People-Powered Partnerships

Vol.5

Stories of Intersectional Positionalities: Interviews with Social Changemakers
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We are thrilled to launch the fifth volume of our People-Powered Partnerships series, a celebrated publication of the AIF Fellowship program. This year's publication focuses on “Stories of Intersectional Positionalities: Interviews with Social Changemakers”. Inspired and informed by the experiences of the fellowship and the challenging, yet rewarding work in the development sector, the fellows bring out the complexities and nuances of interventions in varied thematic areas. The work clubbed with the stories of positionalities, and intersectional identities of social changemakers is the core of this publication. This series sheds light on how the stories, lived experiences and identities of changemakers come together to play a significant role in the intervention and pathways these leaders take to pave a road for community and future changemakers.

Throughout the last 21 years, AIF has functioned as an active scaffolding bridge between India and the U.S. Since its advent in 2001, AIF has channelised and cherished the power of cross-cultural relations to nurture and imbibe the value of service to drive the social impact via the Fellowship Program. Concomitantly, the Fellowship Program has continued to engage with the global and national complexities and challenges aggravated by the changing climate, educational, and health dynamics, among others, that demand rapid action and leadership for change. Through collaborative leadership and synergy between fellows, civil society organisations and host communities, the Program taps into the power of people-to-people ties to drive change and scale impact. To strengthen the program and bolster the US-India connection further, AIF partnered with Atlas Corps to launch a US-based Fellowship leg and introduce the Virtual leadership Institution, for the India-based cohort to develop international networks and build key leadership skills aimed at creating a cadre of global changemakers.

The fifth volume of the People-Powered Partnerships exemplifies this dedication to highlighting the stories of impact fellows created in communities and organisations across India. The publication showcases the positive and uplifting influence of fellows’ socio-cultural positionalities on the on-ground work they are committed to. For this, the fellows interviewed experienced resilient development sector professionals from their respective thematic areas to display the intersectional positionalities of social changemakers from the lens of personal, social, cultural and career-centric perspectives. It underlines the fellows’ work, innovative ideas and good practices that create leaders and pave a path for the next generation. It is a guide for understanding the solutions, context-specific approaches, cultural positionalities, personal identity and thought processes of people who are continuously impacting lives through their sustainable engagement in the sector.

This volume features contributions by six spirited fellows of the 2021-22 cohort: Prakriti Panda, Amana Praveen, Aishani Jaiswal, Ilika Trivedi, Manoj Das and Naina Yadav. They have had a dynamic experience in the hybrid expedition, allowing them to explore their capabilities in both online and offline scenarios. They navigated their way amidst the Covid-19 threat and made the fellowship’s vision of a sustainable impact on the sector come through with their rigorous efforts and determination. Their commitment to development and change shined through the tremendous efforts they put in to create sustainable structures in the host organisations and the surrounding communities. We believe this experience has taught them many valuable lessons to cherish and carry. We hope you enjoy reading this volume by our very first all-Indian cohort of the Banyan Impact Fellowship, the renewed avatar of the William J. Clinton Fellowship Program.

Nishant Pandey
Chief Executive Officer
New York

Mathew Joseph
Country Director
New Delhi
In the last few decades, the world has seen major developments in technologies as well as alleviation of the lives of millions across the continents. Many of these developments have only been possible because of community leaders and grassroots changemakers, who have spearheaded campaigns on the ground. However, the international discourse on development is yet to imbibe the idea that bottom up programs are the way to go in most cluster interventions. The fellows this year have chosen to focus on this very idea of community strengthening and the use of positionalities to bring about change. For this year’s Public Powered Partnerships volume, each of the contributing fellows have interviewed changemakers and leaders from their respective fields on the premise of how these leaders have used their positionalities and identities to center and often harness in their endeavors to bring about change.

The first cohort of Banyan Impact Fellowship has experienced and leading the fellowship differently. Some of the fellows have had the opportunity to relocate to their host organizations while others have had to stay home and work remotely. The projects have ranged from strategic initiatives to public health with a plethora of skill sets developed within the group. With this hybrid setting came the need to redefine our professional skills and future pathways; these relationships have ripped apart the notion of the “one-size-fits-all” model. As social changemakers, we have been drawing inspiration throughout our fellowship experiences correlated with the voices of our larger host organizations and creating change, from which the future generation of changemakers to showcase the intersectionality of our sectoral work and to embrace the resilience and resistance in bringing innovative ideas and projects to the forefront.

Since it is vital to highlight the identities and positionalities of us fellows and our larger host organizations, the fellows hope to shine a light on the experiences and path-weaving work to celebrate the nuanced interventions of development sector changemakers. Our fellowship has largely been hybrid which has allowed us to explore and contribute to the online and offline work model. As social changemakers, we have been engaging with our identities and positionalities in a larger context. We have created a blossoming network within our cohort’s sectoral work, professional development and future pathways; these intersectionalities have been our strength throughout the fellowship. Now that you, the reader, have gotten to know us, we would like to introduce our collaborative publication.

The idea of this publication arose from our interactions and willingness to learn and research. In our dialogues and discussions, we learned that many outstanding social changemakers are working on various underrepresented themes and with marginalized communities. We, as fellows, recognized the ingrained responsibility we carry towards budding changemakers to show our intersecting professional journeys. With this determination, we engaged in lengthy discussions, and the significance of positionalities and identities shined throughout. One’s positional identity and lived experiences contribute to the push to becoming a development sector changemaker. So, we fellows have put across our interaction with the positionalities of other veteran social changemakers to showcase the intersectionality of our work and to embrace the resilience and resistance in bringing innovative ideas and projects to the forefront.

Welcome Readers,

We, the contributors of this publication (Banyan Impact Fellows of Cohort 2021-22), express our heartfelt gratitude to you for engaging in a conversation with us through your interest in reading the fifth volume of this covered by Banyan Impact Fellows of the People-Powered Partnership publication. We are happy to share “Stories of Intersectional Positionalities: Interviews with Social Changemakers” as our attempt to bring about a light on successful leaders as well as provide a path for early sector professionals to explore their own motivation and identities through the fellows’ learnings of their fields.

Before diving in, we take a moment to familiarize and position ourselves. We are the first cohort of the Banyan Impact Fellowship, the renewed avatar of the William J. Clinton Fellowship Program. For this publication, six passionate fellows of this all-Indian batch serving, learning and leading the fellowship differently. So, we fellows have come together to bring about our experiences and path-weaving work to celebrate the nuanced interventions of development sector changemakers. Our fellowship has largely been hybrid which has allowed us to explore and contribute to the online and offline work model. As social changemakers, we have been engaging with our identities and positionalities in a larger context. We have created a blossoming network within our cohort’s sectoral work, professional development and future pathways; these intersectionalities have been our strength throughout the fellowship. Now that you, the reader, have gotten to know us, we would like to introduce our collaborative publication.

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which have extremely specific challenges and unique strategies to tackle common social problems. A collaborative approach is therefore essential because it opens us up to the finer nuances of work in these sectors. These interviews are a step in this direction.

Interviewing these sectoral experts was a unique experience in itself. The Banyan Impact Fellowship is the starting point for all of us in the social sector but interacting with these individuals showed us the path that we need to follow to have the maximum impact throughout our careers. Having a strong commitment to the cause and persistent efforts to bring change are qualities that are common to all the interviewees and we are privileged that we got the opportunity to understand this. We hope these interviews are a source of learning for our readers as well, and we wish to bring the focus of our readers to the on-ground efforts being made in the development sector. We look forward to your feedback and comments and hope that we have curated an enjoyable reading experience.

The journey we have been on and the work we have done so far has been impactful, which will not be ending here but will only lead us to be more fervent advocates of the work we have been doing together and carry forward the legacy AIF has bestowed upon us.

“You are a changemaker, and nothing should clean this notice off the boards of your heart!” - Israelmore Ayivor.

Contributors:
Prakriti Pandia
Amana Parveen
Ilika Trivedi
Aishani Jaiswal
Working For The Forgotten: Face to Face With Dr Kiran Bedi on Prison Reforms in India

- Ilika Trivedi
AIF Banyan Impact Fellow 2021-22

The different elements required to go from punishment to rehabilitation in prison reform.
FROM PUNISHMENT TO REHABILITATION
IN PRISON REFORM

If one thinks of kids in a group, there’s always a girl in glasses who loves reading, who considers books to be her friends, who gets excited about studying, and whose life revolves around the next book she wants to get issued from the library. That girl is me. Whenever my father was posted to a new place, the first thing I did was scope out the cantonment area for the libraries and the treasure of books they held. The concept of having a role model was also something I read about and the decision to find one for myself was a well-researched effort. I remember reading about Dr Kiran Bedi in a book called ‘Teen Idols for Today’ and after careful consideration, I chose her as my guiding force. She was the first woman Indian Police Service officer and I had dreamed of joining the Indian Civil Services since I was in school. I worked diligently to turn this dream into a reality for many years. Her image as a dedicated, unbiased professional who was serving the country as a capable administrator truly inspired me. Dr Bedi’s fearless attitude towards service was something I wished to imbibe for myself.

