, she chose to work in the Health and Nutrition program of the nationally recognized NGO Samaj Pragati Sahayog. Starting in 2023, she took on the role of a sustainable menstrual health trainer along with a focus on adolescent girls' health, which she found closely allied to her goal of supporting girls' education. Over nearly four years with the organisation, she has worked directly with girls from the community as well as their parents, helping them make informed decisions about their health, education and their futures.

A deeply influential experience during her tenure was ensuring that Anisha, a bright student on the verge of dropping out after her failed attempt at clearing 9th grade, continued her education. Pinki's effective advocacy and communication with Anisha's parents translated into a second chance for Anisha which eventually led to her finishing her higher secondary education and a new support from Anisha's parents who have promised to support her education for as long as she wishes to study. This change remains one of Pinki's most meaningful experiences.

Her fieldwork in the space of sustainable menstrual health education and training has been highly successful. However, during her tenure she was deeply troubled by the caste-based discrimination exhibited by the women being trained. During her training sessions, she witnessed a Dalit woman's food being rejected by dominant caste people and a Dalit adolescent girl being made to sit separately and served tea in a cup that was later discarded. These incidents made Pinki confront the everyday pain of discrimination and strengthened her commitment to working for greater dignity and equality in rural communities.

Pinki's experiences with education, adolescent girls, and caste discrimination have shaped her commitment to community work. She hopes to continue learning and strengthen her ability to support children, girls, and families in overcoming social and educational barriers. Through the MA in Rural Management program, she seeks to deepen her understanding of rural challenges and make her work more effective.



PRINCE KUMAR

**ROHTAS DISTRICT
BIHAR**



Prince (second from left) leading a campaign against discrimination in governance and service provision in his village Singhpur

A Dalit community activist leveraging
filmmaking for social change.

Prince Kumar comes from Singhpur village in Rohtas district of Bihar. His father is a farmer who supplements the family's income through furniture work and daily wage labour. Prince completed his education up to graduation in Bihar, and his own journey through higher education has been shaped by the realities of rural life and the economic constraints faced by his family.

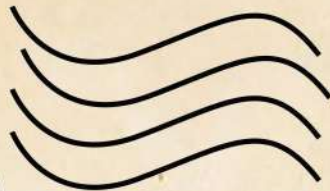
After completing Class 12, Prince began his social journey as a Voice Reporter with Mobile Vaani, using his voice to document issues affecting people in his community. He later received training through the Buland Bol programme of Video Volunteers. The training introduced him to using video as a tool to document everyday problems in villages, from recording and editing to publishing stories online. His work led him to be interviewed by the founder of Video Volunteers, Stalin K., after which he was selected as a district-level community correspondent. Since July 2022, he has produced more than 40 videos, many of which have been published on the Video Volunteers YouTube channel. He now works as a content creator, seeing storytelling not simply as a profession but as a way of bringing attention to issues that are often overlooked.

Alongside his work in community media, Prince was a fellow with the Bihar Ambedkar Vidyarthi Manch from 2023 to 2025. For two years, he brought together 15–20 students from his village every Sunday at the local community building, where they discussed education-related issues and learnt about government scholarship schemes. He later undertook a fellowship with the National Youth Equity Forum, which gave him an opportunity to understand the Panchayati Raj system and engage more closely with questions of local governance. The Forum works to connect young people from SC, ST, minority, and EBC communities in rural areas with opportunities for higher education, and through this work Prince came across the MA in Rural Management program at Shiv Nadar University.

After several years of social work, he felt that he needed to strengthen his knowledge and skills to work more effectively with communities. The opportunity was particularly meaningful because it represented the possibility of moving from documenting community problems to developing a deeper understanding of how they can be addressed.

Receiving the admission offer, Prince worried that his father's plans for his marriage might prevent him from pursuing higher education. With encouragement from his elder brother, he spoke to his father, while his sister-in-law supported his wish to study. His father eventually agreed, enabling Prince to prepare for university.

Prince's experience has strengthened his conviction that his work should go beyond creating videos. He wants to use his skills and education to help communities understand their rights, access government services, and participate more effectively in decisions that affect their lives. At the MA in Rural Management program, he hopes to build the knowledge required to connect his experience in community media and youth mobilisation with a deeper understanding of rural governance and development. For him, the program is an opportunity to transform himself before returning to his community with the tools to create more meaningful and lasting change.



PRIYA BHUSUM AMRAVATI DISTRICT MAHARASHTRA



Priya working in her fields at Melghat during last summer

A Korku woman from Melghat, Priya
wants more girls from her community
to continue their education beyond
Class XII.

Priya comes from Hatru village in Chikhaldara taluka of Amravati district, Maharashtra, located within the Melghat Tiger Reserve. Melghat is a remote Adivasi region in the Satpura hills, home largely to Korku, Gond and Nihal communities. Limited access to roads, healthcare, higher education and employment continue to shape everyday life in the region. Priya belongs to the Korku Adivasi community and grew up in a family of eight, with her parents, grandmother and five siblings. The family sustains itself through farming on five acres of land as well as daily wage labour. For generations, there was little exposure to or understanding of the value of higher education. Even today, some parents continue to believe that “Class XII is enough, now learn to manage the household.” At the same time, the growing number of young women from the community pursuing education is beginning to change these expectations. Priya sees her own journey as part of this gradual transformation and hopes to contribute to it.

