

Ashoka Alumni
OUR STORIES

VOLUME ONE



Produced by
Ashoka University
NH 44, Rajiv Gandhi Education City,
Sonapat, Haryana 131029

First published in India in 2023

Conceptualised and designed by

ALLCAP”
COMMUNICATIONS

www.allcap.co.in

All Rights Reserved Worldwide

No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner
whatsoever without the written permission of the publisher.

We would like to thank the contributors and alumni
who helped put these stories together –
Kanishk Devgan, Rohan Chowdhury, Prerna Gupta,
Sloka Chandra Kasapuram, and Swati Kankan.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

PRAMATH RAJ
SINHA 06

SHUBHAM
RATHORE 08

PRATITI 10

SHAKUL
SONKER 12 / 31

SIMRANPREET
OBEROI 14

KARAN
BHOLA 15 / 94

RAHAT
KULSHRESHTHA 16

CHAMBA
TSETAN 18

ARYAN
MISHRA 20

JONATHAN
MENDONCA 22

SAUMYA
AGGARWAL 22

SREYA
MUTHUKUMAR 23

JAIRAJ
BHATTACHARYA 24 / 41

RADHA
LATH GUPTA 26

PEEYUSH
KHARE 28

LAV
KANOI 30

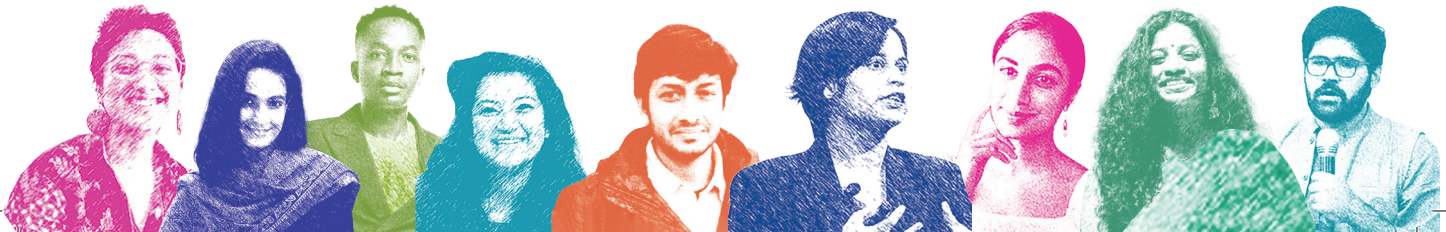
ASHWEETHA
SHETTY 32 / 53

SPARSH
AGARWAL 34

GARIMA
POONIA 36

CHAKSHU
CHHABRA 37 / 82

MCPHERLAIN
CHUNGU 38



GURLEEN
KAUR

40

MEGHA
ARORA

58 / 85

SHIVPRIYA
ARORA

73

KRITI
GARG

42

ABHIR
BHALLA

60

ABHISHEK
VERMA

76

YAJUSHI
KHURANA

44

URVIN
SONETA

62

SONAL
JAIN

77

FATIMA
KHAN

46

NAINA
PRAVEEN

63

GARIMA
RASTOGI

78

PRABHAT
KUMAR

48

ABHISHEK
CHOUDHARY

64

MONIKA
SHUKLA

80

SHODHAN
BABU

49 / 74

VIKAS
SANGAM

66 / 89

VIVEKANANDA 84

AKRITI
ASTHANA

50

KRITIKA
PANDEY

67

SHALEEN
WADHWANA

86

LAKSHMAN
ROHITH
MARADAPA

52

UPATYAKA
DUTTA

68

RISHI
IYENGAR

88

ANOOP
MAURYA

54

ONISH
GARG

70

SAHIL
BHARGAVA

90

SAMARTH
MAHAJAN

56 / 81

DAKSH
WALIA

72

SANDHYA
NAIR

92

AFTERWORD

VENKAT ESHWARA & ANU SINGH 96





FOREWORD

We set up Ashoka to be an inclusive institution of excellence in teaching and research, to nurture responsible leaders for India and the world, and to be a pioneering force for interdisciplinary higher education; to be one of the top universities in the world. Over the past decade, we have created a strong foundation for achieving this goal. In start-up lingo, we went from “0 to 1” with our Young India Fellowship programme from 2011-2014, culminating in the launch of the University. Since then, we have scaled up – our “1 to 10” phase – to 2,700 students and over 200 faculty.

Even in this brief period, our alumni – in their early-twenties to mid-thirties, have excelled in their disciplines. They have gone to some of the most coveted organisations in the world. There is not a single top university without an Ashoka alumni, which is a remarkable feat. Our alumni have also become successful entrepreneurs, with outstanding contributions in the government as well as the social sector.

University reputations are built on the back of the transformative effect they have on the lives of their students. This book captures a sliver of some of the journeys and success stories of that transformation. And the best is yet to come.



PRAMATH RAJ SINHA



CHILD'S RIGHTS ACTIVIST;
YOUTH LEADER AT 100
MILLION CAMPAIGN; DEPUTY
MANAGER - CENTRE FOR
ENTREPRENEURSHIP

SHUBHAM RATHORE

RAJASTHAN TECHNICAL
UNIVERSITY → YIF-2022
→ YOUTH LEADER →
ASHOKA UNIVERSITY

Shubham Rathore works to raise awareness about child trafficking and sexual abuse. At 13, Shubham started working as a child labourer to provide for his family. He worked for a year before being rescued by the *Bachpan Bachao Andolan* – an anti-trafficking and anti-slavery movement started by Nobel Peace Prize winner Kailash Satyarthi in 1980. Shubham was taken to Bal Ashram, a rehabilitation centre in Jaipur where he restarted formal education. Eventually, he pursued an electrical engineering degree in Alwar, Rajasthan.

“In the rehabilitation centre I used to be involved in awareness activities on sexual abuse and trafficking in villages. We organised marches, raised slogans, and held street plays.” Shubham’s activism continues with the youth-led *100 Million* campaign, launched by the President of India in 2016. It’s a call to action for a world where young people are free, safe, and educated. “When I reached the rehabilitation centre I learned of the unfair conditions that exist in the outside world that children are the victims of. This became a driving point for me.”

Kailash Satyarthi has remained Shubham’s idol and a personal mentor. Shubham

believes Kailash’s work has made a difference in the lives of countless children. “It’s important to me that people learn about the work he has done, and get inspired to create change with that knowledge.”

Life was not without challenges for Shubham. The world beyond child labour was very different. However, the people at the rehabilitation centre helped him settle in. “It’s not very easy for children who are rescued. Many get addicted to certain kinds of substances and they have to go through counselling,” he says.

Before joining the Young India Fellowship (YIF), Shubham was engaged in COVID-19 relief work through Kailash Satyarthi Children’s Foundation. He currently works at the InfoEdge Centre for Entrepreneurship at Ashoka University. He hopes more people will join him in his efforts to bring about tangible change.

“After coming to the YIF I am clear that I should go for an MBA and build my own network. Right after, I’d like to join a startup or work on a business plan. I now have a plan in my mind for the next 5-10 years because of my time at Ashoka.”



UG 2020, ASP 2021
→ UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA AT
BERKELEY


Your journey to Berkeley hasn't been easy. What were the challenges?

I am disabled, psychologically and physically. It took me a while to understand what was going on, and how to overcome it. As a queer person, I also faced an identity crisis. I come from a mixed caste parentage, with both Dalit and Savarna parents. There's no primer when it comes to mixed-caste families,

and how you navigate that in a caste-ridden Indian society. I acknowledge my privilege in my family – both my parents are doctorates – but emotionally it's been a very difficult journey in figuring all of this out.

What role did Ashoka play in your journey?

At Ashoka, I majored in history with a creative writing and performing arts



What has life after Ashoka been like?

I am a masters student in South Asian studies at Berkeley. I work on modern and contemporary Bengal, from 1990 to the present. My current thesis – ‘Bizarre in the city: Science and nature narratives in Bengal’, focuses on science and literature. I am also teaching two courses at Berkeley. I continue to translate, currently working on a translation of one of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s essays.

PRATITI

MASTERS STUDENT, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT BERKELEY; TRANSLATOR

minor. I feel that the most valuable things were the two minors I did. With creative writing, I did all my courses in the translation track. Professor Arunava Sinha’s work with creating one of the foremost translation centres in South Asia made me realise how much I loved translating. I also published the translation of Shirshendu Mukherjee’s *Exiled from Ayodhya* from Bengali to English.

My main agenda in life is to create space – a decolonial, anti-caste space – as a queer person, as a Dalit person, and as a disabled person.

FOUNDER, I-STEM
UG 2018, ASP 2019 → CLIX CAPITAL → ENTREPRENEUR

SHAKUL SONKER

As a blind student, I relied on screen-reading software, but they didn't help me read mathematical equations. Why was there no technology solving this problem for me?



As a blind student, I relied on screen-reading softwares to read documents. But they didn't help me read mathematical equations. I struggled with math textbooks through college because they weren't readily available for me. I kept asking myself, why is there no technology that is solving this problem for me?

At Ashoka, my friends and I began a self-advocacy group called I-STEM. We were asking crucial questions such as how digital infrastructure can better accommodate students with disabilities. We wanted to improve it to make STEM education accessible, inclusive, and available for all.

With a focus on visual impairments, we organised initiatives for mentorship, upskilling, and recruitment. Since 2018, we have also been organising India's first inclusive hackathon.

As someone who has experienced all that was lacking in terms of accessibility in STEM, I felt the need to develop I-STEM further. With my co-founders Kartik Sawhney, Sunil Choudhary, and Akashdeep Bansal, we expanded I-STEM into a digital accessibility company. We develop solutions for making digital infrastructure accessible, usable, and consumable for all and work with organisations like UNFPA, IIT-Delhi, Ashoka University, and the State Government of Washington.

The community that I was exposed to at the University was especially impactful. Ashoka forced me to think critically and encouraged me to ask questions. Ashoka does not train us to serve as employees, but inspires us to be enthusiastic participants and take a risk. The three years were well-rounded with an emotional connection with my cohort built on mutual peer learning, kindness, and support from the extended ecosystem – students, faculty, and co-founders alike.



SIMRANPREET SINGH OBEROI

**SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR;
RECOGNISED AS TOP SOCIAL
INNOVATOR BY SCHWAB FOUNDATION**

JAGRITI YATRA → MAHARASHTRA INSTITUTE
OF TECHNOLOGY → YIF 2013 → KALAM
FOUNDATION → GENPACT → SANJHI SIKHIYA

Simranpreet Oberoi has been recognised by the World Economic Forum-backed Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship for his work in the education sector. Simranpreet is a social entrepreneur and co-founder of Sanjhi Sikhiya, a non-profit, community-based, educational organisation that aims for social change at the grassroots level. “What we do is not usually very easy to explain because we are here to make the system work better – and it’s very abstract. The most joyful moment is when someone understands immediately what we do, starts explaining it to others, and provides support to the project.” Sanjhi Sikhiya focuses on various initiatives, including fellowships at government schools, to ensure children get quality education.

Simranpreet believes the Jagriti Yatra was a turning point in his life. Here, for the first time, he met people passionate about

bringing change in the community. This passion saw gradual fulfilment at Ashoka.

Talking about his experience at the University, Simranpreet says, “For anything you do, the most important element is people and learning how to work with those who have different worldviews and life experiences. This is something I learnt at Ashoka. It was all about listening to different perspectives. It’s continuous learning – how do I work effectively or speak in a language that is understood by different people?”

He also remembers a speech during his graduation by Pramath Raj Sinha, Ashoka Founder and Founding Dean of the Young India Fellowship. “He spoke about the multiplier effect, asking us to do something and make sure others get impacted too. I am forever trying to live by that advice.”



The Ashoka alumni community's greatest strength is that the answer to pretty much any question can likely be found within it.



KARAN
BHOLA

DIRECTOR, YOUNG INDIA FELLOWSHIP;
FULBRIGHT-NEHRU SCHOLAR, HARVARD GRADUATE

RAHAT
KULSHRESHTHA

FOUNDER & CEO,
QUIDICH INNOVATION LABS

UNIVERSITY OF
WESTMINSTER → YIF
2014 → FREELANCER →
DRONE FEDERATION
OF INDIA → UNDREAM
→ ENTREPRENEUR

Q

Slowly we started venturing into sports and discovered several storytelling gaps. We realised that these could be solved through tech.

A



01

How did you develop an interest in filmmaking?

After 7th grade, I went to a boarding school and started playing around with cameras, making edits for school projects. My parents were also in the media so I had a clear idea that I wanted to study broadcasting and filmmaking in London. Entrepreneurship was never on the cards though.