Here’s the highlight reel of my life story. As an Army Officer’s daughter, I grew up all over India, learning in eleven schools and various cities. I completed my Bachelors in Economics from Shri Ram College of Commerce, Delhi University and my Master’s in Human Rights from Jamia Millia Islamia. I worked as a researcher for The Politics Initiative at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi and joined the Banyan Impact Fellowship with the hope of directly working in the field of human rights. My host organization, TYCIA Foundation, is committed to the cause of Prison Reform and my fellowship journey, I had been in touch with India Vision Foundation for a collaboration related to my project at TYCIA - the Unlearn Fellowship, is also the center of Dr Bedi’s efforts. Tihar Jail turned out to be the mutual starting point of both our journeys in this sector.

Prison reform is a niche area of work in itself and Dr Bedi’s India Vision Foundation is a pioneer in this area. She is well-known for her efforts in the reformation and rehabilitation of prisoners as the Inspector General of Delhi Prisons in 1993. The reforms undertaken by her in Tihar received worldwide acclaim and she was awarded the Ramon Magaysay Award for her leadership and innovations in crime control, drug rehabilitation, and humane prison reforms in 1994. This propelled her to establish the India Vision Foundation in the same year to carry forward the work of prison reform so that the reason for this award lives on.

The Politics Initiative at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi and joined the Banyan Impact Fellowship with the hope of directly working in the field of human rights. My host organization, TYCIA Foundation, is committed to the cause of Prison Reform and my fellowship journey, I had been in touch with India Vision Foundation for a collaboration related to my project at TYCIA - the Unlearn Fellowship, is also the center of Dr Bedi’s efforts. Tihar Jail turned out to be the mutual starting point of both our journeys in this sector.

Inmates Showing Ilka their Vegetable Garden and Nursery at Bhondsi Prison, Gurugram, Haryana with Mr Ravi of India Vision Foundation

Our interaction started with Dr Bedi discussing how Bhondsi is a model prison where her organization has achieved the most. Having seen both Bhondsi and Tihar, the difference between the two was very dramatic and my visit to Bhondsi was a breath of fresh air. Of course, there are differences in administration at the central and state level but Bhondsi is a prison where the Foundation has had the ability to make the biggest difference over a period of 10 years. According to Dr Bedi, the reforms in Tihar had transformed it to a greater degree during her tenure, but it was not sustained at that level over time.

In her opinion, to make an impact, one has to go big because drops don’t make an impact, there needs to be a flood of reform. By flood, the implication is two-fold – one, that there are reforms in every possible area and two, that every prisoner is directly impacted. If there is education, there must be education for all and everybody must go to school. During my sessions at Tihar, I’ve observed that participation in education, music, sports and other activities is quite limited and not every prisoner is interested in attending sessions. Participation in these activities is voluntary for prisoners but in Dr Bedi’s view, an effort has to be made to ensure voluntary participation by all and an inspirational atmosphere of volunteered must be created where there is a hunger to learn, change, and transform and evolve. She’s very particular about the lack of punishment when it comes to inculcating this approach. In 1994, Tihar had over 1000 prisoners who sat down together for a group meditation session without any guns or threat of punishment. Discipline must be instilled and punishment for this award lives on.

For ex-inmates since they are involved as peer fellows too. When I decided to interview a social leader in this field, approaching Dr Bedi was the first thought in my mind. But before this interview, Dr Bedi asked me to read her book ‘It’s Always Possible: One Woman’s Transformation of Tihar Prison’, to understand the steps taken by her during her posting at Tihar and she also arranged a visit for me to the District Prison of Gurugram, Haryana at Bhondsi to directly witness the impact of the work done by her team.

Model Prison at Bhondsi - District Jail, Gurugram, Haryana

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Further, prisons are an integral part of the criminal justice system but they are often ignored as the least important aspect. My host organization is attempting to address the systemic issues in prisons and Dr Bedi added that reforms in prison can extend toward much-needed reforms in the criminal justice system as a whole. It is important that these reforms go beyond the idea of mere security and go towards the reintegration of the inmates into the larger community and society.

India Vision Foundation has a dedicated framework and reach in this sector. The model followed by India Vision Foundation is a long-term sustainable one while the interventions of my host organization TYCIA Foundation are more short-term and project-based in nature. The latter reaches fewer people, it can sow a seed which might or might not lead to fruition, whereas the former approach creates a gardener and gives them the tools to ensure that the seed bears the fruit of reform. On the other hand, the shorter, intervention-based approach is an excellent beginning point for newer organizations, especially the ones who specialize in a specific sub-field.

India Vision Foundation introduced the system of peer fellows in which inmates are selected inside the prisons and they are given the responsibility of acting as a medium between the organization, the inmates and the prison authorities. Creating peer fellows needs to be done very carefully with close supervision and regular training. TYCIA Foundation has taken this system a step ahead by making peer fellows an integral part of our interventions and training ex-inmates as future social workers. Unlearn Fellowship is one such initiative which is acting as a conduit of rehabilitation and reintegration of 4 ex-inmates.

**Government-NGO Partnership**

Prisons are state-run institutions, and therefore, collaboration with government officials and institutions is crucial to ensure impact. An effective partnership between NGOs and the government is essential. India Vision Foundation is well known as an established organization and Dr Bedi’s reputation precedes her. In case an organization is new, the only method is to persist and continue working in the field with dedication so that the government can see the results. Newer organizations will take more time and may not be taken seriously by prison authorities initially but continued efforts are important to build a name and image.

Dr Bedi has been in the IPS, worked as a social leader, established her own organizations, held political and administrative positions and has directly addressed people too. In her opinion, the route of the government has been most effective in terms of impact for the prison setting. People in this setting require leadership of a social leader, they have to invite NGOs in and recognise their need for the betterment of prisoners and ultimately, the society.

Talking about Dr Bedi’s identity as a woman in a field where the staff is almost entirely male and the prison beneficiaries are also mostly male inmates, she stated that she incorporated her identity in a positive manner in her work. She used her identity for compassion and care since she took the role of a provider, a caregiver and a teacher. This helped her to use either a soft or a hard hand, whichever was needed depending on the situation. She used her identity as an advantage so that it doesn’t act as a barrier. She could’ve easily felt threatened in that environment, but she chose to make her position clear, as a fearless woman. In Dr Bedi’s opinion, being confident in one’s identity and capabilities is important to get things done. There shouldn’t even be a phase of transition, since she starts her work from the day she gets the responsibility to do so.

Identity - Social Advantage for Some, Social Disability for Others?

Prison Reform - Why & How?

For me, prison reform was the project I chose to work on because ensuring the human rights of prisoners is a unique challenge. Human rights is a broad field which includes almost all types of social work in its ambit but because prisoners are inherently deprived of their fundamental rights, by law, efforts to ensure their rights need to be unique as well. For Dr Bedi, continuing her work in prison reform was a choice. She chose this field because she felt that this work was most needed, since there was no organization which was working in this field at the time.

Even today, very few organizations are working in this area because they struggle to get funds as prisoners are seen at the bottom of the barrel. The opinion is that there are enough people in need who require our support and resources and criminals cannot be the priority. Improvement in the living conditions of prisoners is seen to be counter intuitive to the purpose of prisons. When I discussed why human rights for all doesn’t seem to include prisoners, even in the social sector, Dr Bedi’s response is that one needs to approach the right organizations who believe in the cause as much as we do. Organizations that believe in humanity and want to work for the enhancement of security in society through education and inculcation of ethics are the ones who need to be open to supporting this cause.

