2021-22
YEARBOOK
ABOUT THE AMERICAN INDIA FOUNDATION

The American India Foundation (AIF) is committed to improving the lives of India’s underprivileged, with a special focus on women, children, and youth. AIF does this through high impact interventions in education, health, and livelihoods, because poverty is multidimensional. AIF’s unique value proposition is its broad engagement between communities, civil society, and expertise thereby building a lasting bridge between the United States and India.

Working closely with local communities, AIF develops and tests innovative solutions in partnership with NGOs and Governments to create and scale sustainable impact. Founded in 2001, at the initiative of President Bill Clinton following a suggestion from Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee, AIF has impacted the lives of 12.9 million of India’s poor since then. With offices in New York, California and Delhi NCR, twelve chapters across the U.S., AIF is transforming lives across 35 States and Union Territories of India while addressing issues in the field of education, health, livelihoods, and nurturing the next generation of leaders committed to impactful change. Learn more at www.aif.org

CONTRIBUTORS

Chandni Wadhwani, Program Head, The Banyan Impact Fellowship
Dr. Bjørn Technau, Program Manager, The Banyan Impact Fellowship
Ankita Bish, Program Associate, The Banyan Impact Fellowship
Riddhi Jain, Intern, The Banyan Impact Fellowship
Shreya Ralli, Director, Communications and Advocacy

DESIGNED AND DEVELOPED BY

Prince Vishwakarma
The American India Foundation’s Fellowship Program is a distinguished program with a long and rich tradition, and today we are very excited to celebrate the graduation of its latest cohort in 2022. In the program’s history of 21 years, this group of 11 young ambitious Fellows is the first one to graduate under the program’s new name: The Banyan Impact Fellowship.

What started mainly as a disaster relief program following the Gujarat Earthquake in 2001 has developed into a renowned Fellowship program over the years, expanding in scope and fostering future generations of social change makers and international collaboration between the U.S. and India. We are proud to look back at the great success story of this program, building bridges between the U.S. and India and bringing positive change through civil society support and service at the grassroots level in India. The service-leadership model of our Fellowship Program is unique, and our Fellows have served communities all over India, covering 25 states and 218 host organizations over time. But the impact of their work goes way beyond their 10 months of service. Our Fellows have remained close to AIF and they have joined our alumni network, supporting AIF’s mission and course and acting as mentors to the new Fellows. What is more, most of our Fellows have continued in a career of service or in the development sector, and many of them have founded their own non-profits.

Our world has changed drastically over the years, and our Fellowship Program has developed and adjusted accordingly. For instance, the scope of thematic areas has been expanded considerably, and our Fellows now cover a whole range of different topics that go beyond our traditional focus on livelihoods, public health, and education. Being aware that all of these development areas intersect and influence each other, we have added new partnerships and Fellowship projects under close consideration of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, including projects on climate justice, nature conservation, environment protection, LGBTQI rights, gender equality, peace-building, and partnerships for the goals. We are excited to include these new interrelated areas in our program and thus expand our Fellows’ contribution to a better and sustainable future. And this is also part of what our new avatar, the Banyan tree, stands for: It symbolizes interconnectedness and strength; a cross-generational force toward sustainable impact. Just as the Banyan tree is known for growing roots from its branches that will eventually become trees of their own, our Fellows foster new generations of social change makers and create an ecosystem of mutual support to amplify each other’s impact.

This first Banyan Impact cohort is the third cohort of Fellows impacted by COVID-19. When the pandemic hit the world in early 2020, we had to react quickly to ensure the safety of our Fellows. We eventually implemented a hybrid model for our program where Fellows served both virtually and in person, depending on the safety situation of the evolving pandemic. Due to travel restrictions, we had to pause the program for American Fellows coming to India and decided for an all Indian cohort in the years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022. Thanks to the amazing support from our donors, the Krishnan Shah Family Foundation (KSFF) and the Rural India Support Trust (RIST), we were able to keep our Fellowship Program running and even add new elements to it.