02 *When did the idea for Quidich come up? What made you want to pursue it?*

After I moved back to India, I started directing music videos. One of them required us to shoot a car from above. Looking for solutions, I researched and got my first drone. But the one move which turned it into an entrepreneurial venture can be completely credited to the YIF.

At Ashoka, I had decided to take a break from shooting videos. While discussing our Experiential Learning Module (ELM), my roommate Gaurav suggested we work on a startup related to drones, because that service didn't exist. The ELM gave us the platform to experiment with it, and we started pitching the service.

Our first contract was covering the 2013 elections for India Today. It started as a one-day contract, then two days, and then suddenly we were travelling in a bus on a 48-day contract.

We even worked on several movies, such as *Gully Boy*, *Sanju*, and *Brahmāstra*. Slowly we started venturing into sports and discovered several storytelling gaps. We realised that these could be solved through tech. This is what Quidich is focused on today.

03 *Tell me where Quidich is right now?*

We've grown fairly quickly – we're about 70 people now. We primarily focus on sports broadcasting and try to enhance the viewers' experience sitting at home. The sports side is helping us expand our footprint globally. We just set up an office in the UAE and we'll have one in London soon. We see a strong push towards creating experiences where we can digitise the sporting experience, and take it into the metaverse, so that's our next big jump.



ICE HOCKEY PLAYER, ENTREPRENEUR

CHAMBA TSETAN

SECMOL → ELIZER
JOLDAN MEMORIAL
COLLEGE → YOUTH
ASSOCIATION KARGYAM
→ YIF 2019 → HIAL →
ADVENTURE SPORTS
FOUNDATION OF LADAKH

Not many people can claim to find a balance between their passion and profession. But Chamba Tsetan has.

Chamba is trying to usher a change in Ladakh. The first step: making people environmentally conscious and responsible. Born in a pastoralist-nomadic community in Ladakh's Kargyam village, Chamba was always close to nature. Education was considered a luxury in the community with children often not having anything more than a blackboard in a make-shift tent. Chamba attended Sonam Wangchuk's organisation, SECMOL, where he was introduced to ice hockey. He played for the under-18 national team and currently plays for the Indian team.

Chamba wanted to pursue a course that offered practical learning and allowed him to meet people outside Ladakh. The Young India Fellowship's idea of a multidisciplinary curriculum, with a special focus on social

changemakers, entrepreneurship, and youth leadership attracted him.

“When I went back to my village after almost 12 years, I realised nothing had changed. Educational resources were still limited. Children were struggling.”

Armed with new ideas on leadership and entrepreneurship, Chamba joined the Himalayan Institute of Alternatives, Ladakh (HIAL) and started designing courses. These programmes – solar building construction and responsible tourism – brought together his twin goals: bring about change in the community and feed into his own entrepreneurial skills. In late 2022, Chamba left his job at HIAL to establish the Adventure Sports Foundation of Ladakh – which promotes environmental responsibility through sports while instilling sustainable behavioural changes. Chamba continues to play ice hockey, and plans to keep changing young lives through sports.

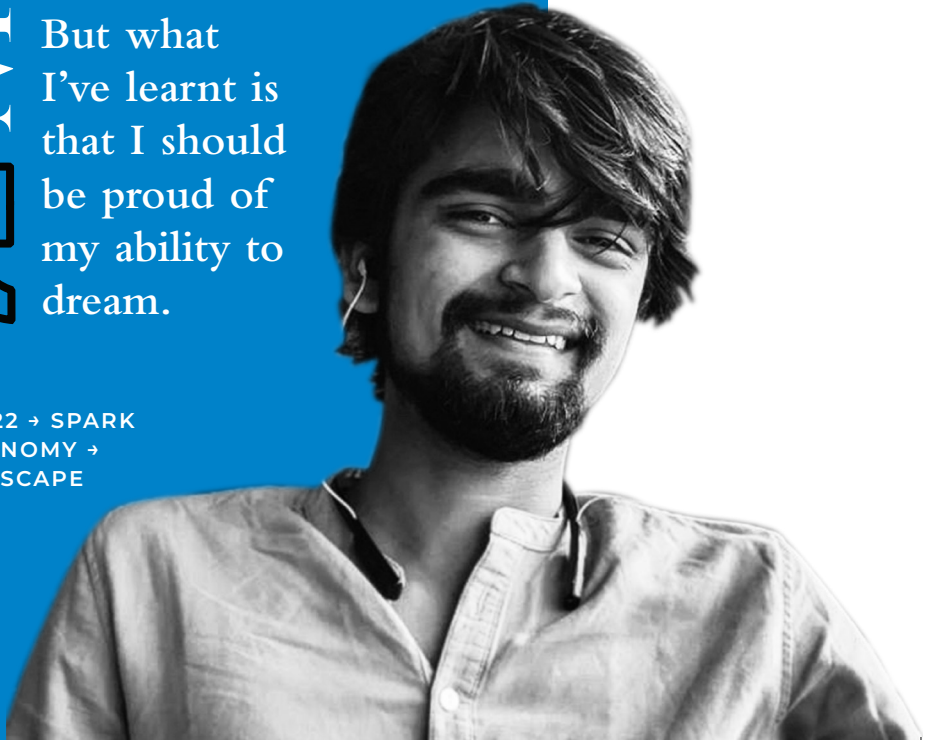
ASTRONOMER &
SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR

ARYAN

MISHRA

I discovered an asteroid when I was 14 years old, taught in universities and helped others learn. But what I've learnt is that I should be proud of my ability to dream.

UG 2022 → SPARK
ASTRONOMY →
ASTROSCAPE



01

What was the idea behind AstroScape?

My startup, AstroScape, builds astronomy labs in gram panchayat schools and helps children understand science in a more practical manner. It includes experiments and involves the villagers, so it is a citizen science effort, and not a bureaucratic one.

The astronomy lab is a place to explore dreams. It aims at stoking curiosity about space at a young age. When I was 17, I started my first company, Spark Astronomy. By May 2022 I had built 220 labs. With my second startup we have already built 26 labs and are in the process of building a hundred more.

02

What were the challenges in this journey?

The challenge was the lack of support and guidance. I'm still young and learning in my own field. There aren't many people who are there to guide you. I try whatever seems interesting or engaging, and do what I like.

03

What are the lessons you'd like to pass on to others?

Nobody should believe clichéd advice on success. Set your own priorities, achieve them, and be proud of them. For me, I discovered an asteroid when I was 14 years old, taught in universities and helped others learn. But what I've learnt is that I should be proud of my ability to dream. To my other alumni, I would say make sure you stand up for each other. We are a close-knit alumni community and I feel proud when I read about the achievements of others.



JONATHAN MENDONCA SAUMYA AGGARWAL

CO-FOUNDERS, BAREFOOT EDU FOUNDATION

VEERMATA JIJABAI
TECHNOLOGICAL
INSTITUTE (JONATHAN)
AND SHAHEED SUKHDEV
COLLEGE OF BUSINESS
STUDIES (SAUMYA) → YIF
2017 → SOCIAL CHANGE
MAKERS

Jonathan Mendonca and Saumya Aggarwal met in 2017 as Young India Fellows. That was the beginning of a partnership that led to the Barefoot Edu Foundation. The foundation started as an Experiential Learning Module (ELM) project, and has now expanded to working with school leadership. The focus: capacity building and improving administrative systems and infrastructure. Barefoot Edu Foundation currently works with 1.3 lakh schools.

“The YIF exposed us to a lot of courses. These seemed unrelated at the time, but have helped us think about complex problems through different lenses,” the duo says.

For both Jonathan and Saumya, the YIF provided the platform to transition to a new field – education.

Jonathan says he experienced a shift in mindset when he saw that Ashoka could execute quality work at scale through a decentralised system. This helped conceptualise Barefoot’s primary function. Their first big project – capacity building of 14,000 Anganwadi teachers – came with the support of the Chief Minister’s Good Governance Associates programme hosted at Ashoka.

“Thankfully, both the Mother Teresa Fellowship and the InfoEdge Centre for Entrepreneurship incubated us. That gave us the confidence that someone has our back and believes in what we want to achieve,” says Jonathan. He says the Centre for Writing and Communication helped him especially while applying for grants. “Doing the YIF is a privilege. People recognise it in other incubators so it certainly helped us,” he adds.

“My journey post Ashoka has been as diverse and dynamic as my time spent there. I worked at Ashoka for a year as a Teaching Fellow and a co-curricular instructor in dance. At this time, our band Shorthand was performing regularly in Delhi and across the country. In 2019, we moved to Mumbai and continued making music, playing in festivals like the NH7 Weekender. I also began my career as an actor. I learnt the ropes by acting in advertisements, short films, and an Amazon Prime web series. During the pandemic, regular life skidded to a halt. I moved to Bengaluru, went back to basics, taught dance, reconnected to my craft and wrote my own songs. This eventually led me to the University of Michigan, where I am pursuing an MFA in dance. Here, I am working to synthesise my interests in dance, theatre, singing, writing, and teaching.”

SREYA MUTHUKUMAR

PERFORMING ARTIST
UG 2017, ASP 2018 → UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN



FOUNDER, CONVEGENIUS; FIRST ALUMNI FOUNDER OF ASHOKA
IIIT → YIF 2012 → UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO BOOTH SCHOOL OF
BUSINESS → ENTREPRENEUR

JAIRAJ BHATTACHARYA



Jairaj Bhattacharya is on a journey to redefine how the next generation learns.

Born and raised in Hyderabad, Jairaj says he felt free to explore only when he secured admission in the International Institute of Information Technology (IIIT), Hyderabad. And he chose to make the most of it. In the second year of his electronics and communications engineering course, he joined the robotics club and spent most of his time creating innovative software. It was during a business plan competition in college, that Jairaj demonstrated his software, Source Code. He was immediately approached by investors. But he was focused on studies and so, decided to sell his software to those investors. That was a game changer.



Jairaj decided to create something that would be innovative and could solve ‘real problems.’ He quit his job in Singapore and joined the Young India Fellowship's (YIF) first cohort in 2010. It was at Ashoka that he learnt to absorb, appreciate, and respect different perspectives. Studying sociology, art, and history, helped Jairaj expand his thinking.

Ashoka and the YIF proved to be catalysts in his journey as an entrepreneur. While at Ashoka, he started working on the idea of ConveGenius, a technologically driven educational enterprise aimed at providing education to children in the country. During the day, Jairaj was focused on his curriculum. In the evenings, he spent time with his peers and professors. That year, Jairaj built relationships that would last a lifetime. Further, Founders at Ashoka became the first angel investors at ConveGenius.

ConveGenius, currently in 13 Indian states with 35 million users, witnessed exponential growth during the pandemic. Skill development, employability, and access to opportunity are the next areas he wishes to address. This is part of his vision of “marrying a problem statement which could create social impact, with the use of technology.”

Jairaj believes his journey in Ashoka prepared him to be a leader and set an example for others. Today, Ashoka is more than an alma mater. It is a family he’s been part of, as a student and now as the first Founder from the alumni community. He hopes to be part of this institution for many years to come.

RADHAKRISHNA GUPTA

WOMEN'S SPORTS
JOURNALIST; FOUNDER,
SHE TALKS BALL

UG 2022 → WOMEN'S
SPORTS ZONE →
SONY PICTURES →
ENTREPRENEUR



Fitness, discipline, leadership, and competitiveness have all shaped me growing up.



01

Women sports journalists are rare even today. Why did you decide to be one?

I have been participating in team sports all my life and I think I learned the most from playing sports. Fitness, discipline, leadership, and competitiveness have all shaped me growing up. I wanted to do something related to sports.

02 **How did you manage to enter the field of sports journalism?**

I'm a digital journalist and content creator, my niche is women's sports. I started *She Talks Ball*, a women's sports media platform. It aims to increase content and coverage around women's sports. I was the recipient of a grant called the Title IX Content Creator Grant given to four different women's sports content creators across the globe by Sports Innovation Lab. With the help of those funds, I was able to secure media accreditation for major women's football tournaments in 2022. That was my first exposure to a different side of sports – not playing, but reporting. The grant really kick-started my dream.

03 **What role did Ashoka play in realising your dreams?**

I look at myself as someone who wants to be a productive member of society. I want to tackle challenges relevant to my industry and make a difference in bridging current gaps. At Ashoka, I learned as much in the classroom as I did outside. The entrepreneurship courses taught me skills relevant to building my brand and platform while interactions with peers and professors moulded me into the confident young adult I am today.

A year and a half of my programme was done online which gave me the flexibility to work on my own platform. The overall experience has been incredible. The sports facilities, the women's football team, and the friends I made enhanced my Ashoka experience and gave me a purpose outside of just studying hard and graduating with a degree.