Priya herself was initially expected to study only until Class XII. She completed her schooling entirely in rural Ashram schools. Having grown up in villages far from urban centres, she was deeply apprehensive about leaving for the city. The possibility of higher education emerged during the COVID-19 period, when Priya had completed Class XII and was back home. Conversations with friends at the weekly market, who spoke about continuing their education after Class XII, made her begin to question the limits she had assumed for herself. Around the same time, people associated with Maitri and the Eklavya India Foundation were visiting nearby villages to speak to young people about opportunities for further education. A village elder subsequently visited Priya’s home, spoke to her parents about the importance of higher education, and helped convince them to allow her to continue studying. He eventually accompanied her to Yavatmal, where she enrolled in a Bachelor of Social Work program. Moving to Yavatmal brought a new set of challenges. Priya came from a rural Korku-speaking environment and suddenly found herself among students from urban areas who spoke Marathi with confidence. In the beginning, she was afraid to speak to anyone and often remained by herself.

A turning point came when one of her teachers, Darne Sir, noticed her hesitation and encouraged the Melghat students to interact more openly. He guided them on how to speak with people, participate in conversations and express themselves without fear. Her classmates also played an important role. When Priya mispronounced or incorrectly used a Marathi word, they would correct her and encourage her to try saying it again. Gradually, she began participating in fieldwork, case studies and group assignments. What began as a fear of speaking and interacting with others slowly became a growing confidence in her ability to navigate unfamiliar spaces.

Priya’s own experience of finding a pathway to higher education has shaped what she now hopes to offer others. Having experienced how a conversation with the right person can make higher education seem possible, she understands the importance of making such possibilities visible to young people in remote communities. She remains keen to return to this kind of work whenever she gets the opportunity.

Priya is drawn to Rural Management because she wants to work with remote Adivasi communities across India. She hopes to understand the challenges faced by rural and Adivasi communities more deeply and eventually work as a bridge between government programmes and the people they are intended to reach, particularly in areas of education, health and livelihoods. At the RM programme, she hopes to build the knowledge and skills that will allow her to contribute meaningfully to her community. A particular aspiration for Priya is to see more girls from the Korku community continue their education beyond Class XII. She hopes that the growing presence of educated young women from the community will gradually change how families think about what is possible for their daughters.



PRIYANKA CHOUHAN

**KHARGONE DISTRICT
MADHYA PRADESH**



Priyanka speaking with a group of SHG women members while conducting their meeting

Priyanka found her voice through
grassroots work and now wants to
work on women's education and
violence against women and be an
example for her daughter.

Priyanka comes from Khargone district of Madhya Pradesh. A Dalit woman, Priyanka personifies a story of pure grit and determination. Coming from a small farming family, she is the eldest of all her siblings and early on witnessed domestic violence at home because of an alcoholic father. Despite a lot of resistance, she completed her BA Program from Jawaharlal Nehru Shashkiya Mahavidyalaya, Barwah under Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya, Indore.

"I wanted to study further, make a name for myself, but I was married off. I have been married twice now. My first marriage was mutually ended by me and my then-husband. After which I thought now I will educate myself, stand on my own two feet but looks like society never thinks a woman is enough by herself", Priyanka sighs. In her second marriage, she faced domestic violence and harassment at the hands of an abusive husband and his family. She stayed because of the birth of her daughter. After years of facing violence, she finally decided to stand up for herself and her daughter and left her husband. "My husband refuses to divorce me and continues to harass me. He has in fact created many hurdles for me to not be able to join the Rural Management Program at SNU but enough is enough! I need to now stand up for myself and my daughter!", she says with a quiet but strong determination.

A turning point in Priyanka's life was getting introduced to and joining Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS), a leading grassroots organisation working on women's financial empowerment through formation of SHGs, groundwater management, sustainable agriculture among a gamut of other issues. She joined SPS as a Field Supervisor and that work opened for her new worlds of women's stories and empowerment. Her work that included supervision of functioning of SHGs, supervision of meetings, working closely with the women members, listening to and understanding their problems, addressing them, training new Community Resource Persons, among others truly inspired her. "Listening to women's stories, their struggles, their refusal to be silenced, earn for themselves, create a space for themselves, truly inspired me to do something for myself too. And I was giving them solutions for their problems – I mean, if I can help them so they can help themselves, then why can I not help myself too?" Working with SPS not only endowed her with critical skills, techniques and leadership qualities but also brought a wave of hope and encouragement to change her life and her daughter's future.

Her motive for joining the Rural Management Program is to fulfill her long-held dream of getting higher education for herself and inspiring other women. She wants to specifically work on issues of violence against women and education of women. "Most women here are married early and are not educated. I want to work on that. I have finally found my voice, I want other women to find theirs too. But mostly I want to be an inspiration and support for my daughter. I want her to remember her mother for her courage. I want to leave back a better society for her to live on as a woman." As a single mother and woman leader, Priyanka's story will continue to inspire many.



PRIYANKA KOMRA

KANKER DISTRICT CHHATTISGARH



Priyanka in her traditional attire on the occasion of World indigenous Day (9 August)

From bringing essential services closer
to her village to helping women turn
custard apples into an enterprise,
Priyanka works across livelihoods and
community development.

Priyanka Komra, 23, comes from Rofragram Khamdhodgi, a forest-surrounded village in Kanker district of Chhattisgarh. She belongs to the Gond Adivasi community and grew up in a farming family that depends primarily on agriculture and forest produce. Her father is a farmer and her mother, a homemaker. Priyanka studied in government schools in and around her village before completing her graduation in Hindi from Indru Kenvat Girls' College in Kanker.

Continuing her education was not always easy. With limited resources at home, Priyanka worked as a labourer during the summer holidays to pay for her fees, books and notebooks. She later took up part-time work at a Choice Centre while completing a Diploma in Computer Applications. The fact that earlier generations in her family had little access to education, and that opportunities for girls around her remained limited, strengthened her determination to complete her studies and become financially independent.