There is also a widespread opinion that if prisons begin offering all facilities, it might encourage crime as criminals would be secure behind bars with their day to day necessities being met without any effort. Dr Bedi’s answer to this opinion is a simple question. Who doesn’t want freedom and liberty? Can any human be happy when their daily choices are limited by authorities and the law? For me, prison reform was the project I chose to work on because ensuring the human rights of prisoners is a unique challenge. Human rights is a broad field which includes almost all types of social work in its ambit but because prisoners are inherently deprived of their fundamental rights, by law, efforts to ensure their rights need to be unique as well. For Dr Bedi, continuing her work in prison reform was a choice. She chose this field because she felt that this work was most needed, since there was no organization which was working in this field at the time.
But discussing the identity of the beneficiaries is an arduous exercise. The social tag of an ex-inmate, a convict or a criminal is something that cannot be left behind even if the desire to reform is strong. Our society labels prisoners for the rest of their lives and creates a negative identity for them, which acts as a social disability. This actually acts as a deterrent and prisoners take a defeatist attitude towards their future. Along with efforts of reform, Dr Bedi believed that it is important to undertake counseling of the inmates so that there is a change in their attitude. Most of the prisoners never think about their future till their case is resolved, which is a setback that needs to be countered through positive thinking. The inmates must have a belief that there is a future for them beyond the walls of the prison, for which they can prepare now and skill themselves for a more stable tomorrow.

There is an additional challenge associated with identity when it comes to women and juvenile prisoners. I’ve helped in designing and managing the Unlearn Fellowship, during which facilitators are taking sessions in juvenile or observation homes. This is a unique challenge in itself because the participants have very different demands and styles of participation. When I discussed whether the learnings from prisons can be applied here, Dr Bedi was convinced that these learnings can be applied even more effectively since the children are younger and easier to mold. In her opinion, observation homes should ideally take the shape of residential schools with a fully scheduled day. The experiences of our fellows have brought out various other challenges like the fact that children in observation homes are easily distracted, jump from one topic to another, are either too energetic or too lethargic, and are facing more troubles in understanding their future till their case is resolved, which is a setback that needs to be countered through positive thinking.

Similarly, women prisoners are reluctant to participate and need more investment and resources – both physical and human. They are more attached to their families and homes as a result of which they struggle a lot more with mental health issues. My visit to Bhopal prison made it clear that these women go into their shells and frequently suffer from depression, not participating in the myriad activities being offered to them because of lack of hope. They require regular motivation and guidance but limited funds and resources of NGOs lead to male prisoners being prioritized over female prisoners. This is because prisons are overwhelmingly dominated by male prisoners. According to Prison Statistics of India 2019, out of 4,78,600 prisoners, only 19,913 were female which means that over 98% of the total prison population are men. As is the norm, special requirements of the minority population are often overlooked. Also, since male prisoners are often repeat offenders, the focus lies more on their reform and rehabilitation from the perspective of crime prevention and reduction and for the betterment of society. Rare cases of women prisoners aren’t the center of attention since they do not align with this goal.

Second Chance - Vision or Naivety?

My host organization is also in the process of launching the Second Chance Fellowship with the goal of finding solutions to systemic issues in prisons. I naturally asked Dr Bedi if she truly believes in second chances and as expected, the answer was a firm yes. Excluding certain cases, which have proven to be hopeless, Dr Bedi truly believes in the ability of every person to redeem themselves. After decades of experience in this field, Dr Bedi has cent percent conviction that her efforts to reform really do reduce the rate of crime. This absolute conviction gave me a lot of hope especially because I’ve met many people in the system with a fatalist attitude, but Dr Bedi holds the opinion that these are not the right people for the job since their approach is not oriented towards reform.

Many inmates come up to me to ask whether they’ll ever get a respectable job when they get out. Dr Bedi’s response to this question is that the time of the inmates must be invested in productive work inside the prison. Only then will they find a direction for themselves outside. Bhopal Prison is a prime example of the opportunities that can be made available to the inmates through the efforts of the social sector. My visit to their activity center started with a tour of the garden and nursery where a few dedicated inmates spend their day growing fruits, vegetables, flowers and even dry composting. India Vision has also established various units under Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives of various private corporations. Project Dhan was set up in collaboration with Sony Pictures Networks India to offer music as a skill through all essential instruments and equipment. Singer has established a stitching center and other industries have set up a salon, a computer center, a library, a radio station and many other resources. The women’s prison has a sanitary napkin making unit, and a chocolate making unit as well. Certified short term courses are provided to the inmates and there are many success stories of these people being self-reliant after their release. Ultimately, self-reliance and rehabilitation is the effort of my host organization as well.

Weakness is the most powerful weapon of an enemy. We can change an enemy to a friend. We can change a criminal to a new person. We can change a prisoner to a new citizen. We need to focus not on the crime but on the person.
them to become better human beings, different methods might appeal to different people. These methods could be music, art, prayer, discourse, bhakti or yoga. Identifying the needs of the inmates is crucial and access to these methods might not even cost any money to the authorities if the correct route is undertaken.

Lessons from the Field

India Vision Foundation is taking major strides in their work with expansion in multiple states and programs both inside and outside the prison. The Inside Prison Program incorporates the 4S Model of reformation which ensures Skill, Shiksha, Sanskar and Swasth (Skill, Education, Values and Health). Other initiatives include the Early Childhood Care Development Program, Children of Vulnerable Families Program, Reintegration & Rehabilitation Program and Training for Prison Officials. Dr Bedi’s mind is a deep well of ideas and her team is working consistently in achieving their vision. Ma’am is always on the lookout for passionate individuals who want to work for this cause and newer organizations like TYCIA Foundation are bringing some innovative initiatives to the sector as well. Of course, there are many challenges which have been highlighted above, but with visionary social leaders like Dr Bedi and passionate teams like the one at TYCIA, major strides in this sector are possible and seem within reach. A major caveat here is that support from the government and collaboration with the administration are essential components for success in this sector. Authorities with an approach towards reform are crucial for the better life of prisoners and as a result, the betterment of society as a whole.

“If you don’t solve the problem, you’re part of the problem.” This quote from Dr Bedi’s book ‘It’s Always Possible’ truly reflects her approach towards her work and it really struck me. What shines in our conversation is her unique attitude towards social reform. Her own sense of purpose guides her because she’s an extremely self-driven person and she thinks that her commitment and passion comes naturally to her. Ma’am iterated that this is something which can be imbibed from childhood in individuals through high conscientiousness and taking ownership of one’s own self. My interaction with Dr Bedi helped me in gaining a deeper perspective towards my work and she once again inspired me to become a better version of myself, the way reading about her inspired me as a child. There are many stories of people being disappointed when they meet their role models as an adult but I’m honored to say that my younger self chose well.”
Shed off skin to fit in: Educating the whole child: Tête-à-tête with Richa Gupta and Shweta Goswami

- Prakriti Pandia
AIF Banyan Impact Fellow 2021-22
Is education about teaching a discipline and subjects? Or to help the young ones make sense of life, learn skills and prepare them for the future? Education strives to guide children in becoming well-settled and healthy humans who contribute to the development of humankind. However, when a child enters school, why do they have to shed parts of their identity? Their identity as children witnessing dysfunctional family dynamics, poverty, facing caste discrimination, gender impediments, living in an orphanage, religious violence and an endless list of identities. As a stakeholder in school and society at large, do we have space to hold a child's holistic identity beyond the role of a student? Why is a child expected to shed off their skin/parts of identity to fit in? Where is the space of the child to be seen as a whole? Are there ways to cater to the needs and realities of the whole child and not the mere bits and pieces?

This essay will run you through the problem mentioned above to provide a critical lens on how to cater to the whole child in diverse and structured organizational programs and how personal motive is central in all the narratives. For this pursuit, founders of two Non-governmental organizations working in the education and connected fields were interviewed. I interviewed Richa Gupta, Co-founder of Labhya Foundation with a Master’s of Education from Harvard University, along with years of experience in the education field, particularly pedagogy, teacher training, social-emotional learning and leadership. And Shweta Goswami, Founder and director of Nirmal Initiatives Mission, and PhD in Philosophy from Jawahar Lal Nehru University with years of experience in education, community development, violence and leadership. I interviewed Richa and Shweta to bring out diverse experiences of young leading communities and values. She always saw her mother with a book as a means of resistance, intersectionality, and entrepreneurial leadership journey while building her positionality and the penetrative effect of identity politics on the purview of work.