VIT → VIRGINIA
TECH → YIF 2015 →
SCIENCES PO → YALE
UNIVERSITY → PAUL
SCHERRER INSTITUT


How did you develop an interest in environment and climate change?

My mother is a professor of botany and my father holds two master's degrees in environmental engineering. Hence, we have always had conversations around environment at home. My interest in science was initially stimulated when my father bought me a book titled *101 Science Experiments*. This has continued

through my life. My thesis at Yale was focused on the increasing importance of non-combustion sources for urban air quality. Hereon, I wish to be at the intersection of policy-making and scientific research.

What attracted you to the Young India Fellowship?

When I learned about the Young India Fellowship (YIF), I knew its claim of



Are there any anecdotes you have from your time at the YIF?

There are several I fondly recall, but would like to highlight one from the *Art Appreciation* class by Professor Anunaya Chaubey. He was discussing a painting that was just in a flat colour – blue. I could not comprehend why something like that would sell for millions and inadvertently blurted, “Oh you’ve got to be kidding me.” The whole class laughed. However, the professor very patiently

PEEYUSH KHARE

SCIENTIST, MARIE S. CURIE FELLOW AT THE PAUL SCHERRER INSTITUT, SWITZERLAND

creating change makers would be relevant to my planned PhD and future career. And I was right! Ashoka fostered the right environment and all the essential elements to sharpen one’s intellect, such as socially informative discourses. One of the Founders had stated: “It’s only when the Young India Fellowship is over that you realise the impact it has had on you.” That is absolutely true.

helped me understand the significance of the work – smooth textures, absence of gradients that is very hard to achieve, and the philosophy that led to its creation. This was very new and impactful for me as I realised that the truth always lies in the details.

PHD SCHOLAR, YALE UNIVERSITY

KANOI

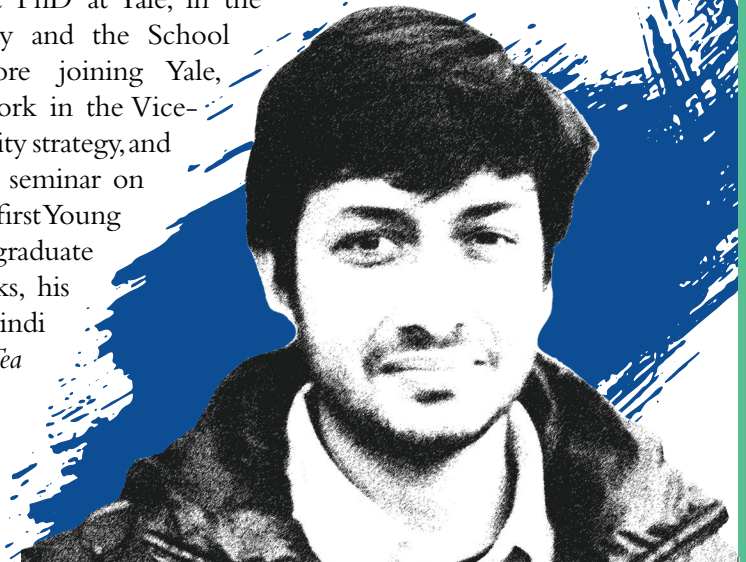
JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY → YIF
2015 → BCG → GOVERNMENT OF
HIMACHAL PRADESH → ASHOKA
UNIVERSITY → YALE PHD

LAW Lav became a passionate believer in the liberal arts pedagogic system early on. He first developed an interest in liberal arts while studying at Jadavpur University in Kolkata. Later, he discovered that most of the academic courses in Ashoka's Young India Fellowship (YIF) programme were completely in line with his interests. Lav enrolled in the programme in 2014 while it was still fairly new.

After spending a year at Ashoka, Lav joined the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), impressed by their approach to problem solving. Subsequently, he worked closely with the Himachal Pradesh state government as a consultant on a statewide systemic transformation programme in education, focusing on kindergarten to grade 12. This experience reaffirmed his commitment to the education and impact sectors.

“While a lot is being done in the country, a revolution in higher education is still in the making. To be a part of that, I decided to pursue my PhD first but was unsure of what my topic should be. During a drive near the river Beas, I realised how I had never heard the sound of the river while growing up in Kolkata or living in Delhi. This made me think of water in the urban context which is what I am studying now,” says Lav.

Lav is now pursuing a joint PhD at Yale, in the Department of Anthropology and the School of the Environment. Before joining Yale, he returned to Ashoka to work in the Vice-Chancellor's office on University strategy, and also taught an undergraduate seminar on Greek Tragedy, becoming the first Young India Fellow to teach an undergraduate class. Lav also translates books, his most recent publication – a Hindi translation of *The Book of Tea* Okakura Kakuzo.



“I didn’t plan on quitting my job in just six months to pursue a greater calling – but the mindset I built in these formative years at Ashoka gave me the confidence to take a risk.”

SHAKUL
SONKER



FOUNDER, I-STEM

A portrait of Ashweetha Shetty, a woman with long dark hair, wearing a yellow and green patterned sari, speaking into a microphone. The portrait is framed by a large green arrow pointing upwards and to the right.

FOUNDER, BODHI TREE FOUNDATION;
CONSULTANT, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WELFARE
AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT, WORLD BANK

ASHWEETHA SHETTY

MANONMANIAM
SUNDARANAR
UNIVERSITY → YIF 2013
→ ENTREPRENEUR

Ashweetha Shetty was only 22 when she founded the Bodhi Tree Foundation - a non-profit in Tamil Nadu that aims to bridge the rural-urban divide by empowering rural graduates to become role models. A first-generation college graduate, Ashweetha set up Bodhi Tree because she had witnessed the transformative power of inclusive education up-close.

Ashweetha made up her mind after seeing an advert for the Young India Fellowship (YIF) in a Tamil magazine. However, support was hard to come by. “My parents are *beedi* (tobacco rolled in tendu leaves) rollers. I grew up knowing that I am poor and should not dream big. The environment around me made it very clear that education is not necessary for girls.” But Ashweetha was adamant. Despite her father’s disapproval, she left home to pursue the Fellowship.

“It completely changed the way I saw myself. My self-perception was so poor that I would put myself down every day. But the professors saw me as a student who is as eligible as everyone else.” After the Fellowship, deeply inspired by Rajiv Lochan’s business course, Ashweetha worked as a community engagement coordinator with SughaVazhvu Healthcare, which provides last-mile primary healthcare in rural India.

After running Bodhi Tree for six years, Ashweetha stepped down as its CEO in 2020. “Today, I take a lot of risks in my life thanks to the Fellowship. I stepped down because I realised that change needs to happen at a bigger, structural level. I want more women to occupy leadership positions in politics and that is what I am going to focus on now.”

CO-FOUNDER, DORJE TEAS;
FOUNDING SECRETARY, THE
SELIM HILL COLLECTIVE

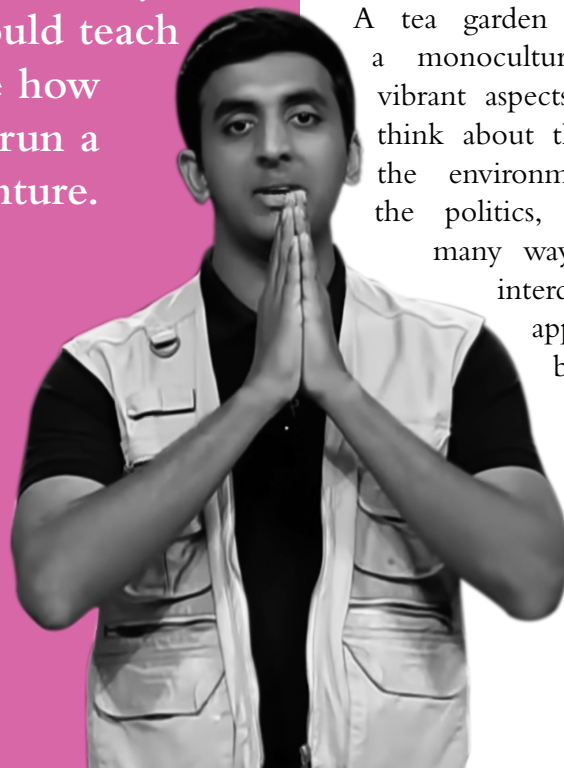
SPARSH

AGARWAL

UG 2019,
ASP 2020 →
UNIVERSITY
OF OXFORD

”

I never thought studying political science, international relations, and history would teach me how to run a venture.



How has the Ashoka experience helped in establishing Dorje Teas?

Ashoka was the obvious choice for someone like me who wanted an interdisciplinary education. I was always curious. Ashoka not only welcomed it, but provided the platform for experimenting intellectually and finding my direction.

I am a very proud student of Ashoka and also of the Department of Political Science at Oxford. I never thought studying political science, international relations, and history would teach me how to run a venture.

A tea garden is more than just a monoculture of tea; it has vibrant aspects to it. One has to think about the local community, the environment, the economy, the politics, and marketing. In many ways, without Ashoka's interdisciplinary liberal arts approach, it would have been very difficult for me to truly grasp the nuances of all these elements within the tea garden.

02

Was entrepreneurship always on the cards?

I was on my way to becoming an academic and an international lawyer, but the pandemic changed that. I saw my friends unhappy in high paying jobs. Sometime last year I realised that I was excited by the idea of reviving Darjeeling.

What we are trying to do in Selim Hill is more than just an enterprise. It is a socio-political experiment. Our aim is to reimagine the space of the tea garden. The Selim Hill Collective comprises multiple people and professors from Ashoka, artists, lawyers, researchers, and consultants; all in all, a motley group of friends. Our aim is to bring the world to Darjeeling and create something spectacular. We are partnering with Oxford for a student exchange, in the process of setting up an art residency, and undertaking large scale reforestation.

03

What is the plan for Dorje Teas after Shark Tank?

The data about the viewership of Shark Tank made me realise that this would be a game-changer for Dorje and Darjeeling. To say it is adrenaline-inducing and hectic would be an understatement. However, my respect for show business has increased since. I always believed that Darjeeling is about show business, and now we have the national platform to put on that show. We have set ourselves a target to reach Rs 100 crore. Our aim is to target the HORECA (hotel, restaurant, and café) segment and fund research and development for creating new products.

We want to take Darjeeling to the world.

A portrait of Garima Poonia, a young woman with dark hair, wearing red-rimmed glasses and a blue top. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background behind her is a textured, greyish-blue wash.

GARIMA POONIA

FERGUSSON COLLEGE → YIF
2015 → SOCIAL CHANGE MAKER

FOUNDER, THE KACHREWAALE PROJECT

On a trip to the Andaman islands, Garima Poonia realised waste management was not a priority there. A Mother Teresa Fellow from Ashoka, Garima knew she had her task cut out. When the Kachrewaale Project was born, the island got its first waste management system. Today, it's working on India's first marine litter/ocean plastics programme.

With her father in the army, home was never one place. As a child, Garima's memory bank was filled with images of the majestic Himalayas, vast deserts, and endless rainforests. Her love for water strengthened her bond with nature. After studying literature in college, Garima had

planned to pursue gender and academia. But, as she says, "Life had better plans for me than I had for myself." Garima discovered the Young India Fellowship (YIF).

For her, the YIF was nothing short of a perspective-altering experience.

"The faculty made me curious about ideas I didn't know existed." The *Political Economy of India's Development* course, taught by economist Mihir Shah encouraged her to follow her calling. Today, she not only leads the Kachrewaale Project but also heads the Andaman and Nicobar Island chapter of the Women's India Chamber of Commerce & Industry.

“**L**ook at Ashoka as more than an institution that can provide you with education which can help you succeed or provide access to better opportunities. It is a place than can help you figure out how you’d want to live and lead your life.”



CHAKSHU
CHHABRA

MANAGER, LOTUS PETAL FOUNDATION



GLOBAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL

McPHERLAIN CHISENGA
CHUNGU

UG 2017 → GENEVA GRADUATE INSTITUTE →
UNITED NATIONS WORLD METEOROLOGICAL
ORGANIZATION → UNAIDS

McPherlain Chungu (MJ) grew up in Zambia to a single mother in a conservative society. Growing up amidst the AIDS epidemic, he recollects a time when they were going to someone's father's funeral, who had died of AIDS. "On the way back from burying the father, the mother also passed away from the disease." With such gruesome memories from his childhood, MJ decided to help the community. Consistently topping his classes and being fluent in English allowed him to understand and translate policies to his local languages - Bemba and Nyanja. This made it more accessible to his people, particularly young people.