Priyanka's involvement in community work began after she turned eighteen, when she joined a local youth group and participated in cleanliness drives and other activities in her village. In 2022, she became involved with the SBI Gram Seva program implemented by Samarthan- Centre for Development Support and took responsibility for a Gram Seva Kendra. Until then, villagers often had to travel around ten kilometres to Kanker for services such as photocopying, Aadhaar-related work and access to social security schemes. Bringing some of these services closer to the village showed Priyanka how much difference a relatively simple local facility could make.

She particularly remembers elderly pensioners, some between sixty-five and eighty years old, who had difficulty walking or seeing but still had to travel around eleven kilometres for banking-related work. Priyanka began visiting some of them at home to assist them. Their response affected her deeply. Their appreciation and blessings, she says, made her feel that the work she was doing had meaning.

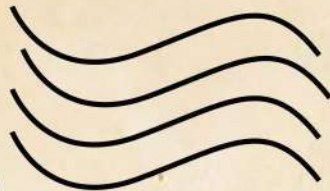
Her work gradually expanded into agriculture and livelihoods. She became involved in promoting kitchen gardens, multilayer farming and the System of Rice Intensification, among other practices. One initiative that has stayed with her concerns sitaphal (custard apple) that grows abundantly in the region. Earlier, much of the fruit would go to waste. Women began collecting and selling it, initially transporting it to markets in Kanker and even Raipur, but the returns remained low after accounting for transport and other costs. They subsequently learned to process and preserve the pulp. More recently, the women have begun making sitaphal ice cream and selling it during exposure visits, tourism programs and events organised by the administration. Priyanka sees this not simply as additional income but as an emerging source of identity for the women as entrepreneurs. Their aspiration now is to develop a brand of their own.

In 2023, Priyanka was selected as a cluster mobiliser with the organization Transform Rural India, coordinating with the National Rural Livelihoods Mission and working with women across 29 villages and 14 panchayats. She facilitated meetings in which women identified concerns relating to water, health and other village issues and encouraged them to raise these in Panchayats and Gram Sabhas. She also participated in awareness and training around gender, health, PESA and the Forest Rights Act. For Priyanka, questions of forests and natural resources cannot be separated from Adivasi life. Forests are connected not only with livelihoods but also with culture, identity and rights.

The work has changed her understanding of achievement. Earlier, Priyanka says, she believed that becoming educated and securing a job would constitute success. Her experiences in the villages made her think differently. Her own progress would have greater meaning if women, children and young people around her could also move forward. She remembers, for instance, an SHG president who had rarely spoken publicly but eventually prepared a written proposal and presented it in the Gram Sabha herself. Seeing women acquire the confidence to articulate their own concerns has become an important measure of change for Priyanka.

Her aspirations remain firmly connected to the region in which she grew up. She wants women to know their rights and become economically independent, children to have better educational opportunities, young people to progress, and forests, water and land to be protected while supporting stronger local livelihoods. "When women become self-reliant, the village also becomes self-reliant," she believes.

Priyanka comes to the MA in Rural Management with substantial experience of working at the village level, but she is also quite specific about what she still wants to learn. She wants to strengthen her research skills, become more confident speaking in English and making presentations, improve her ability to use a laptop, and learn to analyse local problems more systematically. The program offers her an opportunity to bring her grassroots experience into conversation with a broader and more systemic understanding of rural society, institutions and development.



RANI SINGH

**PANNA DISTRICT
MADHYA PRADESH**



Rani takes notes at a meeting with a group of women farmers in Panna District, Madhya Pradesh, where she worked with the People's Science Institute for 3 years

A Gond Adivasi from Bundelkhand,

Rani has worked with farmers and

women on kitchen gardens, natural

farming and water-efficient agriculture.

Rani Singh is a Gond Adivasi from the Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh. One among four siblings, she has lived all her life in her native village of Jugarwara in the region's Panna District. The Bundelkhand region carries a reputation for valour and martial prowess, represented, in particular, by the folk legends of the warrior brothers Alha and Udal, and the medieval Rajput king Chhatrasaal. In recent times, however, Bundelkhand has acquired notoriety for its intense social hierarchy, drought-prone character, and socio-economic backwardness.

Upon completing school, Rani came under intense pressure to discontinue her education. However, she was not ready to embrace domesticity so soon. Rani found an opportunity to work for the well-known People's Science Institute (PSI), which is active in Madhya Pradesh's Panna District. She was designated a Village Level Resource Person (VLRP) and spent nearly three years as an active fieldworker.

Her association with PSI proved to be transformative. Says Rani, "As a VLRP I worked closely with women. Keeping their health needs in mind, I encouraged them to set up kitchen gardens so that they could grow and consume fresh vegetables. I formed Farmer Interest Groups (FIGs) and trained farmers in natural farming techniques. My aim was to encourage them to replace chemical fertilizers and pesticides with matka khaad (earthen pot manure), agni astra (a form of liquid bio-pesticide), and organic pesticides. As part of PSI's efforts I would also talk to farmers about growing crops that require less water. I received training in the SRI (System of Rice Intensification) method and taught this to farmers in my field area."

In the course of her intense interactions with women and men farmers on the one hand, and PSI's trainers and resource persons on the other, Rani felt her own capacities growing. At the same time, she grew sensitive to the patriarchal norms that encumbered women's fulsome participation. "Although women showed interest, they frequently faced hostility towards their participation in livelihood activities and events organised by PSI and other civil society organisation. The opposition arose from caste norms and objections from family members," Rani observes.

"The only way to overcome such barriers is to continue working with women, and to encourage and empower them to participate in activities beyond domestic chores," Rani continues. "And that is what I want to do when I go back to my village after completing my education at SNU."