Photo Credit: American India Foundation
We want to express our deepest gratitude to this generous community of American Fellows, alumni, and partners for providing opportunities to our Fellows through their organizations for doing tremendous work on the ground and to our funders for their generous support! The most exciting addition to our program is our new collaboration with Atlas Corps that allows us to expand the Fellowship and include service in the United States, as well, making the Fellowship a truly binational program going forward.

Looking at this current cohort, we could not be more proud of their accomplishments and contributions, having made the launch of our newly named program, the Banyan Impact Fellowship, a huge success. This year has not been an easy one, full of challenges and with a continued pandemic. This year has not been an easy one, full of challenges and with a continued pandemic. Due to travel restrictions, the first batch affected by the pandemic was the 2019-2020 cohort that had to interrupt their in-person service and transitioned to a virtual mode. However, the Fellowship program has expanded accordingly: Today, our Fellows are engaged in a variety of different topics including climate justice, conservation, waste management, health education, and minority rights, always keeping abreast of new developments and the most pressing challenges of our time, such as those formulated in the United Nations Sustainability Development Goals of the Agenda 2030. The unexpected occurrence of COVID-19 has had severe consequences for our Fellows over the past few years. The first batch affected by the pandemic was the 2019-2020 cohort that had to interrupt their in-person service and transitioned to a virtual mode. However, the Fellowship program was able to quickly adapt and implement a hybrid mode of service that allowed for a continuation of the program, albeit at reduced capacity. Due to travel restrictions, the last two cohorts, 2020-2021 and the current one, could not include American Fellows traveling to India; however, thanks to our active Alumni network, the U.S.-India change could still be maintained, and former American Fellows served as mentors to the current Fellows, sharing experiences online and building up the binational dialogue and bridge-building between the U.S. and India.

We believe that the program’s new name is a perfect symbol of its core and what is dear to our hearts. The Banyan tree stands for the resilience and strength of our Fellows as well as the impact they have on the communities they serve, spreading hope and positive change and paving the way for future leaders and social justice. Novel challenges such as climate change and the ongoing pandemic are far from easy to tackle, and it needs young bright minds like our Fellows to face these challenges through innovative approaches and international collaboration. The thematic scope of the Fellowship program has expanded accordingly: Today, our Fellows are engaged in a variety of different topics including climate justice, conservation, waste management, health education, and minority rights, always keeping abreast of new developments and the most pressing challenges of our time, such as those formulated in the United Nations Sustainability Development Goals of the Agenda 2030.

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We want to thank everyone involved for making this unique program possible: to our funding partners for their generous support and contribution to fostering the next generation of social entrepreneurs; to our partners and friends for promoting the Fellowship program and spreading its vision; to the host organizations for doing tremendous work on the ground and for providing opportunities to our Fellows through their hands-on involvement in the field; and of course, to our Fellows for their impressive and transformative work in their
Heartiest congratulations, class of 2021-22 good luck for your future!

A NOTE FROM THE FELLOWSHIP TEAM

What started in December 2021 is no less than a fun-filled journey! We were super enthusiastic to welcome our first ever batch of The Banyan Impact Fellowship which will always be remarkable in many ways. E-meeting all the Fellows for the first time during our virtual Orientation gave us hope and positive vibes about all the good things that this batch will achieve! We took immense pride in selecting diverse and passionate Fellows like each one that comprises our current class who were ready to serve during the pandemic-stricken times. The collaboration, fervency and unity that you have established deserve appreciation. This class has always been accommodating during all the engagements including Fellowship conferences and your active participation has given us many opportunities to learn from you. The safe space that you created for your peers and for the Fellowship team has been exemplary. Each one of you has proved to be a powerful warrior irrespective of the challenges that you faced. We must say that this cohort has braved impediments like serving mostly in a virtual capacity despite which they came together as a collective to drive change meaningfully and maintain the program’s rich legacy. Fellows, you have established a strong legacy of tackling obstacles, a legacy of being an epitome of a support system and a legacy of finding a glimmer of positivity during stringent times. This legacy as a cohort will be an impulse for the batches to come. Your substantial contribution towards your host organization, key beneficiaries that you have impacted and the cohort at large has accentuated a positive mark in the social development sector. We thank you for your tireless efforts towards supporting and uplifting your local communities and doing your bit in furthering our collective mission of social justice.