In the years that followed, MJ moved to Kolkata, India, after earning a scholarship to Oaktree International School to complete his International Baccalaureate degree. It was here that he heard of Ashoka University through a Bangladeshi classmate, and decided to apply.

The beginning of the Ashoka experience for MJ came with several

challenges. As the first international student, it took him a while to adapt to this new environment. However, in the weeks to come, his perception of the place changed.

He believes that Ashoka was the best educational experience he had. He says, Malavika Maheshwari's classes on *Social and Political Formations* were life-changing for him. The course allowed him to question everything: from society to gender roles, and religion. "Prior to this I had easily accepted the status quo of my society, even if it was harmful in some cases. Ashoka taught me to question; it provided me with the tools with which to analyse and understand the world against the backdrop of its various complexities."

After Ashoka, MJ pursued a master's degree in international affairs and policy at the Geneva Graduate Institute (IHEID). He is currently serving as Technical Officer, Stigma Research in the United Nations where he coordinates research, advocacy, and policy intervention work on HIV-related stigma.

R&D ENGINEER, TOTAL ENERGIES

KAUR

GURU NANAK DEV
UNIVERSITY → YIF 2015 →
PHD, NUS → BP ADVANCING
ENERGY SCHOLAR → R&D
ENGINEER

GURLEEN

Growing up, Gurleen was as comfortable studying astronomy, history, and debating as she was painting. An avid participant in various activities, she found herself more inclined towards the sciences after she bagged the runners-up title in NASA's Space Settlement Design Contest.

But the road leading to the sciences – particularly sustainability and solar energy – was not an easy one. Unable to travel too far, she ended up studying electronics and communications engineering in Amritsar. Underwhelmed by the course, disillusionment soon set in. An introduction to research by a college professor led her to pursue internships at the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay. Scholars such as Brijmohan Arora and Padma Shri laureate DB Pathak ignited a spark that changed Gurleen's life. She also received the Research Fellowship Award-IITB 2013 for her work on 'Polycrystalline silicon for solar cells'.

Her new-found love for research and sustainability did not however diminish her love for arts despite her parents' resistance. Coming to the Young India Fellowship on a full scholarship, Gurleen found a way to marry all her interests. She credits the YIF's courses for making her a better and more socially-conscious engineer.

Equipped with assistance from her peers and mentors, Gurleen opted for a PhD at National University of Singapore (NUS) for developing low-cost and high efficiency architectures for solar cells.

Gurleen is currently working as a Solar R&D Expert at TotalEnergies, Playground Paris-Saclay in France. She conducts reliability studies for emerging solar technologies – AgriPV and FloatingPV.



“**Y**IF Curriculum enables one to think on every single aspect in life. You can apply what you’re taught in Ashoka to whatever you’re doing in life. It provides you with the skills important to be a leader and change maker.”



JAIRAJ
BHATTACHARYA

FOUNDER, CONVEGENIUS;
FIRST ALUMNI FOUNDER OF ASHOKA

DIRECTOR, KNIT POCKET
UG 2017, ASP 2018 → FREELANCER → ENTREPRENEUR

KRITI GARG



Kriti Garg's earliest memories are of paintbrushes, fights over crayons with cousins, and sketches of her favourite cartoon characters. Her love for art eventually led her to start Knit Pocket. Kriti describes it as a community for freelancers to connect, learn, and access the right mentorship.

Born into a family of chartered accountants and doctors, Kriti was clearly a misfit. However, becoming an artist was never her sole goal. She wanted to be an entrepreneur as well. Summing up her experience as an undergraduate in Ashoka,



A LIVING FOR ARTISTS

Kriti says the multidisciplinary approach broadened her horizons, and helped her to pursue a wholesome learning that wasn't just restricted to art. She decided to opt for a summer course at UC Berkeley, specialising in photography, film, and media culture.

She says, "Indian design schools teach you how to design, but not how to earn a living." Through Knit Pocket, Kriti looks at end-to-end strategy, design, and marketing. She also mentors teams of freelancers and introduces them to clients. With the gig economy transforming every week, Kriti feels this can help bridge the gap between freelancers and the ever-growing demands of clients.

PHD SCHOLAR,
COMPUTATIONAL BIOLOGY,
UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

YAJUSHI KHURANA

There's a huge gap between what is researched about and the actual people who should benefit from it.

UG 2020,
ASP 2021 →
CMU-PITT



01

Have you always been interested in science?

I've always wanted to study science, yes. I wasn't sure what in the sciences I wanted to study. I wasn't one of those who preferred learning just one stream of science. I had even taken admission in a decent college in Delhi to study mechanical engineering. However, the programme didn't quite suit me – I didn't feel like I was learning, and the professors got annoyed everytime I asked a question. I decided to drop out and took a gap year where I worked with a rehabilitation centre, taking classes for children who were victims of abuse. I can confidently say that the gap year I took was the best experience of my life.

02

How did Ashoka happen? Was your experience at Ashoka different from the engineering college?

Ashoka was a very interesting experience for me. I took the first year to experiment.

In terms of academics, the professors at Ashoka were the best mentors. Dr Bikram Phookun was instrumental in helping me decide what I wanted to study – which was a major in physics along with a minor in biology. I feel professors at Ashoka not only know how to teach, but also know and understand people.

Ashoka also helped me understand how gendered the space in STEM was, from perceptions of women studying science, to the way problem statements are phrased in questions.

03

How do you plan to leverage this education going forward?

I wish to do something in the future around shaping scientific policy. There's a huge gap between what is researched about and the actual people who should benefit from it. We need to organise the way we think about scientific problems, and this is something I would hopefully want to work on someday.

I'm currently doing my PhD in computational biology. I'm studying cancer cells under my advisor, Professor Jianhua Xing. In my research, I'm looking at cell systems as dynamic systems, working on how these cancer cells act, the effects of certain drugs and their interaction with these cells, and understanding how to make cells function a certain way.

JOURNALIST, WINNER OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESS INSTITUTE
AWARD & UN LAADLI AWARD
DELHI UNIVERSITY → YIF 2018 → THE PRINT → THE QUINT

FATIMA KHAN



Fatima Khan is a journalist who covers hate crimes, gender, and national politics. She has previously worked at *The Print*, and currently has a multifaceted role as a senior correspondent at *The Quint*. “It’s not the safest time to be a journalist in India. These are vindictive times; one often finds their physical safety at risk, especially while reporting on hate crimes like I do,” she says.

Fatima won the UN Laadli award in 2020 for her coverage of the Unnao rape and murder. In 2021, she travelled through Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh during the peak of the second COVID-19 wave to bring stories of the infrastructural collapse and the human cost of the virus. This won her the International Press Institute award.

An alumna of Delhi’s Motilal Nehru College’s English literature department, Fatima wanted to be



STORYTELLING THAT MATTERS

a journalist for as long as she can remember. “While there is a clear dearth of organisations covering the stories that need to be told, being able to document even some of those relevant stories, is important.”

Reflecting on her decision to pursue the Young India Fellowship (YIF), Fatima says, “The idea in journalism is to be able to pick up a new topic and learn about it quickly, and be able to articulate it in a way that is comprehensible to the larger public. The eclectic course structure of YIF really helped me develop that skill.”

Having been placed at *The Print* through Ashoka, Fatima hopes that the University “continues to invite independent media organisations and journalistic platforms for recruitment as it can make a real difference to aspiring journalists.” About future plans, she says “We are always running towards the future, and right now I’m trying to unlearn that and enjoy where I’m at in life.”

CO-FOUNDER AND TRUSTEE, SUMARTH

KUMAR

JALPAIGURI GOVERNMENT
ENGINEERING COLLEGE → YIF
2014 → HARVARD BUSINESS
SCHOOL (EXECUTIVE
PROGRAMME) → ENTREPRENEUR

PRABHAT

When I went to Ashoka, the sky was the limit – people wanted to go to Harvard, Stanford, McKinsey. That was a big turning point for me,” says Prabhat Kumar, Young India Fellow, 2014. “For the first time I understood the value of peer learning and the network you have. Many of the first funders of my organisation were connected to Ashoka.”

Prabhat today is the founder of SumArth, a non-profit social enterprise in Bihar. Its agricultural models are market-driven, low-risk, and have high-returns. It provides small farmers the opportunity to have a stable income. Prabhat is from Gaya in Bihar, and comes from a family of farmers himself.

At present, SumArth is working with more than 15,000 farmers in and around Gaya, promoting crops that are not traditional. The company is trying to create a model where crops require a one-time investment and provide a recurring 3-4 month income.

Prabhat says, “The one thing I have learnt is that everything may look complex, but when you are in the system and are patient, it can be cracked. You just need to trust the system.”



“The biggest
takeaway from
the Fellowship
for me was to be
comfortable with
uncertainties, and
thrive in uncertain
environments.”

SHODHAN BABU

FOUNDING PARTNER, LAW
OFFICES OF PANAG AND BABU



AKRITI
MANAGER, ALUMNI RELATIONS
OFFICE, ASHOKA UNIVERSITY

ASTHANNA

DELHI
UNIVERSITY
→ YIF 2018
→ ALUMNI
RELATIONS
OFFICE

I'm certain that our alumni exists in every corner of the world and to be a part of this rapidly growing family is nothing less than a privilege.



01

What has it been like to build the alumni office in the initial months?

The transition from a student to an administrator in an ecosystem as unique as Ashoka was exciting and challenging. In the beginning, some issues that had been persisting from the time of the first council had to be dealt with on priority. But eventually it worked out for the best. I had to take care of alumni across programmes and batches every day. This helped me build a rapport with them. Word spread about a dedicated alumni office in Ashoka. Today, the alumni office is the gateway for all alumni related matters for Ashoka and has a legitimate standing within the community.

02

How did YIF prepare you for this role?

Ashoka was unlike any other educational institution that I had previously been a part of. What stood out was the diverse peer group, interdisciplinary nature of academics, and the collaborative approach. The Young India Fellowship (YIF) and Ashoka were instrumental in inculcating an entrepreneurial mindset and teaching me how to fail faster and learn faster, which have been instrumental throughout my journey here. Overall, this is my fifth year in the Ashoka ecosystem and I find the entrepreneurial spirit quite pervasive in every aspect. I feel confident, courageous, curious and a lot more myself. I'm certain that our alumni exists in every corner of the world and to be a part of this rapidly growing family is nothing less than a privilege.

03

What has excited you about this role?

The challenges at work were in terms of the organisational structure and building a large engagement engine. We worked at inculcating a culture of the alumni giving back, both financially and by being involved with students. We continue to do this through mentoring, jobs, placement support, and support with outreach and admissions.

The most exciting part of this job has been to be able to interact with this warm and enterprising community of Ashoka graduates. The spirit that binds the alumni community together is extremely unique, one of togetherness and sheer brilliance in everything they do, one that defines and sets Ashoka apart from all other Indian universities.

LAKSHMAN ROHITH MARADAPA

A portrait of Lakshman Rohith Maradapa, a young man with dark hair, smiling, wearing a white shirt. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with a blue sky and greenery.

LOYOLA COLLEGE → YIF 2017
→ NCDEX → GOVERNMENT OF
TAMIL NADU → ENTREPRENEUR

ROWER, ASIAN GAMES & YOUTH OLYMPIC GAMES
ATHLETE; FOUNDER, JUST PLAY INDIA

An athlete, social entrepreneur, and government servant, Lakshman Maradapa is all three. He works in government welfare, volunteers with an animal shelter, and is currently also the Chennai chapter head for the Ashoka Alumni network.

As a child, Lakshman saw his father spend a lot of time reviving the Kodaikanal Boat & Rowing Club. That propelled him to become a rower. Success at the national level seemed elusive for nine years. Then, in 2014, he won the All-India University Championship and was spotted by national coaches for the Asian Championship. He followed his father's advice and chose sports over education. Lakshman led the

men's eight event as coxswain (the team member who is in charge of steering the boat) of the team. He went on to win several medals for the country and represented India at the Asian Games and the Youth Olympic Games.

“All my life I wanted to do something different, prove myself worthy of all the effort, mentorship, and support I had received. Winning the silver medal at the Asian Championships was a real turning point and a big achievement for me,” says Lakshman.

He now uses the Ashoka network and his not-for-profit ‘Just Play India’ to encourage more young people to take up sports.

“The biggest
gift the YIF gave
me was how to
question things.”

ASHWEETHA SHETTY

FOUNDER, BODHI TREE
FOUNDATION; CONSULTANT,
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WELFARE
AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT,
WORLD BANK



A portrait of Anoop Maurya, a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark blue vest over a white shirt. He is positioned in front of a large, stylized letter 'A' that is blue on the left and right sides and orange in the center. The background behind the 'A' is white with orange brushstrokes.