Positionality and identity: Individualistic and collective

My positionality and identity as a writer and your reader, a reader, play a significant role in portraying and understanding the essay. My position as an upper-caste woman living in a metropolitan city with no physical disability and having studied in private school is one layer of my identity. The second layer is that for 20 odd years of my life, I lived in a semi-rural area as an alien (Outsider) and struggled in school as I was continuously bullied, compared by my teacher and suffered in health aspects. I faced gender discrimination and harassment as a young girl, adolescent and adult and saw patriarchy and violence at their core in my household. The third layer is how my education in psychology (Master’s and Bachelor’s) and work with children, adults, relationships and college have left an imprint on my identity and perspective on life. There have been transformational moments that taught me not just new knowledge but also about the occasional need to put up a fight, i.e., the power of resistance. The last layer is the in-depth experiences I am gaining presently as a Banyan Impact fellow as I serve in Jharkhand and Chattisgarh in the “Holistic Development of tribal and rural children and communities” project under the Learning and Migration Program, American India Foundation. The project focuses on education, health, life skills and community engagement so that the holistic development of a child is reached and catered to. Through my work with communities, schools and students, I got engrossed in how the politics of a child’s identity goes beyond school and plays a role in education. In Jharkhand, some girls are married off at an early age (Child Marriage), and many girls use clothes at the time of menstruation and are told they are “Asha B” (Unlucky) at the time of periods in Chattisgarh. Without boys, men and the community taking role, women and girls face gender discrimination subtly and outwardly. As I singularly pondered on the issue and aspects of holistic representation of self within our Education system, I invited established veterans to extend the conversation and celebrate together while positioning themselves in the larger discourse.

This led me to share a téte-à-tête with Richa Gupta, Labhya Foundation. She is a single child born when her parents were in their 40s and lived in Zimbabwe where she was just 19. The struggle of fighting her inhibitions, doubts and family pressure regarding her unconventional choice, particularly as a female (Gender), put impediments in her way from family and society, showcasing the hold of patriarchy on our choices and opportunities. However, through the power of her resistance and belief, she pulled through with supportive friends and believers by her side. To further add layers to identity politics complexities, I shared an elaborate discussion with another experienced veteran.

Going onto the work and positionality of Shweta Goswami, Nirmal Initiative shared her story of struggles that shaped her thought process and initiative. She comes from a Nath yogi community and Bahujan caste, often denoted as a nomadic community with different norms and values. She moved to Zimbabwe, took care of her sick child and picked up the habit. Books (Knowledge) became her gateway to enter into a different world, a world which registered her grandmother to caste discrimination, humiliation, discrimination and difficulty in adapting. Nevertheless, sooner the reality of these children facing humiliation, discrimination and difficulties adapting became evident as they belonged to a minority religious group. The question: how is the school helping these children? How the school structure is using the uniform to ask these children to (Metaphorically) cover up the reality of their distressed identity and become one with other children? Another question is, how can we be sensitive and structurally equip children with resources and identity politics? Give them space to claim their identity in classes rather than getting bullied and isolated for it? These questions, coupled with many reflections, stayed with Richa. She and her co-founder, Vedant and Mallika, started Labhya Foundation in 2016 when she was married off at an early age (Child Marriage), and practised caste discrimination, another child and practised caste discrimination.

In conversation with Richa Gupta, Labhya Foundation

In conversation with Richa Gupta, Labhya Foundation


Moreover, in the positionality of all the changemakers, opportunities, further attached to societal respect. Between disciplines exists in the wage gap and available quality education available in all the states of India? Why do we fail to value humanities discipline? The bias discussion propelled me to ask questions such as, is quality education available in all the states of India? Why? Why do we fail to value humanities discipline? The bias between disciplines exists in the wage gap and available opportunities, further attached to societal respect.

In conversation with Shweta Goswami, Nirmal Initiative

Moreover, in the positionality of all the changemakers, there are commonalities of undergoing secondary trauma from witnessing others’ lived struggles, be it our mothers, neighbours or children we worked with. Three of us walked miles in the shoes of others (The other created by social structures). We faced gender discrimination and attached impediments in the form of gender roles and societal expectations. However, academic space (Knowledge hub) became our weapon of choice to radicalise the movement voicing actionable change. Also, our different experiences gave rise to different lines of work and initiatives.

Shweta’s experience brought out another layer of the complex lens to surface the reality of many. In her experience, she never felt like a victim but rather an active negotiator of caste dynamics. Her unique gaze through the lens of caste dynamics provided the floor to look at gender as a byproduct of caste violence and a patriarchal strategy to doubly victimise and divide women. While working in Jharkhand, the caste and gender dynamics surfaced in discussions of sexual violence. Women shared that “In our village, some Upper caste men would not look at us (Scheduled tribe and caste women), but they could harass and humiliate us. To them, we smell so they don’t come near us, but what about when they harass us? Aren’t we untouchables when they harass us? And when we gather the courage to ever talk about this, we are silenced by the gossip and rumours that follow even our shadow?” — A ST woman, Jharkhand. Caste and gender roles and societal expectations. However, opportunites, further attached to societal respect. Between disciplines exists in the wage gap and available quality education available in all the states of India? Why do we fail to value humanities discipline? The bias between disciplines exists in the wage gap and available opportunities, further attached to societal respect.

In my work on “Holistic Development of tribal and rural children and communities”, I focus on building the capacity of our team, teachers and communities. To burden children to defend and protect themselves against the unsupportive environment seems unjust, so the angle to work with women, adolescent girls, and boys and government stakeholders is essential to bringing about an ecosystem change that promotes education that focuses on life skills, participation, provide a safe space to speak, and allow the children to learn about their health and nutrition. However, would it be enough to teach children about health, nutrition, and participation when their societal reality is that girls are getting married at an early age, most of the children have witnessed domestic violence and physical punishment, and parents are caught in gender roles and discrimination yet we expect educated children to behave differently? How will the difference follow when our curriculum reflects the same stereotypical notions and norms? For this, the project entirely focuses on gender, health and nutrition. Also, working with young boys as if they are sensitized and learn about gender roles, expectations, and discrimination, will take off the burden on the girls and women. The current big question: Is this enough to work with groups of women on the receiving end of the power structure? This isn’t enough, so to make slow amends to the larger structures’ deficits, we work with the government and implement new ideas. The same is true for the grassroots and government-level work in which Labhya Foundation and Nirmal Initiative engage.

In Labhya Foundation, Richa Gupta took the entrepreneurship route, and as a young woman, she faced difficulties in government sector negotiations because of her gender and age. So, Labhya Foundation shifted its focus on maintaining work ethics, balancing the power-driven structures, managing people and relationships, and creating sustainable work methods. Labhya’s sustainable and contextual subjective structure makes it apt for empowerment and involvement. They create grade-specific hyper-localized modules by training a chosen teacher from each government school they engage with. They have a rigorous monitoring and evaluation model using a 360-degree outlook covering all the possible areas. The government has supported the project begun by Labhya Foundation for 8-10 years to make it sustainable and register a significant change. I was impressed to learn about hyper-localization, emphasis on quality of intervention, and inclusion of government to pass on the ownership to schools and make the structure sustainable.
The third innovative approach is by Nirmal Initiative an organization led by Shweta Goswami, which concentrates on community-based educational intervention; they started by taking the route of school intervention and teacher training and now added the direct community intervention aspect using a community resource centre. Their unique approach is “integrated and community-based” to address sexual violence against children. The leading advocate in this area is that sexual violence doesn’t take place in isolation but in complex social, cultural and economic spheres. They treat it as a socially rooted evil followed by other structural factors (Gender, caste), so through intervention, the aim is to create informed and sensitive communities that don’t pressurise children to protect themselves; instead, they take collective responsibility to safeguard children. Also, Shweta shared that “Words like discrimination and privilege make it easier to discuss grave issues without imagining the generational violence and attached historical realities and associated trauma”. The holistic approach would be to look at the past and the future of the child.

The different approaches pointed to the fact that to grasp the reality of children and communities we engage with, we must open our horizons of understanding and use a participatory approach to learning and contextualise the particular intervention in the social-cultural lived experiences. There is much to learn from the work context, and hyper localization of content caters to experiences. There is much to learn from the work context, and hyper localization of content caters to experiences.

Intersectionality

The intersectionality of experiences as changemakers and women are abundant yet different given the context.

Richa and I, upper-caste women living in Delhi with available options of getting educated in schools and colleges with quality education, our issues have mainly centred around gender, bullying and finding a space. It was coupled with a glimpse of a dysfunctional family and my parents migrating to a new city, and the feeling of being an alien followed me throughout life.

The sense of intersectionality of identity, experiences, and pathway makes it complex to square box the identities and doing this to children and adults isn’t justified. Perhaps the question we need to engage with is, why is it crucial for people to reduce identities and attach one tag? What about the complexities of identity and the embedded trauma we are running from?

Nevertheless, these women shaped and found ways to take on their identities and experiences to create value in society. Let us touch upon how the changemakers are paving the path for a collective way and how can people aim for the same to reach their goals.

Changemakers are paving a collective way...