It has been an honor for the Fellowship team to support and mentor you through your Fellowship journey. We must express that you have been an outstanding and valiant batch. We hope you utilize the learnings from the Fellowship in your career and continue to shape your journey wherever you go next. Being the first ever Banyan Impact Fellowship class, you have written history and we hope that you will continue to inspire future Fellows and generations to come.

Heartiest congratulations, class of 2021-22
good luck for your future!

Thank you!

Lata Krishnan
Co-Chair, AIF Board of Directors

Ajay Shah
Co-Chair, AIF Fellowship Program

various projects, establishing relationships within their host communities and building bridges between India and the U.S. Your service and commitment cannot be appreciated enough, and we want to thank and congratulate you and wish you all the best. You are an important part of the AIF Family and you will now enter our strong network of Fellowship Alumni, co-creating a better future and spreading your roots just like the Banyan tree.

Thank you!

Lata Krishnan
Co-Chair, AIF Board of Directors

Ajay Shah
Co-Chair, AIF Fellowship Program

Heartiest congratulations, class of 2021-22
good luck for your future!
The AIF Banyan Impact Fellowship for Service in India (AIF) has been shaping the next generation of leaders committed to positive social change while strengthening civil society in both the U.S. and India and identifying innovative solutions to tackle the most pressing challenges we face.

What started in 2001 as the AIF Service Corps for young Americans to work in India on disaster relief and long-term rehabilitation grew in its impact and footprint. In 2009 the program was renamed the AIF William J. Clinton Fellowship for Service in India in recognition of the former President’s role in creating AIF. As the program grew, it also took another large step in 2011 to include cohorts from both the US and India working in tandem to create a binational force for good. The tenets that helped form AIF, the deep ties between these nations, are what underpin the Fellowship: US-India civic diplomacy to create a “living bridge” and a lasting partnership for positive change.

Over the decades, this program has evolved as an immersive bi-national volunteer service program with immense strategic importance in the US-India corridor. By facilitating exchange and collaboration between young professionals from India and the US, the program aims to shape the next generation of leaders committed to positive and sustainable change and create a lasting US-India relationship by broadening the existing constituency of future leaders, civil society and other stakeholders.

In March 2021, AIF seized the moment to rebrand the program as ‘The Banyan Impact Fellowship’ to reflect the organizational mission, vision, and values moving into the third decade of action. The Fellowship Program to send American and Indian civil society organizations to the US for capacity building and leadership development, thereby furthering the program’s mission of creating lasting ties between India and the US. What was birthed in the form of the Banyan Impact Fellowship last year has now considerably built on its past legacy and has evolved into a full-fledged binational program. We envision the upcoming decade to be that of amplified impact with our passionate Fellows taking challenges head on and striving collectively towards creating a socially just and sustainable world in tune with current realities that we are faced with. As we continue to expand the scope of our Fellowship Program to accelerate impact, we invite you to Follow this journey into our third decade and witness our life affirming work. Learn more about our Fellowship Program at https://aif.org/Fellowship/
AIF Fellow Prakriti Pandia working in the thematic area of Education and Gender during her field work.
Design Thinking Session conducted by Nikhil Mahan (Alumni)

Group Activity conducted by Madhu (facilitator)

Guest Speaker Session by Anjali Gopalan from The Naz Foundation

Guest Speaker Session by Beena Pallical, General Secretary NCDHR

Engaging Activity conducted by Nilisha (facilitator)

Fun Activity conducted for Fellows

Virtual visit to Aga Khan Foundation

Midpoint Session with Urvashi Sahni

Fun Session with AIF Team

Midpoint Session with Barefoot College International

Panel discussion with Alumni

Midpoint Session with Manish Joshi

Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (MEL) Session by the MEL Team