SOCIAL CHANGE-MAKER, PRESIDENT OF
BHARAT NAVODAYA ABHIYAN

ANOOP
MAURYA

DELHI UNIVERSITY → YIF
2015 → MOTHER TERESA
FELLOW → ENTREPRENEUR
→ ACUMEN INDIA FELLOW

Anoop Maurya is what you call a self-made man. He's built a life through pure grit and determination.

In Anoop's village, Moglaha in Uttar Pradesh, children were rarely educated. Eventually, government schemes such as those for free food grains incentivised Anoop's parents to enrol him in school. After that, he joined Navodaya Vidyalaya. Then, he went on to study in Delhi University's Kirori Mal College. Anoop wanted to enrol in St Stephen's College. He says he realised his grades could have got him in, but by then it was too late to apply.

While at Kirori Mal, he started attending guest sessions at St Stephen's. It was at one of these sessions that he heard about the Young India Fellowship programme. The Ashoka outreach team told him they wanted to create agents of change for India. He realised the

Fellowship could be an alternative to formal education.

He was proven right.

During his stint as a Young India Fellow, Anoop met people who would change his life. He says he is grateful to the Ashoka Founders for supporting his venture – an ambitious alumni network of over 1.2 million Navodaya Vidyalaya students. This network works as a strong advocacy unit to better the lives of school children, target drop-out rates, provide guidance and support for higher education, and address injustice and corruption in rural areas. Anoop now runs a scholarship programme for children from underdeveloped regions. This provides them the opportunity to study in some of the best educational institutes in the country.

Anoop says, this is his way of paying forward.

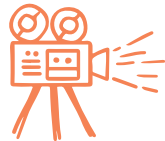
FILMMAKER, NATIONAL FILM AWARD WINNER
IIT → YIF 2017 → FILMMAKER → EDUCATOR

SAMARTH MAHAJAN



Growing up in the small town of Dinanagar, Punjab, Samarth Mahajan wanted to escape to a big city. He would often spend his days poring over books, unaware of his surroundings, just 10 miles from the India-Pakistan border. Little did he know then that his childhood experiences would influence his future. *Borderlands*, a 2021 documentary by Samarth, won the national award for best editing. His first film, *The Unreserved*, won the national award for best on-location sound in 2017.

FILMS FOR CHANGE



Samarth's first step towards his big-city dream came when he was admitted to the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kharagpur in 2009. "I found the Indian education system too uninspiring. Everything was theoretical and all we were aiming for was a job," he says. After the degree, he joined an FMCG company but left it within a year. Samarth decided to give filmmaking a shot.

Along with a friend, Samarth made his first documentary, *The Unreserved* – a story about travelling in unreserved coaches on trains. While working on the movie, he realised he needed to shed his sheltered worldview and learn about the realities

of the world around him. Encouraged by his friend and senior at IIT, Kaustubh Khare, and a student at Ashoka's Young India Fellowship (YIF), Samarth sent in an application for the YIF. "A degree in engineering doesn't make you aware of the socio-political environment. But if I had to become a filmmaker, I had to learn more about the country and the world. And here is where YIF seemed promising."

"*Borderlands* questions borders of many kinds – geographical, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and more. The project would not have been possible if not for Ashoka," he says of his film. The faculty and students of the University contributed to a crowdfunding campaign to make *Borderlands* a reality. "There was a ready feedback system for me. I could bounce-off ideas with anyone since it is a network which thrives on intellectual energies," he says.

Samarth is now in talks with OTT platforms to take *Borderlands* online. He is working on a docu-series and teaching documentary filmmaking at Symbiosis Centre for Media & Communication. He is also delving into fiction film writing where he plans to mix his experiences from different documentary projects and fictionalise his own experiences.

MEGHA ARORA

SECOND SECRETARY -
POLITICAL, EMBASSY OF
INDIA IN BHUTAN

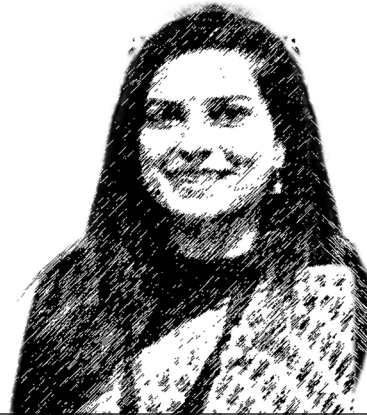
EMORY UNIVERSITY →
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
LONDON → YIF 2017 →
INDIAN FOREIGN SERVICE

The Fellowship
gave me the
right attitude
in life and
made me more
confident.”

Growing up, the idea of working in government services or foreign affairs didn't excite Megha. Probably because her parents were retired civil servants. Instead, she grew up toying with the idea of becoming a foreign correspondent. However, writing the Indian Foreign Service exam was a journey of self-discovery and realisation.

In the undergraduate liberal arts programme at Emory University, USA, a course in *South Asian Politics* got her hooked on international relations. She soon decided that she wanted to write the civil services examination while finishing her Masters in International Public Policy from the University College London.

After her return from the UK, Megha started preparing for the civil services exam. After two unsuccessful attempts, she decided to take a break and pursue the Young India Fellowship (YIF). "I know that the YIF is not a coaching centre for the Union Public



Service Commission (UPSC). But I think what the Fellowship did for me was much greater. It gave me the right attitude in life and made me more confident of myself." She adds, "It convinced me that I can give this exam another shot. But if it doesn't work out then I can do something else because I have many strengths."

Soon after the YIF Convocation, Megha wrote the UPSC exam for a third time in 2018, and cleared it. She is currently posted as a Second Secretary at the Indian Embassy in Bhutan. She wants to work with her Ambassador to strengthen the relationship between India and Bhutan.




UG 2022, ASP 2023 →
INTERN, PWC

How did your journey in climate advocacy start?

I used to think climate change wasn't my problem. I joined the environment club in sixth grade only to build my CV. Around the same time, I was told by my doctor that my seasonal allergies were due to air pollution. This is when I decided to do something about it. It became a cornerstone of my advocacy. Whenever I

talk about climate change my messaging is focused on "what's in it for you?"

At 16, I started a project with Delhi Metro called *Swachh Chetna*, where we organised plantation awareness and cleanliness drives. I also worked on air pollution awareness campaigns with a nonprofit called Care for Air. Three years ago, I was recognised by the BBC as one of India's foremost youth environmentalists. I have



entirely different. Everything I learnt helped me improve my abilities and made me comfortable with the idea that just because I'm interested in climate change and sustainability doesn't mean I need to be pursuing a minor in environmental studies.

What are your future plans?

I plan to explore a career in corporate sustainability or environmental social governance (ESG), and restart my

ABHIR BHALLA

CLIMATE CHANGE ADVOCATE, TEDX SPEAKER,
YOUTH ADVISOR – GOVERNING BOARD AT CHEC

also done several TEDx talks on climate change and youth action since then. Now, I'm freelancing as a sustainability consultant and focusing on advocacy work at an international level.

How have the years at Ashoka affected this journey?

Ashoka gave me the comfort to study one thing and base my work on something

ground-level campaigns soon. In my capacity as a freelancer I'm looking forward to working with corporates and getting CSR funds to support youth climate action projects.

CO-FOUNDER, SYNTH

SONETA

URVIN

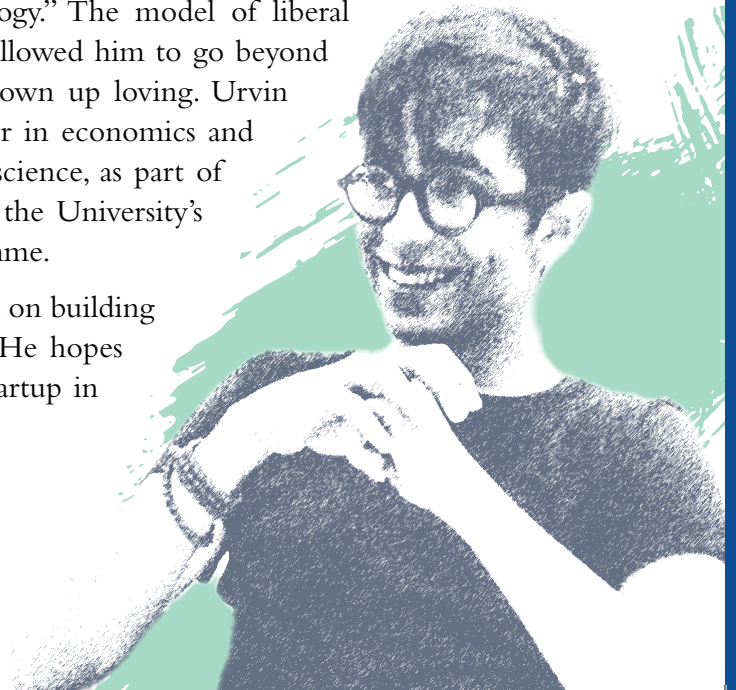
Urvin Soneta is the co-founder of Synth – a B2B software that records, transcribes and summarises online meetings. It also generates documents based on shared conversational information. Synth was born in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, when virtual meetings had become popular.

Growing up, Urvin wanted to be a scientist or a physicist at The European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) and was interested in subjects like physics, chemistry, and mathematics.

“I was a curious kid, but focused only in a certain direction. Ashoka exposed me to subjects like philosophy, literature, and psychology.” The model of liberal arts at the University allowed him to go beyond the subjects he had grown up loving. Urvin graduated with a major in economics and a minor in computer science, as part of the founding batch of the University’s undergraduate programme.

Today, Urvin is focused on building and expanding Synth. He hopes to set up his second startup in the climate space.

UG 2017, ASP 2018 +
PLAKSHA UNIVERSITY + BCG + SYNTH



“The incredible Ashoka community helped me work through my self-doubt, but in my Cambridge classrooms the same self-doubt pervades through my peers who are women, who constitute less than half the class. Everywhere I go, I see women generally begin a sentence with “I know this is not a big deal, but...” and “I know this is a silly question, but...” I hope to see a day when women around me can celebrate their achievements without putting themselves down. It is important to recognise women in mathematics taking strides. I also hope that with patience, I can help shape a braver age for women in STEM.”

NAINA PRAVEEN

MAST., PART III, MATHEMATICS,
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
UG 2021, ASP 2022 → UNIVERSITY
OF CAMBRIDGE



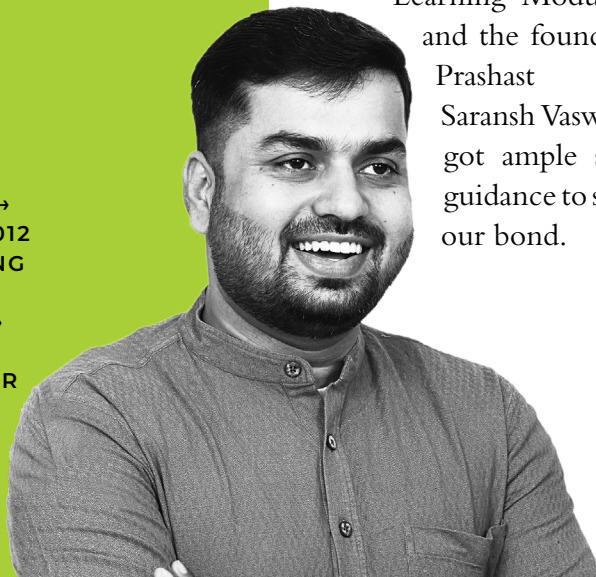
ABHISHEK

CO-FOUNDER, SAAJHA

CHOUDHARY

DELHI UNIVERSITY →
GANDHI FELLOW 2012
→ YIF 2013 → ECHOING
GREEN GLOBAL
FELLOWSHIP 2014 →
FORBES 30 UNDER
30 YOUNG ACHIEVER
AWARD 2015

SaaJha came out of the understanding that we could make leaders out of parents and how we could include them better in the decision-making process.



01
How did the Ashoka education help in your journey?

While attending the Young India Fellowship (YIF), I fell in love with a diverse number of academic subjects. I opened up towards different perspectives and started liking people with different leadership styles. Along with intellectual wealth, YIF gave me some of my best friends and a community whom I lean on even today. YIF was crucial to *SaaJha* since it began there as part of our self-designed Experiential Learning Module (ELM) and the founding team, Prashast Srivastava, Saransh Vaswani and I, got ample space and guidance to strengthen our bond.

02

How did you come up with the idea of Saajha?