The recipe to becoming a changemaker is to keep your book close to you and watch for more to read. Both the entrepreneurs shared the importance of reading, exploring and understanding identities and issues beyond one’s ambit of positionalities. What made a difference was when the academic and philosophical knowledge hit the ground, and we met children and communities that changed our outlook and forced us emotionally and mentally to use our knowledge for good. It would be wrong to call it an individualistic act; instead, it is the values and ethos of the families that children took over, and the values were strong, and the belief was so firm that even when family doubted and did not support them directly, they kept moving on and believing in themselves. The person who made me believe in myself is my mother, sister and brother, my blanket on a cold day of complications. For Shweta, it is her late mother; she shared that she still draws strength from her mother’s words and actions to keep her going; Nirmal Initiative is a tribute to her mother in many forms. For Richa, it is her father and close friend Prakriti Chawla who stood with her through thick and thin. The extended and chosen family of friends play a significant role, as they stand up when our own family seems dubious and possessive.

Another way of paving a collective path is to keep the vision in your mind and find solutions to each obstacle. How can one maintain a realistic lens while aiming for something ambitious and challenging? Richa beautifully shared that one needs to keep the ultimate goal in mind, and in the end, everything boils down to relationships. “Everyone wants to be heard; how can we make them feel and make them part of the initiative is the art of bringing a balance between the real-life and our vision.” -Richa Gupta.

Leadership has been mentioned as an essential part of growing while creating change. Observing great leaders has been my way of learning, and whenever I am in change, I make sure to be empathetic and involved; however, the balance is tricky to maintain. Richa and Shweta shared their recipe for being a leader. Richa struggled when she started as she took on the role of an authoritarian leader, but she was reminded of her caring and connecting nature. She feels she is on a journey toward becoming an authentic leader. She does not have to be cold and work-oriented to get the work done; instead, a person can be assertive, connecting and caring. One has to figure out the recipe for being an authentic leader. Shweta shared her way of taking on the role of leader and role model, the aspect of apparent confrontation yet empathetic communication to understand the struggles of the other person and making connections is the way for her leadership.

“Leadership is the part where you let the other person be authentic and learn how to be disagreeable respectfully. It is all about how you deal with power dynamics; leadership can bring you together or down the slope. A leader must be a changemaker paving the way for collective learning and growth” - Prakriti.

A special thanks to the interviewees for connecting and sharing their personal and professional journeys.
“Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” - John Dewey

With our collective positionalities,
Our created social-political realities and identities,
With education as a progressive tool,
Our society is reinvented
With this, we make education holistic
Our changemakers pave the resilient way
To welcome intersectionalities,
With children, adolescent girls, and women at the forefront,
Our way of gender equality, health and holistic well-being,
To intervene and cater to the communities
We the changemakers,
With our collective will, and determination,
Together we pave the path for a better future
An Ode to Our Identities:
A Conversation with Dr Ruha Shadab on Accessibility to Opportunities

- Amana Parveen
AIF Banyan Impact Fellow 2021-22

Photo credits: https://www.soulveda.com/happiness/getting-real-about-womens-empowerment/amp/
I am currently working as an AIF Fellow with Fair Trade Forum-India in New Delhi, where I am facilitating empowerment and sustainability for indigenous, minority, and marginalised women artisans in India through design thinking and advocacy methods at the forefront.

My project provided me with the opportunity to work across India with various communities, cultures, and traditional practices, which improved my learning curve and exposed me to new techniques and cultures, as well as the patriarchal and archaic limitations that women face. Although my work at Host Organisation directly contributes to women's empowerment and combating such regressive thoughts, it made me look at the root of such issues from a totally different perspective since our realities of life had similarities and differences. This made me analyse my inputs and outputs through community engagement with an empathetic lens as the depth of realities had similarities and differences. This made me analyse my inputs and outputs through community engagement with an empathetic lens as the depth of our experiences here were shaped significantly by my life decisions, particularly my decision to work in the social sector and for the betterment of society, were a way for me to rebel against the unspoken patriarchal and misogynistic rules set for women.

Growing up, I was ridiculed for being ambitious and asserting that I could make a positive difference in society and not ever get to know personally, that exist all around the world working towards equal representation and inclusivity.

I hail from Kochi, a city in India's southern state of Kerala that is known for its backwaters, greenery, culture, positive gender ratio, and kind people.

I believe that while fighting the society, system, and unending biases of those around you, a lack of access to resources for your growth causes you to question your place in the world.

Along with the brunt of patriarchy and endless questioning about my desire to pursue my passion, my identity as a minority woman in India limited my access to opportunities for growth. From subtle racism to people refusing to talk to me because of my identity to dealing with sexism due to various predominant gender roles and expectations, I felt as if I was carrying multiple burdens impeding my ability to thrive as an individual and a professional.

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One such inspirational woman is Dr Ruha Shadab, Founder and CEO of Harvard incubated Led By Foundation - a professional incubator for Indian Muslim Women. Dr Ruha has constantly been working towards bridging the gap of the underrepresentation of minority women in the workplaces.

Being a direct beneficiary of her organisation’s work through the Led By Accelerator programme, which is a year-long experiential training and mentoring programme for professional development, and also have an opportunity to serve as a mentor (paying it forward) to one high school girl with the aim of preparing the accelerator program participants to be exceptional professionals and team members, I’ve been able to experience and witness the amount of impact she’s able to create first-hand.

Her organisation’s zeal to make opportunities accessible has always stood out for me, the work Led By does is an inspiration in my journey of working on inclusion and accessibility.

Positionality and Identity:

Dr Ruha was born and raised in Saudi Arabia, where she spent the first decade of her life as an individual in a predominantly Muslim community. After spending most of her life in Saudi Arabia, she and her family moved to India, where she had her first realisation of her positionality as a minority woman. Her stories detail the microaggressions and cultural differences she encountered as a minority woman. These incidents made her more aware of the positions of majority and minority individuals, ranging from privileges to the burden of racism and lack of access to opportunities.

Ruha applied to Harvard University for a Masters in Public Policy after completing her MBBS, and working for 4 years as a doctor and global health consultant. While writing her proposal for research on improved healthcare access for Muslim women in India, she discovered that there were other issues not talked about, such as not having open access for economic empowerment and professional development with an emphasis on coaching and mentoring. When she dug deeper into her conscience, she discovered that none of her referees were women from her community, which highlighted the significant lack of representation for minority women in professional spaces.

I, the other hand, a South Indian Muslim woman who grew up in a highly secular neighbourhood and boasted about the various delicacies she got to try on different festive occasions but was forced to become a victim of micro-aggression one fine day. Being the only Muslim individual in class throughout high school did not help, nor did having no representation of women to look forward to with my career ambitions and to have shared experiences to hold dear. I felt so alienated from my identity and what society expects of me in terms of what my identity should seem like.

After graduating from high school, I moved to a different region of India, where I was subjected to regular microaggressions as well as racism owing to my name and identity. From being the person who people avert their gaze from as soon as they heard my name to being the person who people avert their gaze from as soon as they heard my name to experiencing life-threatening racism while travelling to the airport and receiving no justice after reporting it, this became a normal part of my life. I used to be afraid of telling people my name, which forced me to stay in my cocoon all the time.

My experiences here were shaped significantly by my status as a woman, a minority, and a South Indian.
The major motivation that made me sit down and reflect more while interacting with my host communities, their positionality and identity, as well as the layers of burden that came with it because of how society views them, was my curiosity to understand the power dynamics that shape how someone’s identity can play a huge role in deciding how far one’s future is when it comes to accessing opportunities, and how the system and society collectively work against the benefit of the individual.

Our stories or geographies may be different, but what binds all of our experiences are the challenges and setbacks we had to face and overcome simply because of the various identities we hold which makes this movement truly intersectional.

Resistance: Envisioning Social Change

I remember waking up one day in the middle of the night wondering how I can make opportunities more inclusive while making sure every woman like me and unlike me, has access to resources that can develop them professionally.