Midpoint Session with Donald Swen

River of Life Session
It’s been a pleasure working with Prakriti Chawla and the AIF Team. With her Human Centered Design Approach, Prakriti Chawla has been able to add great value to FM’s digital platform that has helped Sahelis and last mile rural customers. Her eye for detail, commitment and her passion to bring impact at the grassroot level has been a great alignment with FM’s working philosophy. In spite of working remotely, Prakriti has been able to build great relationships with the team and Sahelis and her designs and ideas are all data driven. Our sincere gratitude to the entire AIF Team for their support in these difficult times. We certainly look forward to hosting more Fellows in the years to come.

-Amrit Mohan, CXO, Frontier Markets
Supervisor of Prakriti Chawla
Amana is a gender equity advocate and a visionary for an empathy-driven world. Her area of interest is holistic socio-economic development. She works tirelessly to improve accessibility and inclusion for minority communities. She thrives in intercultural and mutual learning environments, which she had the opportunity to experience throughout her Fellowship.

“I educated women artisans about their workplace rights and the principles that are in place to protect them while ensuring a quality standard of work.”

Prior to the Banyan Impact Fellowship, I already had experiences in various thematic areas but had never realized how I could bring all of my experiences together and contribute to the growth of an organization. One of my main goals in applying for the Fellowship was to not limit myself to a specific area of work but rather to work holistically. I came here to learn and impart my knowledge, which I believe I have accomplished. Everything felt predestined, from identifying what I wanted to do through this Fellowship to the team matching me with the right project.

Through my project, I was engaged in many different areas, including women empowerment, poverty alleviation, sustainability, advocacy, capacity building, policy analysis, campaign ideation and execution, community engagement, as well as recruitment. Now I’m certain that I don’t want to limit myself to a specific field of expertise but rather work holistically and make use of all development avenues and be a part of the movement for equitable and sustainable growth. The Fellowship taught me how to apply my expertise in various contexts, which was a great learning experience. It helped me gain confidence in my ability to become a changemaker.

Now, I’m confident in my skills, but more importantly, I’m confident in my ability to thrive in any work environment that comes my way. As an aspiring social impact professional who, once again, does not want to be limited to a specific area of work but rather to work holistically. I came here to learn and impart my knowledge, which I believe I have accomplished. Everything felt predestined, from identifying what I wanted to do through this Fellowship to the team matching me with the right project.

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This was a transformative year of my life because...

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The Fellowship provided me with the opportunity to...

“Network with people around and beyond the development sector.”

“The most powerful thing the AIF Fellowship did for me was enhancing my leadership qualities.”

How did the pandemic shape your experience?

I believe the pandemic provided me with the best of both worlds. I completed half of the Fellowship online and the rest at my host organization.

The first part of the Fellowship taught me how to navigate challenges with technology as my best friend, and the second part taught me how to savor the day-to-day interactions and how they can positively contribute to not only my work but the work of everyone involved with the project.

Overall, I believe the pandemic gave me a taste of everything, and I’d like to remember it as a lesson that prepared me to work in any environment in the future.

My Fellowship experience during the pandemic made me a future-ready social impact professional.

What was your most rewarding professional experience?

I’ve always been an advocate for gender equity in the workplace, and I’ve always looked for ways to use advocacy to empower women and enable them to recognize their rights.

As part of my professional development field visit to a social enterprise of handicrafts set up under the Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative and Aga Khan Foundation, I had the opportunity to train women artisans about Fair Trade Principles, which specifically addressed the need for fair procedures, ensuring equal working conditions and subsequent trading/selling of products. I used advocacy to empower the women artisans while also assisting the enterprise’s management in brainstorming new ideas for implementing sustainability.

My greatest professional achievement has been to spread the word about Fair Trade and its principles outside of my larger host community.
Manoj is interested in helping vulnerable populations, particularly the tribals in mitigating and adapting to climate change. He is driven by his burning desire for creating an equitable and inclusive society. The AIF Fellowship has complemented his passion with required skills, experiences and knowledge to be a successful change maker.