I was about to drop out of school in 12th grade because my grades were quite poor. A lot of people lost faith in my abilities, but my mother stood by me like a rock. She spent all her savings so that I could move to Delhi and study further. This incident made me realise that parents are the biggest risk-takers when it comes to the future of a child. But most policies and designs in schools primarily exclude parents. During this time, I also worked in a community-based organisation where my core work revolved around principles in developing better school design. *Saajha* came out of all this – understanding we could make leaders out of parents, and how we could include them better in the decision-making process.

03

Were there any challenges?

While starting *Saajha* the first roadblock we faced was that we didn't have a lot of data surrounding what we wanted to do, since we were targeting lower income groups. The second challenge was with fundraising – since everyone who invests would want a certain ROI. But with community driven initiatives, this becomes a problem since the issue isn't a quick-fix.

VISVESVARAYA TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY →
YIF 2018 → CONTENT CREATOR

VIKAS SANGAM

COMEDIAN AND IMPROV
THEATRE ARTIST

My growing-up years were spent just studying and playing table tennis. But I was always the funniest one in the room, wherever I went. In college, I joined the dramatics club and travelled to different places to perform. In our final year, I started a theatre company with a few like-minded people. These interests decided the path I took in the future.

Today, I am a content creator (known as Vickypedia) and an improv theatre artist. Meeting people from various backgrounds has helped me look at life through different lenses. I am more aware about social issues now than I was before. Moving forward, I have plans of making movies and series for the digital space.

My art has brought joy to my audience and to me, immense satisfaction. I like what I am doing and wouldn't trade it for any amount of money.



“Maturity is realising you don’t have to ‘be a writer’ all the time.”
“You don’t have to

KRITIKA PANDEY

AUTHOR, WINNER OF
COMMONWEALTH SHORT STORY
PRIZE 2020

BIT MESRA → YIF 2014 → UNIVERSITY
OF MASSACHUSETTS, AMHERST

have profound thoughts all the time. You don’t need to be validated by people all the time. It’s okay to do the little ordinary things and not overthink it.”



DOCTORAL RESEARCHER (ETHNOMUSICOLOGY)
TISS → YIF- 2018 → BERKLEE COLLEGE OF MUSIC → SOAS UNIVERSITY OF LONDON →
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

UPATYAKA DUTTA



Upatyaka Dutta grew up with one foot in academia and the other in music. With a background in the social sciences and subsequently, the Young India Fellowship (YIF), she is now working on a PhD in ethnomusicology at the University of Toronto.

“My first foray into ethnomusicology was through my bachelor’s dissertation,” Upatyaka explained. “But my Experiential Learning Module (ELM) project at Ashoka allowed me to dive head-first into the field.”

Ethnomusicology studies the music of different cultures. For her ELM project, Upatyaka worked on an audio-visual archive of eight districts in Himachal Pradesh. She travelled across the state and recorded the oral history, music, and instruments used in the region. This experimental project was celebrated by her peers at Ashoka for its unique and intriguing take on

MUSIC ACROSS CULTURES



music and culture. Speaking about her project, Upatyaka says, “I saw my peers breaking the barriers between separate disciplines – like art and engineering – and I wanted to do the same.”

Recalling the YIF courses, Upatyaka reflected on the first canvas she painted for *Art Appreciation* with Professor Anunaya Chaubey. “Professor Chaubey taught me it’s essential to explore new disciplines even if you aren’t the best at them. Taking academics or your career too seriously doesn’t leave space for finding new things to enjoy.” Such exposure during the YIF inspired Upatyaka to pursue a master’s in music in contemporary performance at Berklee College of Music.

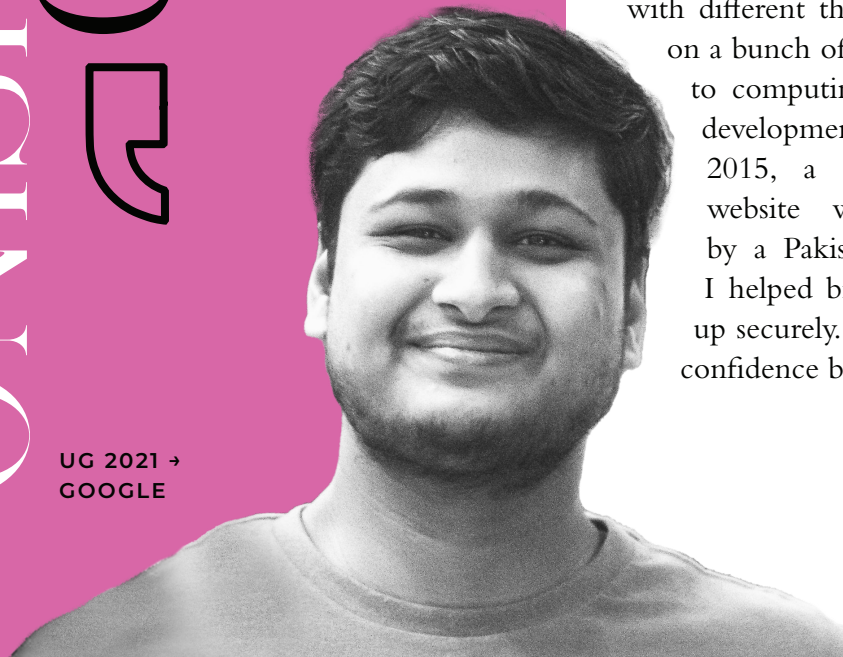
Upatyaka’s current dissertation focuses on the bio-cultural knowledge and ecological information captured in folk music. Her debut single, ‘Luitore Balit’, talks about the existing socio-political environment through Assamese lyrics.

ONISH
GOOGLE ENGINEER
GARG

UG 2021 →
GOOGLE

;

In 2015, a government website was hacked by a Pakistani hacker. I helped bring it back up securely.



01
As a teenager what did you dream of doing?

Although I'm a classic nerd I didn't want to take the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) and study at an engineering college. A friend told me about Ashoka and its generous financial aid programme. I did not want to be a one-directional horse, and wanted to study computer science along with other things. Ashoka turned out to be the right place for me.

I've always been into meddling with different things. I took on a bunch of gigs related to computing and web development too. In 2015, a government website was hacked by a Pakistani hacker. I helped bring it back up securely. It was a big confidence boost.

02

How did the Google internship come about?

I participated in a Google competition while still at Ashoka, and then they reached out to me for the interview. I put all my energy into it. When COVID-19 hit, I was scared the internship would get cancelled but luckily it didn't. I was already familiar with the technology we were assigned and was comforted that I had work experience now. After the internship, they offered me a full-time position.

03

How do you plan to utilise your Ashoka education going forward?

I did a lot of computer science work at Ashoka but it was more practice-oriented. I joined clubs and societies, worked with the Office of Academic Affairs and the IT department. I made the cohort-leadership scheduling algorithm, the course scheduling algorithm for the first semester, the election portal, and even the protest websites. But I really wish I had explored more research at Ashoka.

As things stand, I'm just looking to build a more solid technical foundation. After being at Google for a while now, I realise there's a lot more to learn. In the future, I do want to explore solutions that I can scale, and that can help people out. I want to find solutions to problems in the B2B space, which is tougher because of all the unknown unknowns, unlike customer-facing problems.

DAKSH WALIA

RHODES SCHOLAR

UG 2021 → MA 2023 →
OXFORD BOUND



I was ready to congratulate whoever would get the (Rhodes) scholarship and just go home,” says Daksh Walia – a final-year MA economics student at Ashoka. Little did he know that he would be one of the five Rhodes Scholars selected from India in 2022.

Despite their modest background, Daksh’s parents prioritised his education. Growing up in Chandigarh, he was a curious child and loved reading.

“I don’t think I’ve seen anything better than a state library,” Daksh says, “My father would drop me off at the library in the morning. I would wait outside till it opened, and spend the entire day reading whatever I could find until he picked me up again in the evening.”

From a very young age, Daksh understood the idea of relative deprivation or comparing one’s social situation with another. Studying in a private school made him recognise his privilege. It also motivated him to study inequality and welfare through economics and socio-political philosophy.

Daksh studied economics and philosophy before pursuing a masters in economics at Ashoka. He is currently working with Professor Kanika Mahajan, to understand the determinants of female labour force participation in the urban formal sector. He now plans to pursue an MPhil in economics at Oxford.

“**A**shoka University offered me diversity. In gender, in the educational system, and in economic backgrounds. With this diversity came varied life experiences, passions, and many unique perspectives. Looking at this pool of driven people inspired me to recognise my own distinctiveness and the potential for doing something new. Not only was I inspired by the diversity, but I was also prepped with soft skills in class that would be useful to me as a brand owner in the future. I wouldn't be this person today, building a brand, taking the leap, and pursuing my vision, if it weren't for this journey I took and the people I met.”

SHIVPRIYA
ARORA

UG 2019 → ENTREPRENEUR
FITNESS COACH AND ENTREPRENEUR





FOUNDING PARTNER,
LAW OFFICES OF PANAG AND BABU

SHODHAN BABU

SYMBIOSIS INTERNATIONAL
UNIVERSITY → YIF
2012 → UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY
SCHOOL OF LAW → AMS
ASSOCIATES → LAW OFFICES
OF PANAG AND BABU

Shodhan Babu established his independent practice after working for two and a half years with Attorney General, R. Venkataramani. He subsequently established The Law Offices of Panag and Babu in 2016. The journey from one to seven partners and about 50 lawyers wasn't easy. It came from years of compassionate, socially-driven business decisions.

Shodhan was interested in pursuing law as it exposed him to a wide variety of disciplines. After graduation, the prospect of interacting with peers from diverse backgrounds and the chance to interact with leading academics and industry heads drew Shodhan to the Young India Fellowship (YIF).

It was through a couple of impactful internships that Shodhan was convinced he wanted to pursue law. "Being a lawyer gave me the freedom to express myself however I wanted to. Realising that was a big turning point," he recalls.

"I don't think I would have started my firm as early as I did if it wasn't for the Fellowship. I would have started it 2-3 years later - when I felt ready. My peers and experienced entrepreneurs however, told me 'don't wait, you'll never *feel* ready'. This played a big part in my decision to start an independent practice and the firm early on in my career." Shodhan also credits his decision to the knowledge and learning he acquired at the YIF.

IIT, BOMBAY → DELHIVERY → YIF 2018
→ ENTREPRENEUR → FILMMAKER

ABHISHEK VERMA

DESIGN CONSULTANT; CO-
FOUNDER, THEMATCHBOX.CO;
NATIONAL FILM AWARD WINNER

Abhishek Verma wears many hats: storyteller, animator, graphic designer, brand consultant.

Born in Hazaribagh in Jharkhand, Abhishek studied engineering in Mumbai. He says the radio programmes he listened to as a child taught him the importance of listening – and not just watching – cinema.

A chance conversation with legendary filmmaker, Shyam Benegal at a school function was a pivotal moment in Abhishek's life. When he asked the director how he chose the subjects for his films, Benegal recalled how he was ridiculed by his childhood friends because he chose to read non-fiction rather than detective novels which were the popular choice. Abhishek says, Benegal taught him the first rule of making cinema: learning to react to the world.

Abhishek's love for reading and exploring made him apply for the Young India Fellowship (YIF). One of his research papers, supervised by Professor Dipankar Gupta, questioned the idea of caste, which inspired his current project – a 3-D animated film called *Manhole*. Among other things, he says, the YIF also helped him become a skilled multitasker.



“I came to Ashoka with an open mind, to learn about the world and its vastness. I knew I wanted to work in the field of social change, but I hadn’t thought of the specifics.

I took the year to learn from the journeys of people around me as much as I was learning from the programme. Going to class with an artist, a chartered accountant, a designer, a researcher and others who were older than me, allowed me to learn from their mistakes and learnings. I started working in the pharma industry because I had to earn a living, but in a couple of years, the transition to entrepreneurship began... Living with intention and the practice of authentic communication helped me while making decisions about the financial, emotional, and professional risks that came with Boondh.”

SONAL JAIN

CO-FOUNDER, BOONDH

SYMBIOSIS CENTRE FOR MEDIA &
COMMUNICATION → YIF 2014 →
FREELANCER → ENTREPRENEUR



MPHIL IN ECONOMICS
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD, WINNER OF
THE KUZNETS AWARD

GARIMA ARASTOGI

UG 2019,
ASP 2020 →
UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

I'm fascinated
by the
unintended
consequences
of well-
meaning
policies, such
as the ban on
prenatal sex-
determination.



01

First of all, congratulations on winning the Kuznets award! How did you go about choosing the research topic?

We were honestly not expecting to win the award! Both Anisha Sharma (my supervisor and co-author) and I were quite surprised when I saw the email telling us we had won. For my thesis, I knew I wanted to work at the intersection of education and gender. However, it took a while to arrive at the exact research question. I was quite fascinated by the unintended consequences of well-meaning policies, such as the ban on prenatal sex-determination.