I recall the time when it hit me, that people I went to school with and had similar education might still have an upper hand to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) because of our identities, which eventually turned into a series of questions:

Why did I have to be the candidate that is most unlikely to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) just because of my identity? Why do I have to face the brunt of something which is not my fault? Why do I have to fear not getting accommodation to be recruited just because of my identity? Why did I have to be the candidate that is most unlikely to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) just because of my identity? Why do I have to fear not getting accommodation to be recruited just because of my identity? Why did I have to be the candidate that is most unlikely to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) just because of my identity? Why do I have to fear not getting accommodation to be recruited just because of my identity? Why did I have to be the candidate that is most unlikely to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) just because of my identity? Why do I have to fear not getting accommodation to be recruited just because of my identity? Why did I have to be the candidate that is most unlikely to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) just because of my identity? Why do I have to fear not getting accommodation to be recruited just because of my identity? Why did I have to be the candidate that is most unlikely to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) just because of my identity? Why do I have to fear not getting accommodation to be recruited just because of my identity? Why did I have to be the candidate that is most unlikely to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) just because of my identity? Why do I have to fear not getting accommodation to be recruited just because of my identity? Why did I have to be the candidate that is most unlikely to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) just because of my identity? Why do I have to fear not getting accommodation to be recruited just because of my identity? Why did I have to be the candidate that is most unlikely to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) just because of my identity? Why do I have to fear not getting accommodation to be recruited just because of my identity? Why did I have to be the candidate that is most unlikely to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) just because of my identity? Why do I have to fear not getting accommodation to be recruited just because of my identity? Why did I have to be the candidate that is most unlikely to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) just because of my identity? Why do I have to fear not getting accommodation to be recruited just because of my identity? Why did I have to be the candidate that is most unlikely to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) just because of my identity? Why do I have to fear not getting accommodation to be recruited just because of my identity? Why did I have to be the candidate that is most unlikely to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) just because of my identity? Why do I have to fear not getting accommodation to be recruited just because of my identity? Why did I have to be the candidate that is most unlikely to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) just because of my identity? Why do I have to fear not getting accommodation to be recruited just because of my identity? Why did I have to be the candidate that is most unlikely to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) just because of my identity? Why do I have to fear not getting accommodation to be recruited just because of my identity? Why did I have to be the candidate that is most unlikely to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) just because of my identity? Why do I have to fear not getting accommodation to be recruited just because of my identity? Why did I have to be the candidate that is most unlikely to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) just because of my identity? Why do I have to fear not getting accommodation to be recruited just because of my identity? Why did I have to be the candidate that is most unlikely to succeed in life (both professionally and personally) just because of my identity? Why do I have to fear not getting accommodation to be recruited just because of my identity?

These questions led me to conclude that not just me but women like me with similar identities have to go through this every day. I knew I could either keep wondering about where it all went wrong or take the first step in bringing a change and making everyone feel included.

That’s when I took inspiration from seeing everything in life with an empathetic lens, I wouldn’t lie, things were not always rosy, but it is creating the impact I always longed for. I’m also creating a professional resource booklet to work towards my mission of creating increased accessible professional development resources for underrepresented communities. This is my way of resisting. Resisting the discrimination, racism, daily microaggressions and non-accessibility to resources.

Dr Ruha, in her form of resistance, developed an organisation from scratch, giving her blood and sweat for the professional development of Indian Muslim Women, which to date has impacted thousands of lives and will impact many more in the coming days. She used evidence and a scientific facts-based approach to bring the issue of underrepresentation to the table.

Led By Foundation is also leading their resistance by adapting a holistic model of development, such as seeking policy changes, motivating communities to create a safe and encouraging space for each other and finally becoming the change you desire on an individual level.

As Ruha pointed out during the interview, it is vital to have a scientific, evidence-based approach to substantiate the opportunity gap the community is facing. Taking inspiration from her approach for my project, I use surveys and a participant observation approach (a method used by anthropologists during fieldwork) while collecting data for a policy gap analysis report I created on the Indian Handicrafts Sector. Using an evidence-based approach is crucial while working on lobbying the policy makers (especially when there is a lack of data and enough research done on this topic) to look into an issue an individual or a group of people is working on; here for me to bring notice to the problems artisans, especially marginalised women artisans have to face on a daily basis because of the unorganised nature of the Indian handicrafts sector.

My larger host community daily resists the fast fashion that exploits them, big corporations that undermine them and an archaic and patriarchal society that limits them. They constantly strive to up-skill, seek knowledge and help each other in building themselves through advocacy to build a future and contribute to the larger policy change they envision for themselves and the sector.

Looking at Dr Ruha’s work, my leadership project, my work at my host organisation, efforts of my host community and impact created by my co-fellows to build an equitable society, one thing that stands out is the remarkable communalities and intersections that result across each of our respective work and our shared vision for an equitable world.

If this is not pure intersectional yet inspiring resistance, then what is?! Changemakers paving a collective way!

Being a changemaker isn’t easy; it mainly consists of breaking cycles of regressive practices that people you feel close to blindly believe in, standing up against the power dynamics that exist and taking the lonely yet fulfilling road towards creating a change while touching lives.

Dr Ruha and my host community strongly believe that we all are changemakers; if we fight socio-cultural barriers in any way we can, we’ve become the saviour we’ve been searching for all our life! And I feel there is nothing more accurate than this.

Dr Ruha, as a changemaker, is someone I look up to; her gift and passion for making opportunities accessible for women like us paved the way for me to work towards the same. And her creating such an opportunity for someone like me through her organisation’s accelerator program motivated me to strive to do something similar to make this reach more people, especially the women around me.
Just like Ruha paved the way for me, my achievements through Led By and American India Foundation paved the way for women in my life to access such opportunities, and I believe they'll continue to do the same. This movement has high potential to continue since all the beneficiaries here look forward to giving what we receive.

While I continue to work on my leadership project to make professional development resources more accessible, Dr Ruha work towards creating an enormous impact by being the founder of an incubator organisation for the professional development of the minority women, and my host communities work towards facilitating empowerment through advocacy and capacity building, let us hope that more such individuals will follow and become contributors for placing an equal value for every human beings life and experiences!

With that, I believe we're collectively paving the way as changemakers through our contributions to creating a comfortable bridge for the upcoming generation of women to make their walk easier and smoother!

Lastly, here is to honour our experiences, ongoing struggle for inclusivity and never-ending work towards the upliftment of the underrepresented!

Note: Throughout our interview, Dr Ruha emphasised the importance of mentoring, especially for the underrepresented communities - through this interview, she has offered to help out anyone, especially women from underrepresented communities, that reach out to her regarding career and professional guidance. Her email ID is: ruha@ledby.org

GOOD LUCK WITH CHASING YOUR DREAMS!
What does it take to bring about change?: Discussing ways of battling HIV/AIDS in India with Ms. Mona Balani

- Aishani Jaiswal
  AIF Banyan Impact Fellow 2021-22
I have had a bit of an oddball upbringing within the two halves of my life. I was born into a loving family in Nagpur where I was literally worshipped by my father who used to touch my feet every morning before I left for school. My father was a stockbroker and my mother occasionally took up teaching positions. Our lives were absolutely destroyed by the 2008 global financial crisis as the stocks plummeted, disrupting the status of all of my family savings. We had to move my grandmother’s place in Siliguri which I still call my home to this day. Things turned sour between my parents leading to their separation soon after our move. My father had become increasingly more violent with my mother leading her to perhaps take the bravest decision I have ever seen anyone take. Little did we know that life would only get worse from that point on as our family became plagued with unnatural deaths. In 2011, mental health was not something we talked about as much and we failed to notice warning signs displayed by Dad. He died by suicide just a few weeks before my 12th birthday.

Trouble did not end for my mother and I, as she continued to face the wrath of patriarchal setups within our community and was regularly harassed by my paternal family. But this is when I started to realise the strength it took for her to raise me with her often very limited income. She faced an incredible amount of discrimination, Mona continued to rise through the ranks in HIV care and eventually trained hundreds of HIV/AIDS service providers. She puts a particular focus on women with HIV as she herself saw the double discrimination that is faced by HIV-positive women. Mona is an exemplary role model for those who have used not only their position but also their identity to bring a positive and long-lasting change to their surroundings.

The Banyan Impact Fellowship became a catalyst for me to test my mettle and my commitment to providing services to people who have been historically marginalised. I was placed at SAATHI (Solidarity and Action Against the HIV Infection in India), a more I have spent the last 10 months of my life, building and refining training modules for HIV/AIDS care providers. It is here that I witnessed the sincere dedication of the men and women who, in the face of societal stigmatisation that existed within every sphere of her life. She found herself getting curious about other PLHIV (people living with HIV) in her home state of Rajasthan and how they were faring against the disease. She soon began working as a peer counselor in the state and discovered a world of people living with HIV (NCPH) and has been working tirelessly in the field of HIV/AIDS care for over 22 years. She is leading HIV/AIDS programmes in 280 districts across India with thousands of people now connected to the services. We sat down and had a conversation about her experience as a development sector professional and her position in it as someone who has experienced the worst kinds of trauma in her personal life.