"I got an opportunity to try my hands at as many things as I could and that made me look at development with an interdisciplinary perspective."

I have grown so much as a person, both personally and professionally. The things that I have learned about myself would have not been possible if it had not been for the Banyan Impact Fellowship. Personally, I became more empathetic, more self-aware and more accommodating. Working and staying with the indigenous people, who are arguably living the simplest lifestyle on the earth made me realize the power of simplicity. The grassroot leaders, with whom I met on a daily basis, ignited my passion to contribute to the lives of the marginalized populations of our society.

Professionally, working in a team with people from diverse backgrounds improved my interpersonal skills and broadened my worldviews. Seba Jagat works with a 360-degree approach, covering all the important thematic areas. In the beginning, I was a little apprehensive of coming to Kalahandi and setting out on this adventurous journey. But to embark on this journey in retrospect was the best decision of my life. Of course, it was not smooth, but it was worth it.

The Banyan Impact Fellowship gave me a much needed platform to utilize my skills and knowledge to contribute to the creation of an equitable and inclusive society for some of the most vulnerable communities including indigenous communities. My Fellowship started in a hybrid mode and I came to my host organization once the Omicron variant curve started flattening in the month of February. It was an evolving and self-exploring journey. Each day of my Fellowship came with an opportunity to learn something new about my field.

CONTRIBUTE TO THE CREATION OF AN EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETY

Journey

Partnership Story

Seba Jagat, my host organization, has played a significant role in uplifting Kalahandi from the most backward district of India in the 1980s to one of the most promising districts of India. However, because of the lack of digitization, its impacts were not grabbing as much attention as they should have. So, my first intervention at the organizational level was to digitize and popularize information and communication tools among the employees.

I worked on developing the website and creating social media handles of Seba Jagat, allowing the employees to regularly post the developments of their programs on social media. This helped us keep our stakeholders updated on our work, and it also served as an efficient marketing tool to increase our visibility.

At the community level, I could encourage the female members to participate in our programs by making changes in the sitting arrangements during the workshops and providing a safe space to them for expressing their views. I also worked on promoting profitable ecological farming which would help the marginal farmers and distressed migrant laborers as an alternative source of livelihood.
I learnt about the power of simplicity by staying with the people who are arguably living the simplest lifestyle on earth. This was a transformative year of my life because...

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The Fellowship provided me with the opportunity to...

Work with the indigenous people and utilize my experience and skills for the development of one of the most backward districts of India.

"The most powerful thing the AIF Fellowship did for me was complementing my passion of working for the marginalized sections with the required zeal and skillset."

How did the pandemic shape your experience?

After the commencement of our program, I started working virtually and tried understanding different aspects of my project in the host organization. The nature of my project required me to work with the communities in person, so I was one of the few Fellows who came to the host organization in the first couple of months after the induction. The infamous COVID-19 actually gave me a lot of opportunities to work on the issues of livelihood of vulnerable communities like migrant laborers, indigenous people and marginal farmers. This would have been more challenging before the pandemic due to their unavailability.

The pandemic, however, kept the Banyan Impact Fellowship team and Fellows from coming together for different programs of the Fellowship. But we ensured peer learning by keeping in touch with each other regularly through various online workshops, meetings and programs.

What was your most rewarding professional experience?

When COVID-19 hit, thousands of migrant laborers of Kalahandi returned to their villages and took to farming as their last resort for livelihood. But the lack of irrigation facilities and less profit in paddy made it tough for them to rely on agriculture. In this juncture, I found an opportunity to popularize the cultivation of climate resilient indigenous crops of the region. Together with the staff at Seba Jagat, I organized a number of workshops and cooking competitions to make people aware of the economic, environmental and social benefits of diversifying their existing crops.

Our efforts started showing results and the farmers in our communities started growing a variety of non-paddy crops like maize, sunflowers and summer vegetables in the summer cropping season. They have also taken oath to diversify their crops and adapt integrated farming in the upcoming monsoon cropping season.