Rani decided to apply for the Rural Management program because her aim is to work with women, children, and farmers. Having met several RM alumni at PSI, she believes that the RM program provides just the kind of training she needs. "I met Neha Didi, Anita Didi, Firdaus Didi ... all of them guided and encouraged me to apply to the RM program. I believe I will learn how to address the challenges of the social sector while remaining sensitive and empathetic to those who are most needy and in need of support," she says brightly.

A yoga enthusiast, Rani enjoys practising different asanas, including the difficult sheershasana or headstand pose. As for other hobbies, Rani thinks for a moment and says, "I don't read very much but I'm fond of reading the dohas [couplets] of Rahim and Kabir." Indeed, one of her favourite dohas is: Rahiman paani raakhiye, bin paani sab sun| paani bina na ubre moti, maanas, chun|| The Rahim couplet puns on the word paani or water to deliver a deep philosophical message: protect your inner character and self-respect. In a way, the couplet sums up the gravitas that Rani embodies with her simplicity, cheerfulness, and strong social commitment.



RINKY YADAV

DATIA DISTRICT MADHYA PRADESH



Rinky (second from right) at the Sajhe Sapne office in Bhopal on the day of her farewell, when she organised a debate on “Looks Do Matter”

Questions about gender, caste and
inequality shaped Rinky’s four-and-a-
half years of work with young women
and her interest in rural social change.

Rinky Yadav, 27, comes from Madhopura village in Datia district of Madhya Pradesh. When she speaks about growing up there, she returns repeatedly to the questions that began forming in her mind as a child. “My childhood gave me a lot of questions,” she says. She wondered why girls could not laugh, move around or speak as freely as boys, why boys were discouraged from crying, why daughters-in-law had to cover their faces with a ghoonghat, and why caste determined how people treated one another.

Some of these questions emerged from experiences of fear and violence within the family. Around the age of eleven or twelve, when fights broke out between her father, uncle and grandfather, Rinky would sit on the roof with her fingers pressed into her ears so that she would not hear them. Yet, she remembers, the sounds still reached her. She could not understand why people within a family could behave so violently towards one another.

Caste raised another set of questions. Her village had two handpumps, and Rinky noticed that after a Dalit person drew water, some ‘upper’ caste women would wash the handpump before using it. When she was around thirteen or fourteen, she deliberately refused to do so. “The women said that Rinky had become achhoot (untouchable) and that nobody should touch me,” she recalls. Her mother scolded her. When Rinky asked why untouchability was practised, her mother’s response stayed with her, “I don’t know. Everyone believes in it, so we believe in it too.” For Rinky, that was not an adequate answer.

For a long time, however, she did not have much confidence in her own ability to question the world around her. She was frequently compared with a friend who performed better academically and gradually came to believe that she was not intelligent and could not do anything significant. Moving outside the village began to change this perception. In places such as Bengaluru, she encountered people who listened to her and valued what she had to say. “I understood that you cannot compare two people like that,” she says. “Everyone has a different pace, different circumstances and different strengths.” This experience would later influence the way she worked with other young women.

A major turning point came through Sajhe Sapne, an organisation working with young women from rural India. Discussions on gender, caste, violence, the Constitution, equality and leadership gave Rinky a vocabulary with which to revisit questions she had carried since childhood. “I began to understand that my questions were not wrong,” she says.

Rinky eventually spent four and a half years with Sajhe Sapne, taking on responsibilities in operations, accounts, documentation, planning, coordination, inventory and student management. Working closely with young women also required her to counsel students, listen to different sides of a problem, make decisions, maintain organisational rules while sustaining trust, and patiently address problems that could recur in everyday residential and institutional life. The experience taught her that meaningful work requires not only conviction but also systems, relationships, patience and most importantly, continual learning.

It also produced new questions. At a Sajhe Sapne centre in Bihar, around thirty girls initially participated, but attendance fell to about fifteen after men in some families stopped the girls from coming. The experience made Rinky question whether working with girls alone was sufficient. If decisions about their mobility and participation continued to be made by fathers, brothers and other men, she wondered, did efforts towards gender equality also need to engage boys and men?

Rinky describes herself as someone who is still learning rather than someone who has found all the answers. “Earlier I was afraid of my questions. Now I am not,” she says. If she could speak to her younger self, she would tell her that her questions were “right and natural.” She would also give that younger Rinky permission to make mistakes- while being careful, as she puts it, not to make a mistake that takes her away from the person she wants to become.

Rinky comes to the MA in Rural Management with questions shaped by her own childhood and sharpened through four and a half years of working with young women and within a development organisation. The program offers her a space to bring these experiences together and develop a more systematic understanding of gender, caste, rural society and the processes through which social change becomes possible.



SANJITA KERKETTA

JALPAIGURI DISTRICT WEST BENGAL



Sanjita belongs to a Tea Tribe community of West Bengal

From the tea gardens of Jalpaiguri

to civil society internships across

states, Sanjita wants to create greater

opportunities for tea garden youth.

Sanjita grew up as a member of the tea tribe community in the tea gardens of West Bengal's Jalpaiguri District. Her father is a tea garden labourer while her mother is a homemaker. The family lives on the Damdim Tea Estate. Sanjita has an elder sister who studies and works in Tamil Nadu.

The tea tribes are a diverse community of different Adivasi groups. Their ancestors who migrated to north Bengal and Assam, originally came from the Chotanagpur plateau region comprising, in the main, present-day Jharkhand, and adjacent parts of Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and West Bengal. Starting nearly two centuries ago, the British transported people in the thousands to the newly established tea gardens of north Bengal and Assam. In like fashion, Sanjita's ancestors migrated a few generations ago. Her family belongs to the Munda Adivasi community.