02

Do you intend to continue on the same research path?

I'm currently in my second year of MPhil in economics at the University of Oxford. As a part of my thesis, I am working on a topic similar to my previous paper. I am looking at the role of bargaining power of women in family planning in India. I want to see how women's bargaining power affects contraception usage and the type of contraception used. I am also interested in understanding the effect of the Emergency on current family planning practices.

03

How did Ashoka shape your journey?

I had come to Ashoka with an undecided major. The liberal arts education allowed me to explore a variety of subjects before I made my decision to major in economics. The University helped me learn about economics in the context of other fields such as history, political science, and mathematics. Ashoka was an amazing learning experience for me. My professors, friends, and peers all taught me how to think, research, and write. I have depended on these skills for my research paper as well as in my masters at Oxford.



IIT-K → YIF 2012 → HUMBOLDT FELLOW →
WESTERN UNION FOUNDATION FELLOWSHIP →
ANANTA ASPEN CENTRE → LETS ENDORSE

MONIKA SHUKLA

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR;
CO-FOUNDER, LETS ENDORSE

Even as she was growing up in Chhattisgarh, Monika Shukla was part of a very competitive environment. When she joined the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kharagpur, she met others like her – with similar aspirations and dreams. A job at Goldman Sachs followed. But it brought her little joy. She knew she wanted to broaden her horizons. She wanted to meet others like herself. A quest for a multidisciplinary course and like-minded people brought her to Ashoka's Young India Fellowship.

There she met Varun Kashyap, with whom she later co-founded a social impact organisation, Lets Endorse. During the Fellowship, meetings with organisations like Yum Foods and the Akshay Patra Foundation, helped her realise the potential of pooling together solutions to

bring greater efficiency and transparency to the development sector.

Monika and Varun wanted to create the first “market network” which would connect innovators, solution providers, technology, grassroots organisations, and NGOs with CSR budgets. Though the ambitious project was described by investors as “trying to boil the ocean”, Monika was confident.

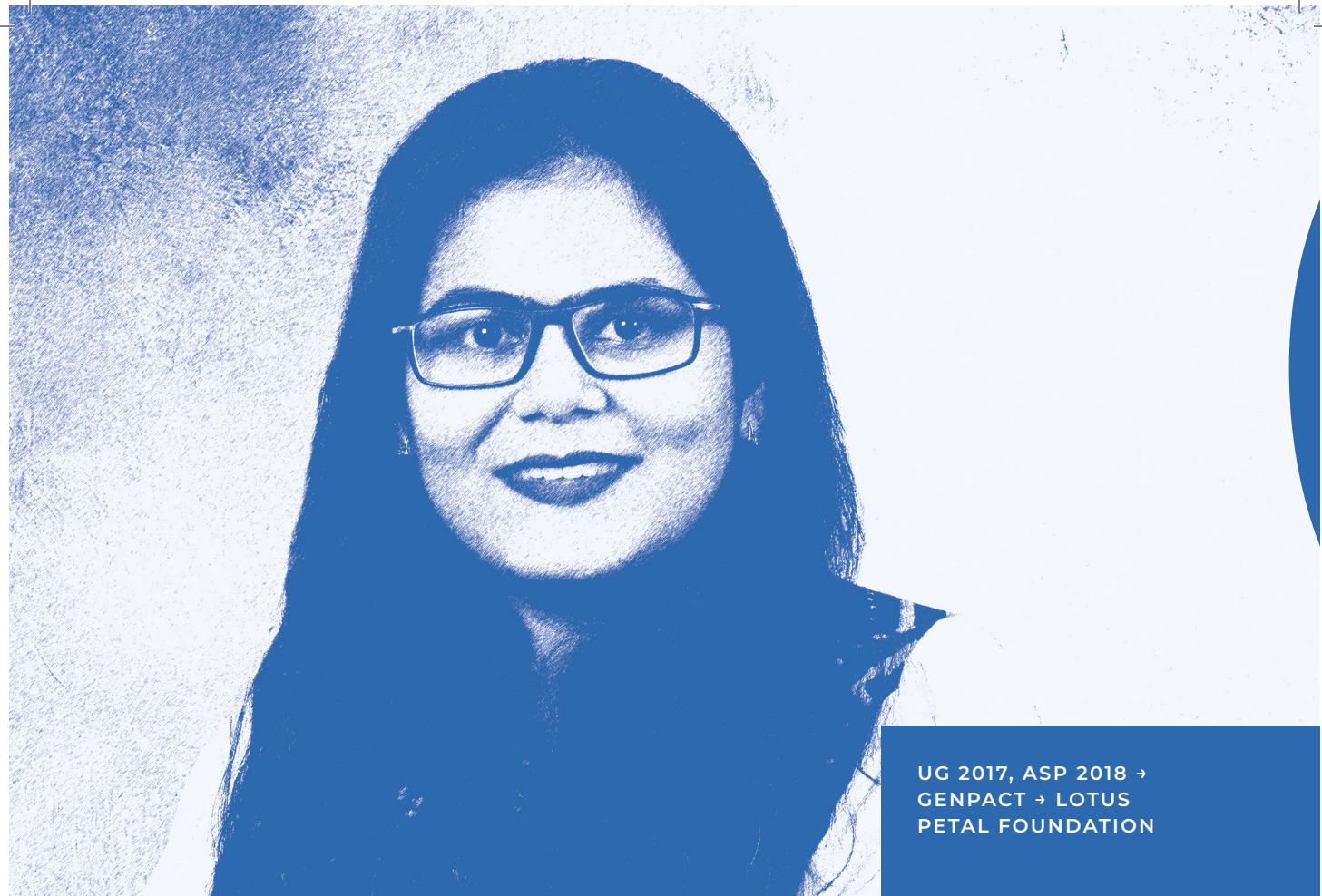
Today, Lets Endorse has a team of 38 people working across 115 districts in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Telangana. It also provides last-mile financial support to people with aspirations. Side by side, Lets Endorse builds their competencies. Monika says, the aim is to create a million micro-entrepreneurs by 2025, and 10 million by 2030.

“The kind of education Ashoka provides is rare, and it’d be a waste if we get demotivated by the harsh realities of the world. We have to be persistent, and figure out novel ways to apply the learnings to improve the system.”

SAMARTH
MAHAJAN

FILMMAKER, NATIONAL
FILM AWARD WINNER





UG 2017, ASP 2018 →
GENPACT → LOTUS
PETAL FOUNDATION

Was it always your plan to work in the field of education?

I was part of the founding undergraduate batch of Ashoka, as well as the Ashoka Scholars Programme. I currently work at the Lotus Petal Foundation, Gurugram, which is building one of India's largest philanthropic schools for underserved children.

I come from a middle-class family. Access to education and inequality were

always prevalent issues in the background. I have completed my education mostly through scholarships, so education has always been like a passport to a prosperous life ahead. Ashoka cemented my belief that education is the space in which I see myself.

What is a lesson you'd like to pass on to other Ashokans?

Ashoka is a place that defines the sort of value system and beliefs that you



stronger skillset to solve the challenges in education. A wider exposure was needed to bring about an enhanced impact.

How do you see your future?

My work is focused on organisational development in the non-profit sector. I work in a cross functional capacity to strategise, design, and govern initiatives which are either high impact or future oriented. However, I do see a need to

CHAKSHU CHHABRA

MANAGER, LOTUS PETAL FOUNDATION

carry for yourself and the kind of world you see. Ashoka is not just about the professors, batchmates, or the founders – it’s about the community – anyone and everyone who has contributed in setting up this institution.

At Ashoka, I co-founded Neev, a community engagement club for the development of individuals living in Asawarpur village. Working with Neev helped me realise that I needed a

return to the academic side of things. My ultimate goal is to work at the intersection of education, gender, and leadership – whether in an existing organisation or one that I set up.

COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS, BANGALORE → YIF 2018 > IGNOU →
ASHOKA UNIVERSITY → FREELANCE ARTIST

VIVEKANANDA

ARTIST & EDUCATOR

Vivekananda is an interdisciplinary artist with a keen interest in education and technology. Born in Mangalore, he pursued a bachelor's degree in visual arts specialising in art history from Bengaluru.

Discussing his journey he says, “I was born into an Avarna community in the Western ghats. The politics of my work are deeply rooted in the geography and sociology of my native land. The absence of certain privileges and systems makes creating and sustaining oneself as an artist in India a major challenge. But I’m happy that I did not give up and continued to trust my instinct.”

Vivekananda’s time at Ashoka had a deep impact on his sense of self. “Art makes one feel less alone. Delving into the themes of desire, memory, conflict, and the idea of home, my work explores the question of ‘where’. Over the years, I have received acceptance, encouragement, and a platform through the Ashoka community. This has helped me grow as a practitioner in myriad ways. I am grateful to Ashoka and look forward to a lasting engagement ”



“**A**shoka gave me intangible skills – self-esteem, emotional intelligence, and a curiosity to learn and grow as a human being. These values contributed to me finally clearing the civil service examination and joining the Indian Foreign Service.”

MEGHA
ARORA



SECOND SECRETARY – POLITICAL,
EMBASSY OF INDIA IN BHUTAN

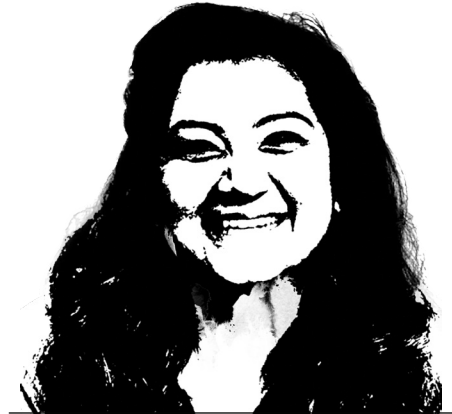
SHALEEN WADHWANA

CULTURAL RESEARCHER AND ART CURATOR,
RECIPIENT OF 12 CANNES LIONS AWARDS
LADY SHRI RAM COLLEGE → SOAS UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON → YIF 2015 → MIT INSTITUTE OF
DESIGN → THE CHIME PROJECT → EDUCATOR

“Art is an intangible emotion that
you sell. If I can sell that, I could
pretty much sell anything.”

Shaleen Wadhwana is an independent researcher and curator who pursued the Young India Fellowship (YIF) in 2014-15. She shares, “I followed a very linear path till my masters, studying humanities, history, then art history and cultural repatriation law. But when I began working at a museum in Gurugram I was shocked at what the culture sector pays and wondered if this was my return on investment for the years of education.” She decided to pursue the YIF to broaden her focus and figure out if her career track needed to shift. She realised, it did not!

After the YIF, Shaleen wrote to every commercial art gallery in Mumbai. She interviewed for the role of Director of Sales & Strategy at Chemould Prescott Road. “I took the job knowing that I had professional exposure towards the Arts but no sales experience. I learnt everything on-the-job. Art is an intangible emotion that you sell. If I can sell that, I could pretty much sell anything.”



Recently, Shaleen worked as a cultural research consultant on *The Unfiltered History tour* by Vice World News UK, as part of Dentsu Webchutney’s team. They created a set of augmented reality Instagram filters for the most disputed looted artefacts that are present in the British Museum today. This project won 12 awards at the Cannes Lions Festival of Creativity in France, a first for India.

“If you ever think of further studies, and you have the ability, financial acumen and time to take that plunge, do it,” she advises. Shaleen is now applying for fellowships and other specialised courses. She is also the curator of India Art Fair 2023’s Talks and Art Walks programmes in Delhi.

STAFF WRITER, FOREIGN POLICY

IYENGAR

RISHI

When Rishi Iyengar was in high school, he decided he wanted to be a journalist. A summer internship with the *Indian Express* sealed the deal for him.

“You get to talk to people, learn stuff for a living, and get paid for it!” says Rishi.

After studying political science at Fergusson College in Pune, Rishi was simultaneously accepted at the Columbia School of Journalism and the Young India Fellowship (YIF). Fortunately, he was able to do both after deferring his admission to Columbia by a year.

“Everything I learnt at the Fellowship helped me make the experience at Columbia less jarring. Since the course at Columbia is very intense, including a lot of sleepless nights and thrown-in-the-deep-end-of-the-pool feelings, I was able to cope and hold my head above water slightly better than I would have if I hadn’t done the YIF,” Rishi says.

Soon after, Rishi landed in Hong Kong, for an internship with the *Time* two weeks before the Umbrella Revolution. Assignments with *CNN Business* and *Foreign Policy* followed. His present role allows him to marry his tech-journalism background with his interest in foreign policy.