My host organization’s works on the convergence of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee (MGNREGA) with the Forest Rights Act and my efforts to popularize diversification of farming helped increase the income level of the farmers. This led to many migrant laborers in our communities to not migrate back and to work for the prosperity of the region by making farming sustainable and profitable.
I got accepted into the Fellowship program right after my Masters. I was pursuing a Masters in Social Design from Ambedkar University, Delhi, after which I did a research project with Muskaan-PAEPID. Upon receiving the acceptance email, I was filled with joy but at the same time felt nervous about everything. I didn’t know who my co-fellows would be but I was looking forward to connecting with like-minded people. When we all met at the Orientation Conference, I was amazed at how diverse the cohort was and how accepting everyone was.

The next leg began with all of us joining our host organizations and then the third wave hit. For me, my work became fully remote with all the systems in place so that I was able to reach out to the stakeholders seamlessly. At this time, I learnt the importance of maintaining a healthy communication between me and the team at the host organization. My supervisor was great at helping me adapt to the work as well as the environment. Amrit ji gave me so much freedom in terms of doing my tasks and letting me explore new things. He involved me in a lot of partner meetings which helped me build a healthy work relationship with them.

When my designs went live on the app, I received calls from the team congratulating me and appreciating my work which made me feel on top of the world. I am excited to see what is in store for me in the future. I wish to keep on exploring the field, learning more about UX design and looking forward to how I can contribute to more projects with AIF and my host organization.

Initially, I was a little unsure about the scope of my work and how it would all fit into the larger vision of the organization. Through a lot of check-ins with my supervisor and a variety of tasks that I was given, I started feeling like a part of something bigger. I understood the social commerce model that Frontier Markets works on and how they work with rural women called Sahelis to enable them to become micro entrepreneurs. My work involved user experience design (UX) and creation of content and flows for the various digital platforms that Frontier Markets uses (WhatsApp, Saheli App, Customer Relationship Management / CRM).

One of the major projects that I worked on was designing a registration/sign-up module for new users recruited as Saral Jeevan Sahelis on the Saheli App and backend CRM website. This was a highly important project as Frontier Markets is scaling to new states and recruiting more Sahelis. To decrease the manual workload and increase the efficiency of the recruitment process, I designed the registration screens along with the tech team. The designs had to be easy to understand and involve minimal support from others to operate. With constant feedback from the team and a few Sahelis, we were able to finish it in three months. The registration module is now live on the Saheli App which is currently used by more than 12,000 Sahelis.

While my perspective on the development sector was deep, the Fellowship really opened my eyes to more spaces within it and how different organizations are working towards enriching the lives of underserved communities through various projects. It also helped me gain a better understanding of how development organizations function.

Journey

\[
\text{Journey} \\
\text{Partnership Story}
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Prakriti is a Social & UX Designer with a passion for equity and inclusion. She is an enthusiast for creative challenges and clay art. Through the Fellowship, she has found a loving community of people who enable her to be authentic while pushing herself to be better.
This was a transformative year of my life because...

I met some truly amazing people in the AIF cohort as well as my host organization who have inspired me through new ideas, ways of thinking and approaches to various social issues.

The Fellowship provided me with the opportunity to...

Gain important skills to become a better development professional and designer who is ready to create meaningful impact through digital transformation.

“The most powerful thing the AIF Fellowship did for me was enabling me to delve deeper into the development sector with a fresh perspective and honing important skills to move forward in my career.”

How did the pandemic shape your experience?

I was scheduled to go to my host organization in January after the Orientation Conference. Then the third wave of COVID hit, with cases rising to an all-time high. Omicron was the buzzword everywhere with lots of uncertainty around its fatality and other health implications. During this time, I had already adapted to working remotely as it was unclear as to how many weeks I would have to stay home. Even from the organization’s side, they had figured out all the systems to enable me to work remotely. As the lockdown eased and cases went down, my work continued remotely. This was also due to the fact that the team that I worked with directly was also not based in Jaipur and working remotely. For the last few weeks, I joined the Frontier Markets office in Jaipur just to close certain projects and interact more with the team in office.