The north Bengal region is home to a great diversity of communities. Consequently, Sanjita speaks multiple languages. While Sadri is most commonly spoken in the tea gardens, she also speaks Bangla, Nepali, Hindi, and English.

Sanjita completed her schooling in the Bengali medium in Jalpaiguri District. Thereafter, she joined a wave of young tea garden youth who have battled the economic decline of the tea plantations by moving out of West Bengal for higher education on scholarships. The role of the youth organisation Himalayan Prayatn which works with the tea garden community was pivotal in helping her continue her education after school.

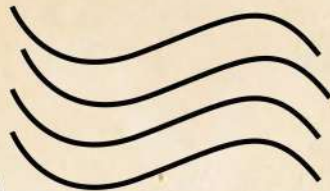
A good score in the nationwide CUET (short for Common University Entrance Test) exam helped Sanjita secure admission to the prestigious Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). She joined the Bachelor's in Social Work (BSW) program at the Tuljapur campus in Maharashtra. Although she had commenced an undergraduate degree in psychology at the Sacred Heart College in Tamil Nadu, Sanjita chose to switch because, in her words, "Having grown up in the tea gardens, I had experienced first-hand the social and economic challenges of a life that was fully dependent on earnings from labour. This inspired me to apply to the BSW program."

The TISS curriculum provided Sanjita valuable exposure. She had the opportunity to carry out fieldwork and complete internships across the country, especially in Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Uttarakhand. She says, "Over three years, I gained insights into rural health, community development, education, child protection, and mental health. I conducted village visits, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), community activities, and case work. I also worked with children, youth, and vulnerable groups, which helped me understand their challenges."

Upon completion of her Bachelor's degree, Sanjita was determined to continue higher education for a career in the development sector. She secured admission at TISS, Mumbai, as well as at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. However, she preferred to join SNU's Rural Management program. "I felt that the RM curriculum was unique given its emphasis on practical experience and solutions to rural India's pressing problems," Sanjita says. "Besides, the RM alumni from the tea gardens, especially Sancharia Oraon, who is a close friend, strongly recommended SNU."

As a rural management professional, Sanjita wants to work with marginalised rural communities similar to the one that she comes from. She believes she will be able to develop valuable skills in community engagement, project planning, budgeting, and management at SNU. "In the long term I want to contribute to the tea garden community. Given the challenges that the tea gardens are facing, I would like to give back to my community by creating better opportunities for youth," she asserts.

"I like to paint and do craft-work in my spare time. I enjoy dancing! And I am always interested in learning about new cultures and new places!" an upbeat Sanjita ends with a bright smile.



SANTLAL UIKE

BALRAMPUR DISTRICT CHHATTISGARH



A Gond Adivasi using filmmaking to
foreground the relationships between
forests and Adivasi.

Santlal during his filmmaking training at the Green Hub Central India Fellowship in Bhopal

Santlal Uike comes from Patewa village in Balrampur district of Chhattisgarh. Belonging to the Gond tribe, he grew up in a rural setting where he was nurtured by his relationships with forests and his community. His interest in social service and community development has been a central part of his journey, shaped by his experiences of living closely with the natural environment and the people who depend on it.

He was selected for the prestigious Green Hub Fellowship in 2025 where Santlal documented and understood community life more closely, particularly issues related to people's rights and their relationship with jal, jungle, and zameen (water, forest and land). As part of the fellowship, he made two films, Magra – Prakriti Sang Basa Jeevan and Sajhi Chaal. Magra documents the official and community processes involved in the implementation of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 in Udaipur's Kotra block while Sajhi Chaal explores the struggles of the Gond and Baiga tribespeople in Madhya Pradesh's Dindori and Mandla district struggle to get their Community Forest Rights promised to them under the revolutionary Forest Rights Act, 2006.

Santlal took the learnings from his films and started working with his own village community on a "Van Adhikar Samiti" initiative while being at the fellowship. The committee is an effort to revive the role of Adivasi communities in the protection of forests and conservation efforts which has for long been monopolised by the Forest Department. Through this work, he has sought to bring together community participation and environmental conservation, strengthening the role of people who have had a deep symbiotic relationship with their natural surroundings.

For Santlal, working for communities and protecting the environment are closely connected. His experiences in the Green Hub Fellowship and in his village have deepened his understanding of the relationship between rural livelihoods, natural resources, and community action. He now sees further education as an opportunity to strengthen this understanding and develop more effective approaches to rural development. He hopes to use the RM program as a platform to hone his skills and scale his efforts. During his downtime, Santlal loves to play Danda Panchranga, a local traditional sport, which he is excited to teach and play with his cohort at SNU.



SATEESH DHURWEY

**DINDORI DISTRICT
MADHYA PRADESH**



Sateesh, amidst the natural beauty of Palakkad, Kerala

Having seen wells and rivers run

dry, Sateesh wants to create local

employment and reduce distress

migration from rural communities.

Sateesh Dhurwey, 24, comes from Bhalwara village in the Shahpura tehsil of Dindori district, Madhya Pradesh, and belongs to the Gond community. He remembers growing up in Bhalwara, living an unhurried life, deeply connected to the land, with a strong sense of community. People worked hard through the day, but evenings often brought them together to share their everyday struggles and stories. What stays with him most is the way people relate to one another, and stand together through moments of happiness as well as difficulty.

Sateesh's educational journey has had its share of setbacks. He failed his higher secondary examination, but chose to attempt it again and successfully completed his schooling. The experience shaped his attitude towards failure, teaching him to see it not as the end of a journey but as an opportunity to recognise mistakes and move forward. He later completed a B.Sc. in Mathematics from Government Model Science College, Jabalpur.