“The pattern with me has been that every few years I feel that itch to do something new. The Fellowship inculcated that in me – the need to constantly push yourself out of the comfort zone because that’s where growth happens.”



FERGUSSON COLLEGE → YIF 2013 → COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY →
TIME MAGAZINE → CNN BUSINESS → FOREIGN POLICY

“At Ashoka, the Founders impacted the direction of my life. They have created something of real value and I want to do the same.”

VIKAS SANGAM

COMEDIAN AND IMPROV
THEATRE ARTIST

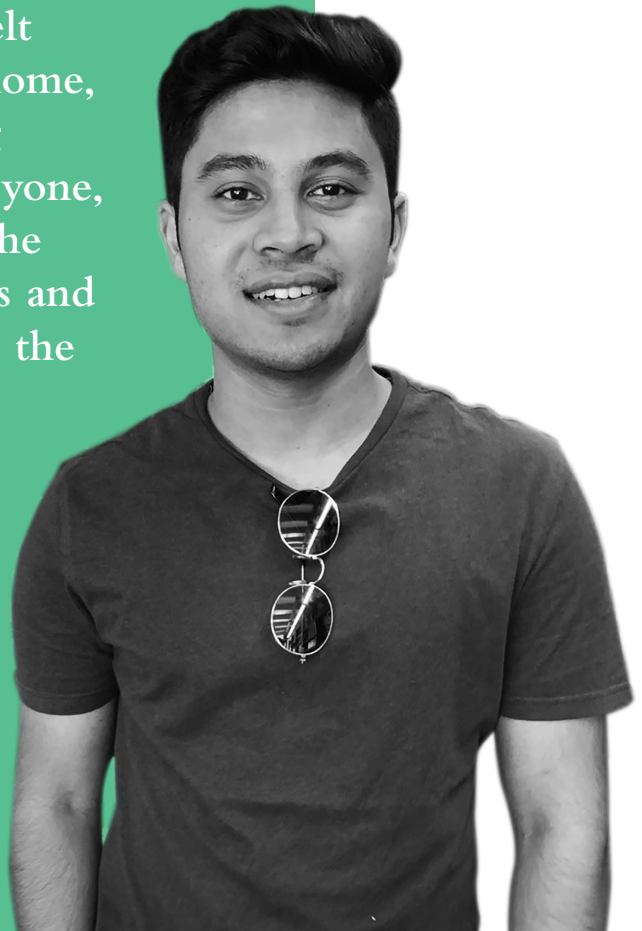


SAHIL BHARGAVA

DIRECTOR OF GROWTH, TODDLE

On the first day when I walked into the mess, I knew I belonged there. I felt right at home, got along with everyone, enjoyed the academics and soaked in the culture.

UG 2018, ASP
2019 → MCKINSEY
& COMPANY →
TODDLE



01

What led you to Ashoka?

When I went to Ashoka for a campus tour, I was instantly sold. I wasn't sure if Ashoka would get me a job, but I knew it would give me a great education that would stay with me for the rest of my life.

It turned out to be a life-changing experience and I'm proud of the decision I made. On the first day when I walked into the mess, I knew I belonged there. I felt right at home, got along with everyone, enjoyed the academics and soaked in the culture. The Ashoka student body was a special selection of students and everyone was qualified and inspiring in their own way.

02

How did life change after Ashoka?

My liberal arts background gave me a head start. While most people were sharp in specific domains, I was able to connect ideas across disciplines because of the range of courses I took at Ashoka. I could make quality and meaningful conversation with people from different walks of life.

This benefited me greatly as I joined McKinsey & Company after college. Although I soon realised that consulting wasn't for me, the experience was really important because Ashoka shaped me, and McKinsey gave me the polish and confidence I needed. This combination helped me realise what I eventually want to do – become a founder and build my own company.

03

What made you join Toddle?

I wasn't ready to establish a start-up in the middle of COVID-19 with very little work experience. I wanted to work at an early stage start-up, experience first-hand what it takes to build a company and work directly with founders. Toddle was a good fit and I resonated deeply with the founders and their values.

I recently relocated to the United States to lead Toddle's US business. My Ashoka education has given me a great foundation to build a cross-border career in India and the US. I hope to establish our University's name in the entrepreneurial circles of both countries.



ACTIVIST

SANDHYA
NAIR

UG 2021 → SAVE THE
CHILD FOUNDATION
→ ACTIVIST

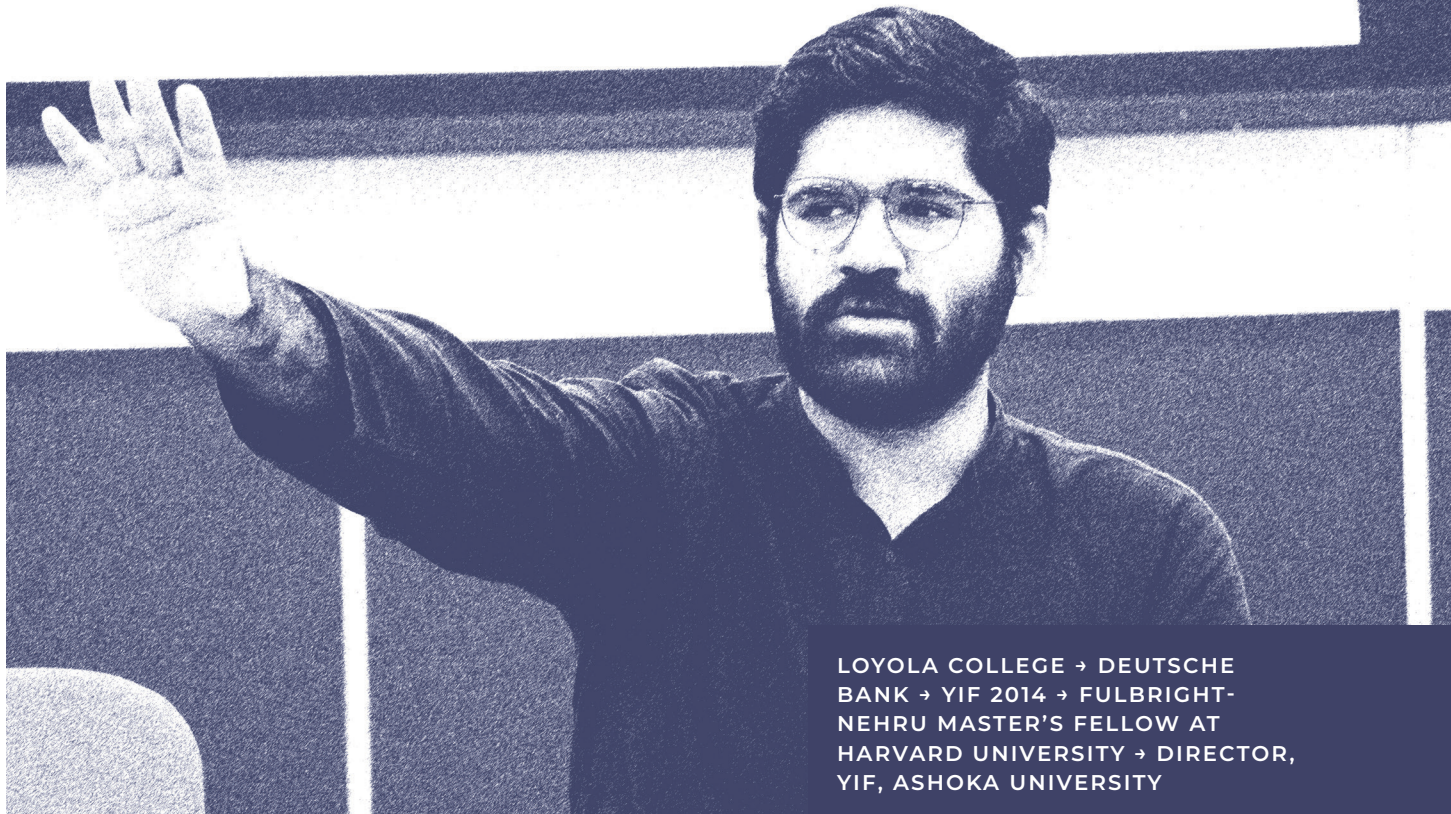
When you've been taught from a young age that you don't deserve certain opportunities, you tend to believe it. Today, as a strategist at a non-profit organisation, I give back to build a better society. I am a grateful benefactor of Kranthi, an organisation that supports girls in the red-light areas of Mumbai. Before I found Kranthi, I was only seen as a daughter of a sex worker: I was sexually abused for years before I was able to break out of the cycle; I was a domestic worker from age seven, and I was continuously bullied and shunned at school for my identity.

I heard about my admission into Ashoka University when I was in Europe performing a show titled *Red Light Express* which talked about life in the *lal batti* (red light) areas of Mumbai. I was grateful

to be given the opportunity and pursue an honours degree in psychology. This allowed me to pursue my lifelong goal of helping women through therapy. While it was a social and academic challenge to be in this new environment, I was able to make lasting friendships with peers who could understand my past.

Currently, I work with multiple organisations that help me impact the lives of students and young girls in African countries. I am also raising awareness about proper sanitary practices and menstrual health.

Through the pain, discrimination, and struggle, I don't see myself as a victim or a survivor. I am Sandhya Nair and I strongly believe that no matter where you come from or what your identity is, you belong in the world."



LOYOLA COLLEGE → DEUTSCHE
BANK → YIF 2014 → FULBRIGHT-
NEHRU MASTER'S FELLOW AT
HARVARD UNIVERSITY → DIRECTOR,
YIF, ASHOKA UNIVERSITY

Did you expect to be working at Ashoka when you were a Fellow yourself?

I came to the Young India Fellowship (YIF) seeking direction, fulfilment and a better understanding of myself – as a former economics graduate and banker with multiple interests. The Fellowship, amongst many things, taught me the value of asking the right questions. The confidence the Fellowship gave me to pursue anything I wanted was the pivotal point that eventually pushed me to work across several facets of higher education.

Everything I pursued after the Fellowship was because I was curious and excited

about it. Not because I thought it would add something to my résumé. But now when I look back, my work in admissions and outreach, my work with professors, and on coursework – the dots seem to be connecting.

Was it a conscious decision to stick to higher education?

There was no direction initially. But it so turned out retrospectively that I happened to be doing everything in higher education, more specifically experimenting with innovative models. I decided to pursue administration and governance in higher education. It was a clean slate and a very

a career. You need competent people to run universities and the system as a whole needs information, insight, and research on higher education itself. My broader goal is to establish an institution of sorts to address these issues.

How have you used these experiences to lead the YIF?

The Harvard and Fulbright tag does help with credibility. But when I was coming

KARANBHOLA

DIRECTOR, YOUNG INDIA FELLOWSHIP; FULBRIGHT-NEHRU
SCHOLAR, HARVARD GRADUATE

tough problem to solve. This allowed me to also be a ‘specialised generalist’. I was specialising in higher education but was a generalist to the extent that I could play different roles from different perspectives.

What was your biggest takeaway from Harvard?

I got some critical distance from both India and higher education during my course at Harvard. I read a fair bit on the history of Indian higher education, and gained a lot of comparative perspective. The overarching goal has been to make higher education administration aspirational as

back, I was only 28. And it becomes difficult to be taken seriously in a non-student, non-faculty role. But there was a point of comfort, and it helped to have mentors within the institution and some of the core trustees.

It was fundamentally about putting my head down, knowing what the right thing to do was and ultimately letting the work speak for itself. In some sense, that journey of building credibility is happening. It is exhausting but it is equally exhilarating and gratifying.

AFTERWORD

Dear Reader,

To quote John F Kennedy, “The success of any school can be measured by the contribution the alumni make to our national life.” These stories stand testament to that.

We hope you enjoyed reading about the contributions, hopes and dreams of Ashoka’s alumni. We also hope you join us in wishing them well as they take on newer, bigger challenges in the years ahead.

While it wasn’t easy to choose which of our exceptional alumni to feature, we tried to present as eclectic a mix as possible. However we must add, there are several who are missing from these pages. Many students we approached were often too shy or too busy to be interviewed. Others were far away, across different time zones. We hope to include them in subsequent editions.

Fittingly enough, the entire process of interviewing and writing the stories was conducted by other alumni. Perhaps that is how they were able to bring out the different nuances of these unique journeys within Ashoka and beyond. We are grateful for their time and effort to bring these stories to life.

We also want to thank Sohini Sen who supervised and executed the entire project.

Finally, to our young alumni out there, you are the best ambassadors a young institution like Ashoka could ask for. Go forth, do us proud!

Venkat Eshwara & Anu Singh

VENKAT ESHWARA & ANU SINGH