Positionality and identity: My struggles as a child continue to affect me to this day as I still have trouble handling my well-being and well-being. A lot of events since then have solidified my beliefs in serving the community. As a student of Political Science at the University of Delhi, I witnessed people from all backgrounds seeking an education in the same class. For the first time in my life, I was confronted with my own privilege as a Hindu, upper-caste female with no privilege as a Hindu, upper-caste female with no. For the first time in my life, I was confronted with my own privilege as a Hindu, upper-caste female with no. For the first time in my life, I was confronted with my own privilege as a Hindu, upper-caste female with no. For the first time in my life, I was confronted with my own privilege as a Hindu, upper-caste female with no. For the first time in my life, I was confronted with my own privilege as a Hindu, upper-caste female with no. For the first time in my life, I was confronted with my own privilege as a Hindu, upper-caste female with no.
I found myself rather out of place within these conversations because I felt like I was trying to relate to a struggle that was very different from mine. I struggled to find my position and develop a stance within the work that I had taken on without encroaching on a space meant for someone with lived experiences of HIV and AIDS. It was then that I began having conversations with members of the communities I wanted to serve and with employees in SAATHII. I realised that I was letting my own inhibitions get in the way of the work and was getting too caught up with my own position. I questioned my own knowledge of the issue and what gives me the right to have a say in the matter. A changemaker does not always need to be someone with a troubled past, but simply have the resilience and willingness to use that momentum to propel themselves forward in the cause. I believe that in this case, empathy and education are of utmost importance. I tried to read everything I could find on HIV/AIDS in India and the struggles of the people who are most affected by it. It is important that changemakers resist the barriers of societal practices and unlearn behaviours that enable top-down approaches to development.

An interesting point Mona touched upon in my engagement with her, was the stigmatisation of the self. In her earlier days, she was hesitant in disclosing her diagnosis and tried to live a very typical life. With time, she was able to truly be herself which is now not only benefitting her but also the communities she is serving. The hesitation to truly embody our beliefs is the way forward to approaching development.

The willingness to unlearn practices from societal norms so that one can critically think for themselves is perhaps the only way a development sector professional can move their cause forward. I believe that when we can actualize our own voices and open doors for the target communities themselves to voice their opinions, we can bring true and meaningful change to the world at large. When I asked Mona about some of the positive takeaways from this field, she responded saying that, “the young people of this country are going to bring about diametrical change to the way we approach policy”. She believes that this new brigade of sensitive yet cautiously optimistic ‘social justice warriors’ have a reactionary approach to bringing about change. When this is coupled with the patience and tolerance of the older generation, we might just see radical change in the country.
11K Km & Counting: In conversation with my alternative self, Shubham Dharmsktu

- Manoj Das
AIF Banyan Impact Fellow 2021-22

Nurturing mother Earth through afforestation
11K KM & COUNTING

While working on tackling climate change as a Banyan Impact Fellow in the American India Foundation, I realized that this humanitarian crisis cannot be solved with mere technical approaches until we address its root cause through behavioral changes. In a society driven by mindless consumption, we need role models who can inspire us to lead a happy and abundant life with minimum resources. Here in this blog, I am sharing the story of one such role model who has inspired millions including myself to embark on the journey of sustainability.

My entire childhood was spent in the lap of nature, as the village I was born in is nestled between the Bay of Bengal on one side and dense forests on the other. Because of a secure, happy and abundant childhood in my village, I subconsciously throughout my life, I have either looked for similar places to stay in or in my limited capacity tried making different places as green and peaceful as my village. But one thing that I lacked in the first half of my life was the exposure to different perspectives, cultures and lifestyles, and perhaps that is one of the reasons why I travel extensively today to make up for what I had missed while growing up.

At the Shauka tribe of the Johar valley, Pithoragarh, I found someone with the same level of care for nature, love for the mountains and craze for traveling, an alternative self of mine so to speak, whom I chose to interview for this publication, “Shubham Dharmsktu”, a recipient of the “We Are Together” Award for his contribution in rescuing 1500 foreigners stranded during the lockdown and helping 250 social work and decided to pursue it systematically.

A graduate from the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, Shubham exchanged the corporate lifestyle to help the disadvantaged sections through social work. He strongly believes that this is the best time to tackle pressing issues such as climate change, poverty, women safety, since this is the first time in human history where the willingness to create change can be complemented with the necessary technology and training to actually create change.

In my host organization, I tried to contribute to as many activities at my host organization as I could, my primary focus was on the conservation of the forests and creation of sustainable livelihoods for the indigenous people. After the announcement of Covid lockdown, when the migrant laborers returned to their homes, our primary responsibility was to find ways to generate income for them so that they can lead a normal life in the villages. However, like other non profits in India, resource crunch was the main impediment in the way of achieving the target. In this juncture, my experience in connecting dots came in handy. The tribals were given forest lands under the Forest Rights Act for farming but there was a need of turning these inferite hilly lands into fertile cultivable lands, and we were also working to give employment to the tribals. We planned to club these two needs and turn the crisis into an opportunity. Our volunteers had dialogues with the Block Development Officer and local sarpanches, and with their help, we converged the scheme of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 and covered the works like land leveling, watershed and irrigation under MGNREGA. Now, the tribal farmers got MGNREGA wages for working on their own farm lands which helped to increase their income manifold. Shubham’s story inspired me in various ways. For one, he had walked the talk through his independently led efforts, showcasing resilience and determination in every step to drive sustainable change. While covering the 5000 km distance between the north and south of India, Shubham stopped at more than 200 educational institutions and innumerable other locations to talk to people about the problem of pollution and climate change. He strongly believes that to inspire people, one needs to lead by example. Shubham covered his adventurous journey of 11,000 km with little equipment and bare minimum things, and he did not generate any plastic waste. I too have adopted a sustainable lifestyle and have experienced that people change more by examples than words.

Even though climate change is impacting all the regions on earth, mountains are more vulnerable to it as the rise in temperature affects high altitude regions at a faster rate. The unrestricted and irresponsible tourism is aggravating the crisis into an opportunity. Our volunteers had dialogues with the Block Development Officer and local sarpanches, and with their help, we converged the scheme of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 and covered the works like land leveling, watershed and irrigation under MGNREGA. Now, the tribal farmers got MGNREGA wages for working on their own farm lands which helped to increase their income manifold. Shubham’s story inspired me in various ways. For one, he had walked the talk through his independently led efforts, showcasing resilience and determination in every step to drive sustainable change. While covering the 5000 km distance between the north and south of India, Shubham stopped at more than 200 educational institutions and innumerable other locations to talk to people about the problem of pollution and climate change. He strongly believes that to inspire people, one needs to lead by example. Shubham covered his adventurous journey of 11,000 km with little equipment and bare minimum things, and he did not generate any plastic waste. I too have adopted a sustainable lifestyle and have experienced that people change more by examples than words.
the consequences of climate change in the mountains. To solve this problem, Shubham suggested that tourists should behave responsibly and create as little waste as possible in the mountains, especially as mountains don’t have proper waste management systems. Tourists should also contribute to the local economy by buying local and unpacked products and staying at local homes. He strongly believes that efforts to create behavior changes in tourists will go a long way in solving this problem and provide a much needed middle path for the sustainable development of the mountains.

We also face a similar dilemma at my host organization’s placement site. Home to many tribes, small mountain peaks, springs and forest sanctuaries, Kalahandi attracts thousands of tourists for tribal tourism. However, many irresponsible tourists hardly make any positive contribution in the lives of the tribal populations and cause more pollution, a menace that this ecologically sensitive zone is already struggling with. This is one of the reasons why my host locality has always given more emphasis to other sources of income generation than promoting tourism, and solutions implemented by Shubham and his organization can help regions like these in balancing the needs of economic development and ecological conservation.

Shubham is now focusing more on his social venture than traveling, and he is using his networks and rich experiences to help people in mitigating and adapting to the climate change in the Himalayas. The story of my friend, Shubham Dharmsktu, a global citizen, people lover and believer in humanity, has helped me every time I needed inspiration to bounce back and move forward in life.
From Barriers to Freedom:
In conversation with Gulafsha Ansari
on the concept of Women in Sports

- Naina Yadav
AIF Banyan Impact Fellow 2021-22
FROM BARRIERS TO FREEDOM

Born and brought up in Delhi, I, Naina Yadav come from a family that migrated to the city from a small village called Daundpur in Uttar Pradesh in the early 1990s for better education and unemployment rates. I am the first-generation school student, the first girl in my family to relocate to another city for a job, and the first girl to win a scholarship for a leadership program abroad. I have had to break down barriers that many young girls face in order to pursue my life goals. Being passionate about sports and bringing change to the communities, I see myself as a social worker, working for the upliftment of society.