Although his formal education was in Mathematics, the realities he saw in his village and neighbouring areas increasingly drew his attention elsewhere. People continued to struggle for basic needs such as employment and healthcare, and many migrated to Kerala, Maharashtra and other places in search of work. Wanting to understand rural issues more closely, Sateesh pursued a one-year Post Graduate Diploma in Sustainable Rural Reconstruction from the Gandhi Research Foundation in Jalgaon, Maharashtra.

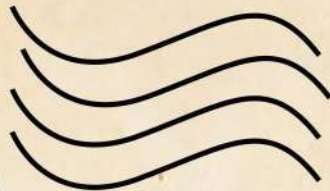
A two-month Community Immersion during the diploma made some of these concerns more tangible. Sateesh vividly remembers his first day in the village, when a local resident took the group around and showed them wells that had completely dried up. He later took them to the Aner river, which was also dry. During summer, Sateesh learnt, the entire village depended on a single tap for water. The experience helped him understand the severity of a water crisis beyond what could be learnt in a classroom.

Migration, however, remains the issue that concerns him most. He has watched daily-wage workers pack their belongings, leave their families for months and live in difficult conditions elsewhere, simply to send money home. He is particularly troubled when school-going children and young people migrate for work and discontinue their education. For him, this reflects the urgent need to create meaningful livelihood opportunities within rural areas.

Sateesh, therefore, visualises grassroots work as being physically present within communities rather than working at a distance. He hopes to spend time with people, understand their everyday concerns and build relationships through which solutions can be developed together. If he could change one thing in Bhalwara and its surrounding villages, he would focus on creating local employment while ensuring that young people have access to good education, reducing distress migration.

His connection with his Gond heritage is also reflected in his love for Gond songs. He values them as expressions of the community's culture, history, relationship with nature and spiritual beliefs. He also enjoys playing badminton, which helps him remain active and focused.

Through the MA Rural Management program, Sateesh hopes to deepen his understanding of rural communities and develop the knowledge needed to work effectively on education, employment and basic services. Eventually, he hopes to return to rural communities equipped not simply with ideas, but with the ability to work alongside people towards solutions that can endure.



SHAIK SANA RANGAREDDY DISTRICT TELANGANA



Sana comes from the Rangareddy district of Telangana

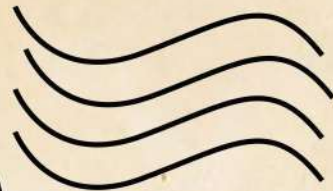
Growing up in extreme poverty, Sana
pursued higher education and now
wants to work for Muslim girls' and
women's education and empowerment.

Shaik Sana or Sana as she calls herself, is a 20-year-old young, determined Muslim woman from Salapur village of Rangareddy district of Telangana. She comes from a small farming family, which has seen extreme poverty, including starvation. Despite this, her parents have pushed for her and her sibling's education. She completed her BA Program from Telangana Tribal Welfare Degree College for Women, Shadnagar under Palamuru University, Telangana that provides free undergraduate education and accommodation to marginalised and tribal women.

"Getting into college and getting free education was important for me since without it my family could not have afforded my education and it would have been difficult for my parents to resist societal pressure of marrying me off", Sana reflects. She proudly quips that her parents in fact are her biggest inspiration. Though not much educated themselves, they fought tooth and nail with their relatives and other members of the village against marrying them early. Her elder sister is pursuing her Masters in Zoology. "My father used to avoid taking us to marriages knowing that someone might ask our hand in marriage to him. He and my mother worked in other's fields as labourers to make sure that we build a brighter future for ourselves, that we become educated and financially secure and independent. I will never forget the sacrifices they made so that we could shine one day," Sana almost choked in tears as she said those words.

Her college education where she studied Economics, History and Political Science opened up new worlds of knowledge, curiosity and interest for her. She became deeply invested in understanding the politics of the world, particularly political forces that keep women, particularly Muslim women, oppressed and voiceless. She also started reading a lot on the history of political parties in Telangana. She understood the value of public movements and how change can be brought forward through actions of individuals.

This is what brought her towards the Rural Management Program at SNU where she is coming with the aim of learning both theoretical frameworks, deep-rooted causes of issues and gain field-based, hands-on experience. The Program's diversity of students, areas taught and tools and strategies are what really impressed her and she believes that she will learn a lot from it. In future, she is keen on working for Muslim girls and women's education and empowerment. "In our community, women and girls are simply seen as objects. We are just objects to be married off early and then to produce children. It baffles me to think that we are not seen as equals, as people with dreams. But I have realized that education is the magic mantra. I believe that. Otherwise look at me, my sister – we come from such an impoverished family and yet, today we have opportunities. Education is that portal. It can transport people, particularly marginalised young women's lives, to better worlds, better futures." Sana brings with her a story of determination, passion, curiosity but more importantly a willingness to understand and work towards changing the reality of rural India, particularly its women.



SHIVANI SONGARE

**KHARGONE DISTRICT
MADHYA PRADESH**



Shivani conducting door-to-door surveys in village Jorghari, Dholpur District, Rajasthan to ensure 100% school enrollment

Selected for the prestigious Gandhi
Fellowship to improve education
systems in Rajasthan.

Shivani Songare hails from Khargone district of Madhya Pradesh and grew up in a farming family. Agriculture has long been the primary source of livelihood for her family, and she witnessed firsthand both the richness of rural life and the financial uncertainties that often accompany farming. The challenges of pursuing higher education in this context became the stone of which she sharpened her resilience and deepened her empathy for rural communities that continue to remain on the margins of development.

Shivani went on to complete a Bachelor's degree in Sociology from Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya, Indore. During college, she prepared for government services, particularly the Combined Defence Services (CDS) examination, with the aspiration of serving the country through the armed forces. Despite years of preparation, repeated setbacks led her to reconsider her path and reflect on what meaningful public service could mean for her.