What was your most rewarding professional experience?

The scope of the project has helped me widen my horizon and sharpen my UX design skills. The work that I was involved in has helped me understand the industry so much better. Frontier Markets has also given me the skills to collaborate with different partners on a project. Something that I cherish the most and that I am proud of is the fact that the designs made by me went live on the app and are now used by thousands of people across India. The registration module that I designed along with the team is up on the Saheli App and every new Saheli that joins Frontier Markets will go through it. It makes me feel proud to also be able to call myself a UX Designer after all the experience and learnings I have gained from this project.

My work varied from the start with a focus on UX design. One of the major projects that I worked on was creating the content and flows for the WhatsApp chatbot of Frontier Markets. They use this chatbot to communicate with Sahelis and rural customers. Another major project was the designing of the assistant bot within the Saheli App to help Sahelis operate the app better and assist those who are not too tech savvy. I was also involved in curriculum development for training of Sahelis on sales and marketing.
NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS BEING AN ECONOMIC MODEL OF REGENERATIVE RURAL COMMUNITIES

My Fellowship journey made me confident first, then I was questioning my understanding, and eventually I was growing and became confident again. There were multiple cycles of it. I came into the Fellowship with an understanding of what space I wanted to engage in. I did not know people in the non-profit sector and the jargon of it, I did not know what Social Emotional Learning is, I did not know that there is such a thing as forestry. I had no idea what native and invasive species are, and yet I thought I knew a lot. One of the life iterating experiences was a four-day workshop with about 30 individuals working in this space. Each one of them had an encyclopedic knowledge and experience in their field, and I sat there thinking, these are sort of the rooms you want to be in. Where you are, quite literally, the least experienced individual onboard, which was very different from the architectural circles I had “frequented” before. I have grown, as an individual, as a professional in the development sector and as a collaborator. The individuals that I have had an opportunity to connect with through my host organization will always keep invigorating me, and my zeal towards climate action and the individuals who I connected with through AIF will keep supporting me in the same.

My Fellowship project was in line with the larger goal of Alaap and served as proof of the concept of nature-based solutions being an economic model of regenerative rural communities. As an architect, I was able to bring a different perspective to the table which helped us shape our programs and define our steps in a more detailed manner. In the ongoing rewilding and regenerative agriculture project at Tarari, Uttarakhand, the existing on ground execution team was looking to build some infrastructure to help in rainwater and energy efficiency but they were using materials and techniques with a high global warming potential and not a favorable life cycle assessment. I was able to suggest quicker, more resource-efficient solutions, including contemporary takes on traditional water channeling methods and prefabricated structures with modern and more sustainable methods and systems to store water.

Simarjeet Nagpal
Livelihoods
Alaap
Uttarakhand

“I was able to suggest quicker, more resource-efficient solutions, including contemporary takes on traditional water channeling methods and prefabricated structures with modern and more sustainable methods and systems to store water.”

Simarjeet is an architect by profession and climate change activist by anxiety. Through the Fellowship, he found a synergy between his expertise and his ambition to tackle climate change actively and equitably. He graduates from the Fellowship as a content man who knows what impact he wants to create in the future.

**Journey**

My Fellowship project was in line with the larger goal of Alaap and served as proof of the concept of nature-based solutions being an economic model of regenerative rural communities. As an architect, I was able to bring a different perspective to the table which helped us shape our programs and define our steps in a more detailed manner. In the ongoing rewilding and regenerative agriculture project at Tarari, Uttarakhand, the existing on ground execution team was looking to build some infrastructure to help in rainwater and energy efficiency but they were using materials and techniques with a high global warming potential and not a favorable life cycle assessment. I was able to suggest quicker, more resource-efficient solutions, including contemporary takes on traditional water channeling methods and prefabricated structures with modern and more sustainable methods and systems to store water.