I was 14 when I started attending a sports and life skills program in my community organised by an NGO. That was back in 2012 when I was in the 10th standard. I really enjoyed being there. I was getting to play sports, it was a safe space so my parents didn’t mind, I was getting physically stronger, and apart from that, I was getting to know a lot of new things through life skills that I wouldn’t have otherwise.

The NGO has played a significant role in my life and opened up many pathways for me. After I completed my 12th grade, I started doing an internship in the same sector in my community and eventually trained many girls and supported them to rise above the community’s narrow-mindedness.

This was the first time when I realised that I want to work in the development sector, especially with organisations that focus on adolescents. Playing sports and working at Naz during my adolescent years have shaped my worldview and my career pathway in the development sector. My love of sports has also led me to some of my closest friends and mentors. After spending close to a decade with that organisation and my own personal experiences of how sport has changed my life as a young woman, I am certain that I want to continue working in the development sector, focusing closely on issues that impact girls and young women.

From that time to till now I have been in the same sector in different capacities but with the same purpose of weaving stories and creating impact, through the use of data and numbers.

Positionality and identity:
One such woman I met recently with whom I could really connect with on grounds of similar vision and mission in mind is Gulafsha Ansari.

Gulafsha Ansari, played FIFA 2010, in South Africa for the Football For Hope (Football Project for the disadvantaged) tournament, in 2011, chosen as a member of the US-run football camp by Julie Foudy Sports Leadership Academy (FSLA). In 2016 participated in France for the Street Football World tournament. She also runs her own NGO “Dreaming in Slums” which aims to run a program for girls in slums to train them in life skills and football and support them to lead a future not only with dreams but with a greater vision.

Gulafsha grew up in the slums of Dharavi, Mumbai. She loved playing sports from the very beginning of her life. She was nine when she got introduced to Netball and learned it quite smoothly. Coming from a Muslim background and from a slum area where there are endless troubles that one has to go through, it wasn’t easy for her to play any kind of sport. As a result, she faced a lot of pressure and disapproval for going out of the house, wearing shorts, and playing a sport that was considered to be a man’s sport in her community. Though in between all of this, her parents saw her talent and interest and refused to be bogged down by the community’s narrow-mindedness.

It was in 2011 when she participated in a leadership camp that was organised by the International Olympic Committee. The camp was for young girls from under-developed communities who had an opportunity to run a project that used one’s skill as athletes to make a difference in their community. That’s when she remembered those girls in her community who used to see her every time she stepped out of her house to go and play. A few years of football had opened her up so much, and she wanted that for the other girls in her community.

When she got back to her community with hope for those girls, her friends, parents, and well-wishers told her that it takes courage and too much effort to challenge long-standing traditions and beliefs, but she was determined to open doors for girls who dream of a different life like her.

She believes in giving the girls an opportunity to become self-sufficient, educated, and independent. To create leaders and role models in the community to inspire more girls from urban-rural areas to convert their dreams into reality.

She says “I stepped out of my comfort zone because that is what I believed in, and doing so, I have proved that, given an opportunity, girls can play and excel at a sport like football and inspire thousands like me.”

With her vision of breaking the barriers not only for herself but also for supporting other girls in her community, she has continued her work in the slums of Mumbai and eventually trained many girls and supported them to rise as leaders and role models.

Resistance and work: Alternative initiative
I come from a community where young girls and women are denied basic rights such as education, access to safe spaces, freedom of movement, access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, the right to work, the right to play, and the right to say no, and many more.

I have seen many girls getting married off at a very young age in my own community. They were not given any
play and her parents being supportive added more joy but the minute she had to step out of her threshold, she used to deal with the neighbourhood looking at her like she is doing a crime. On the other hand, she could see how the other girls in her community also wanted to play and go out like her but they were not allowed to do so and the only future that they had was to get married.

Within my work at Milaan, I was assigned to the Girl Icon Program that takes place when girls transition from adolescence into young adulthood, a critical life stage as post-secondary education, marriage, and employment prospects are considered and questioned. The Girl Icon Program aims to support adolescent girls with the necessary tools to follow their aspirations and provides a safe space for them to practice their newfound skills. I was able to use my learnings and experience to do justice with the work that they are doing. I got the opportunity to share my thoughts with them on the program which is being implemented in states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Karnataka. This was my first time when I worked with an organisation who works in rural areas and my experience working in rural-urban areas appeared to pale in comparison, since the lives of girls in rural areas are far more tough, risky, and hard. Despite this, I attempted to make the most of my fellowship experience by learning as much as I could from the organisation and its personnel. I had the privilege of focusing on capturing the impact of the program and visualizing it for the rest of the world, developing progress reports and amplifying courageous voices, examining the gaps, and developing a narrative backed by facts and numbers. This brings me great joy that I was able to relate to the work that Milaan is doing. The voices of girls that I heard, as well as the changes that they experienced in themselves over time, made me believe that there are many more girls who are able to rise and shine with the support of organisations like Milaan.

While talking to Gulafsha we discussed how difficult it is to access the right to choose coupled with the agency to determine our own future. Coming from a community where choices for girls are limited, the ability to determine how their lives will be is something they do not get to decide, it is pre-decided for them. The formula is simple; school, maybe college followed by a job for a few years, and in some cases, not even that! then they are married without being asked for their choices. In our community, this idea of “allowing” girls freedom is fragile and is easily snatched away.

A large part of why we are drawn to the work that we do in the development sector is so that more girls and women may grow up to have access to the freedoms and be able to dream of a future that they choose for themselves and not one that is chosen for them.
RURAL INDIA SUPPORTING TRUST

The Rural India Supporting Trust (RIST) was established in 2007 as a family-based grant-making organization. RIST’s goal is to assist in alleviating poverty and improving the quality of life for communities in India. RIST partners with value aligned, publicly supported organizations to achieve its goal. Since 2017, RIST and the AIF’s Fellowship program have partnered to enhance the capacity and the impact of India’s social sector through the placement of knowledgeable Fellows who can impart specialized skills, expertise, and best practices to Indian social service sector organizations. From 2017 - 2019 the RIST supported the AIF Fellowship program and due to its generous support, we have deployed Fellows to under-served regions of India annually. Due to the U.S.-India cross-cultural nature of this project, RIST and AIF are assisting in creating a cohesive ecosystem of understanding between these two countries. The Fellows who participate are on their way to becoming the global leaders of tomorrow. In order to create a higher level of program impact, an “eleventh month of service” was added to the existing 10-month program model. This is an opportunity for recently returned Fellows to use this extended program time to strengthen the Alumni network, enhance the impact of the Fellowship program, create innovative program practices, help train the incoming cohort, and engage the broader public. In the second phase of the RIST AIF partnership, RIST has generously supported Fellows from 2019 - 2021. In the third phase, we are excited about our renewed partnership with them for the next 5 years. During the last two pandemic-stricken program cycles, RIST generously agreed to support an all-Indian cohort of Fellows and assisted the AIF Fellowship in establishing the critical infrastructure needed to run a successful hybrid program. RIST’s contributions have enabled the AIF Fellowship in increasing accessibility for persons with disabilities and advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in all program practices. As we now head into the third decade of our existence and journey of creating scalable impact under the renewed avatar of our program, the Banyan Impact Fellowship, we couldn’t be happier to have the continued support of RIST in our pursuit of creating a socially just World.

LATA KRISHNAN AND AJAY SHAH

We are grateful to Lata Krishnan and Ajay Shah for providing long-term support to the AIF Fellowship program. On March 14th, 2021, they announced the largest gift to AIF, a $5 million gift to the Fellowship program. Building on the legacy created over 20 years, the gift carries a bold vision for the future. Lata Krishnan’s and Jay Shah’s historic gift ushers the Fellowship program into a decade of action, focusing on accelerating impact and supercharging ideas to solutions. Under the new avatar of the AIF Banyan Impact Fellowship, the next phase of the program which has already begun will invest in a cross-generational force of change makers building an equitable and sustainable world. The new name embodies this promise: the Banyan tree is a symbol of strength, resilience, and interconnectedness. It’s a powerful metaphor for mobilizing a collective force towards sustainable impact. Lata Krishnan is the Co-Founder and former President of AIF, and serves as Co-Chair of AIF’s Board of Directors. Ajay Shah serves as Co-Chair of the AIF Fellowship program. Both are award-winning technology entrepreneurs, start-up investors, and engaged philanthropists, passionate about AIF’s mission. We are immensely grateful to Lata Krishnan, Ajay Shah, and the Krishnan Shah Family Foundation, for their leadership, vision and ongoing support.