Seeking greater clarity, Shivani enrolled in a 10-day Vipassana meditation course. The experience of silence, mindfulness, and self-observation helped her approach setbacks with greater patience and acceptance, shifting her focus from achieving a particular outcome to learning and growing through the process. Around this time, she came across the Gandhi Fellowship, which offered an opportunity to work directly with rural communities while strengthening public systems. She began to see that serving the country could take many forms, including improving public education and working alongside communities to create change at the grassroots.

Shivani joined the Gandhi Fellowship with the Piramal Foundation and spent the next two years working across rural Rajasthan. Her work brought her into close engagement with government schools, teachers, Panchayati Raj Institutions, district administrations, and local communities. She worked on strengthening Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), mentoring teachers, encouraging community participation in education, and supporting collaboration between schools and local governance institutions. Living in villages and working within public systems gave her a deeper understanding of the complexities of rural development and strengthened her belief that sustainable change depends on trust, participation, and collective action.

These experiences have shaped Shivani's interest in bridging communities and institutions. She believes that meaningful development requires not only compassion but also the practical knowledge and collaborative leadership needed to translate community aspirations into effective action. Her experience working across different levels of the public system has reinforced her conviction that communities are not merely beneficiaries of development, but active participants in shaping their own futures.

Outside of her professional work, Shivani enjoys travelling, meeting people from diverse backgrounds, listening to their stories, reading about society and development, and photography. At the MA in Rural Management program, she hopes to deepen her understanding of rural governance, livelihoods, public policy, and social entrepreneurship. In the long run, she aspires to work as a development professional who can connect communities with institutions and create opportunities for rural communities to build more secure and sustainable futures.



SHIVNATH MUNDA RANCHI DISTRICT JHARKHAND



Shivnath during preparations of Sukan Baru festival in Jharkhand

From helping revive the Munda

Sukan Baru festival to working on a

Mundari translation project, Shivnath

is documenting and preserving Adivasi

culture and knowledge.

Shivnath comes from Buruhatu village in Ranchi district of Jharkhand and belongs to the Munda Adivasi community. He completed his BSc in Environmental Sciences from Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee University, Ranchi. A bright student, Shivnath comes from a humble background, but his parents insisted that all their children get a good education and then build a career. While Shivnath's elder siblings are all engaged in the service sector – one is a teacher, another a nurse and another works in the corporate sector – he and his younger siblings are currently pursuing education.

“My grandfather instilled this understanding of valuing education. He is my biggest inspiration. After his land was bought by the state for building a dam, he was offered the position of a peon. Never once, he was dishonest to his work, he was punctual and always regular, these are values that I want to embody someday in my life,” Shivnath underlines.

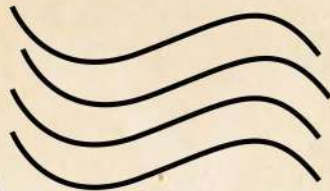
In 2022, Shivnath started working as a volunteer in Rumbul, an Adivasi youth organisation working with Adivasi communities in Jharkhand. He got involved with organising the Sukan Baru festival, a festival celebrated by the Munda community to worship their hill deity. The festival is held in the Sukan Baru hills. “There was a time when the state wanted to build a huge tower in the hills. The Munda people protested citing that the hill was their deity and spirit and it cannot be meddled with. After a lot of protests, the state cancelled that project. However, over time the popularity of the festival was becoming low, so Rumbul decided to revive and boost that festival. I got involved with it, coordinating and helping in its organisation in a major way,” Shivnath said.

The annual festival that takes place for three to four days is organised sometime around December and January. “We also came up with the idea of inviting and taking batches of people from cities and other parts of India who are not much aware of rural Jharkhand, particularly Adivasi culture and history, to the festival. When we advertised it, there was a huge response! Young people from as far as Nagaland showed interest and then visited the festival. That gave it a huge boost! Today the festival is gaining encouraging traction, and I am happy because our indigenous culture, tradition and history is getting preserved and this knowledge is being passed on to the next generation and even outside the community,” he said with a sense of pride in his voice.

In 2023, he got involved with a major translation project that was led by Dr. Ram Dayal Munda Tribal Welfare Research Institute, Ranchi where Rumbul was also involved. The project involved translating a 100-year-old dictionary from English to Mundari language that was compiled by Father Hoffman during colonial rule when he stayed with the Munda community. The project is a massive attempt to record Mundari language and knowledge systems. Shivnath was working as an Assistant Coordinator to Gunjal Ikr Munda, an Adivasi scholar and co-founder of Rumbul. “Gunjal has been another source of tremendous inspiration in my life. Working so closely with him helped me learn a lot, not just about our community's history or knowledge systems but also how important it is to connect with the outside world, other communities and people and grow from there. He taught me the value of exchange of learning between Adivasi and non-Adivasi communities and even among different Adivasi communities, be it within Jharkhand, India or abroad.”

It was this understanding that brought him to the Rural Management program. “My main purpose of joining the MA-RM program is to understand our Adivasi communities' problems by looking at learnings from other contexts. I want to know how to make the condition of Adivasi communities, particularly in Adivasi villages, better.” In future, he wishes to work with an organisation that focuses on improving Adivasi environments and learn better about Adivasi environmentalism.

Shivnath is also proficient in playing the Nagada and dhol where he plays Mundari music, a passion that is very close to his heart and keeps him connected to his Adivasi roots.



UMA JAMNE

BALAGHAT DISTRICT MADHYA PRADESH



Uma on the outskirts of her village Dongariya in Balaghat District, Madhya Pradesh

Inspired by her mother's experience
with a women's self-help group, Uma
wants to work with women, farmers
and rural communities.

Uma is a resident of Dongariya Village in Madhya Pradesh's Balaghat District. Her village lies close to the famous Kanha National Park known for its wildlife. Uma was born to a family of farmers. "My parents are marginal farmers. The land we have isn't enough, so my father also runs a small shop to make ends meet. I have seen my parents work hard since childhood to ensure a decent life for me and my elder brother. Their lives are a huge source of inspiration for me," says Uma.

She continues, "My father believes in the significance of organic farming. As a result, I too have acquired an interest to learn more about it. Meanwhile, I have seen my mother transform as a person ever since she joined a women's self-help group (SHG) in our village some years ago. She used to be shy and confine herself to the house earlier but now she actively interacts with people and participates enthusiastically in meetings and SHG activities. Her transformation inspires me to work with women in rural India."

Uma heard about the RM Program through the famous civil society organisation PRADAN which supported the formation of the SHG that her mother is a member of. She heard more about RM from Ekta Goswami, who belonged to the same village and had secured admission to the second batch of the RM Program. Earlier, Uma had received the opportunity to explore rural Madhya Pradesh as a National Service Scheme (NSS) Volunteer in her college. "During NSS camps we would meet and engage with rural folk of different communities. Although I was studying for a B.Sc. in Botany, Zoology, and Chemistry, through NSS I grew aware about development issues. I started to think, 'how can I bring about a positive change in the lives of the people'?"

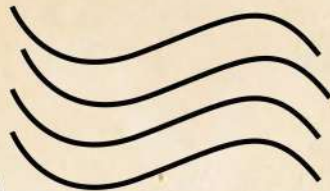
Uma excelled as an NSS Volunteer, receiving the Best Volunteer award (from several hundred Volunteers at her university). She also received NSS's B Certificate, which is provided in recognition of completing 240 hours of community service and at least one 7-day annual camp in a rural area.

Her experiences helped crystallise the resolve to work for the well-being of farmers, women, and rural communities. Uma decided that she wanted to study further to understand how to touch people's lives for the better and simultaneously contribute to her family financially. She began to consider a future as a responsible and socially sensitive development professional. This made her actively consider the RM Program for a Master's degree.

An avid gardener, Uma derives great delight from planting saplings, taking care of them, and watching them grow. She also likes trying out new food recipes. "I like to use my spare time learning and trying out new things," she says. Asked about her sporting interests, she responds, "I used to play cricket and badminton in school. Maybe if I get an opportunity I would like to play again!"

Interestingly, Uma has nurtured a keen interest and curiosity about the Armed Forces since childhood. Combining this curiosity with her passion for women's empowerment, she closely follows The Test Case, a Hindi action-drama web series centred on a woman officer Captain Shikha Sharma who becomes the Indian Army's first female test case for a combat role.

"Shikha's character shows that women are no less when it comes to carrying a burning desire to serve the country. They can be as brave as men and no less competent. I am inspired by Shikha's hard work, determination, and self-confidence. These are the qualities that I aspire to," says Uma with a gentle but resolute smile.



VAISHNAVI KINHEKAR

**YAVATMAL DISTRICT
MAHARASHTRA**



Vaishnavi belongs to the Kolam (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group), Maharashtra

The first graduate girl from her Kolam
Pada, Vaishnavi wants to expand
educational opportunities for children
and young people from communities
like hers.

Vaishnavi comes from the Kolam PVTG (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group) Adivasi community in Sharad village, Yavatmal, Maharashtra. She is the first graduate girl in her family and the first graduate girl from the Sharad Kolam Pada. She grew up in circumstances where education was difficult to access, and financial constraints often shaped what was possible. After the death of her father, her mother took up farming and daily wage work to support the family, while Vaishnavi also worked in others' fields to contribute to the household.

Her own education has therefore been a journey of persistence. She completed her schooling in Adivasi residential schools before pursuing a Bachelor of Social Work at Savitri Jyotirao Samajkarya Mahavidyalaya in Yavatmal. Coming from a PVTG community, she has grown up closely observing how farming, wage labour, forests and access to basic facilities shape everyday life in Adivasi communities. These experiences have given her a grounded understanding of the circumstances in which vulnerable rural families make their livelihoods.

Fieldwork during her Social Work degree further widened this understanding. She worked with women, children and marginalized groups and engaged with schools, Gram Panchayats, health centres, Self-Help Groups and community organisations. She also worked on issues related to the Forest Rights Act. As a volunteer with the ASER 2024 survey, she visited rural families and collected information on children's education, giving her a closer view of gaps in basic learning, numeracy and access to education. These experiences reinforced her belief that understanding rural communities requires being present, listening to people and learning from their experiences.

Vaishnavi has also developed a strong sense of responsibility through organizing and working with others. Integrity, self-reliance and cooperation are central to how Vaishnavi approaches life. For her, integrity means being accountable for her actions, self-reliance means having the confidence to make efforts independently, and cooperation means being willing to support others. These values have grown from navigating education, family responsibilities and community life.

At the MA in Rural Management program, Vaishnavi hopes to deepen her understanding of rural and Adivasi communities, particularly around education, health, livelihoods, employment, agriculture and gender inequality. She wants to work closely with rural communities and eventually begin this work in her own area. Having experienced the difficulty of pursuing education herself, she hopes to create greater opportunities for children and young people from communities like hers.

Vaishnavi's journey from becoming the first graduate girl of her Kolam Pada to wanting to work for others carries a simple conviction, "education can widen what a community believes is possible". She now hopes to work alongside rural and Adivasi communities and contribute to opportunities that can make their lives more secure and their futures more open.



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