**Partnerhsip Story**

My Fellowship project was in line with the larger goal of Alaap and served as proof of the concept of nature-based solutions being an economic model of regenerative rural communities. As an architect, I was able to bring a different perspective to the table which helped us shape our programs and define our steps in a more detailed manner. In the ongoing rewilding and regenerative agriculture project at Tarari, Uttarakhand, the existing on ground execution team was looking to build some infrastructure to help in rainwater and energy efficiency but they were using materials and techniques with a high global warming potential and not a favorable life cycle assessment. I was able to suggest quicker, more resource-efficient solutions, including contemporary takes on traditional water channeling methods and prefabricated structures with modern and more sustainable methods and systems to store water.

**Strategic Innovation and Initiatives**

- Engaged with 9 village communities across three states of India
- Led a 5-day design workshop to reimagine eco tourism along with my two senior colleagues
- Interacted with 30 experts from across India working in regenerative space
I had an opportunity to interact with highly motivated individuals working in the climate change space and I was able to find my tribe so to speak. The journey has been exhilarating in terms of growing personally and professionally and I move on with even more vigor to work in the development sector than what I came in with.

This was a transformative year of my life because...

I had an opportunity to interact with highly motivated individuals working in the climate change space and I was able to find my tribe so to speak. The journey has been exhilarating in terms of growing personally and professionally and I move on with even more vigor to work in the development sector than what I came in with.

The Fellowship provided me with the opportunity to...

Connect, work and learn with professionals across the globe and leaders in the regeneration space in India.

“The most powerful thing the AIF Fellowship did for me was introducing me to the true rural India.”

Q & A

How did the pandemic shape your experience?

It was different. Due to the disruption, Alaap, my host organization was not able to continue implementation on ground, the period allowed them reorient themselves in a new way moving from primarily nature based solutions execution projects to planning, financing and implementing regenerative ecosystem solutions, and therefore my roles within the organization were also very different as compared to if I had been engaged with them in previous cycles.

What was your most rewarding professional experience?

During the first week of April 2022, I assisted my supervisor in running a 30-person systems design workshop to envision the future of regenerative tourism in the Himalayan foothills. I led numerous breakout groups throughout the week as we explored different facets of regenerative infrastructure (including water, soil, farmlands, forests, and energy systems, as well as the interplay of plants, animals, and humans). The knowledge I had gained about sustainability and regeneration, either through architectural education or on my own, all came into use.
Ms. Saisirisha Kavuri demonstrates the unwavering empathy and earnestness needed to successfully collaborate with Jaisalmer Merasi endeavoring to build community capacity. Withstanding the ongoing challenges presented by COVID and a remote Fellowship, she has built mutually respectful relationships with Merasi School teachers and staff, making a positive impact by building confidence, abilities, and techniques. Always ready to assist Lok Kala Sagar Sansthan-Folk Arts Rajasthan alliance, mentor Ankita Bisht, has guided our Fellow to foster professional growth.

As we look towards continuing this wonderful journey, the opportunity to strengthen the partnership with the entire AIF Team is deeply appreciated.

-Karen Lukas, Director, Folk Arts Rajasthan
Supervisor of Sai Sireesha Kavuri
The life of a developmental professional is like a roller coaster ride full of emotions. To be a good leader or to bring a change in others’ lives we have to put ourselves in someone else’s situation. This journey was an action-based journey influencing others with our actions rather than showing authority. I am proud to be a part of this most prestigious AIF Fellowship and to have worked with such a diverse team. Coming from the southern part of the country and working with the people of the Merasi community of Rajasthan and learning about their rich cultural heritage and the contribution they made in the field of music was really exciting and inspiring. This journey provided me with many opportunities to be a good leader by connecting me with people who intend to bring a positive impact on the communities they are working with. The network-building opportunity helped me to understand different perspectives people have on different social issues around the world and to narrow down my thoughts.

My journey as an AIF Fellow helped me to be non-judgmental and more empathetic towards vulnerable people. We all know that a pen is mightier than a sword, and the inspiring part of this journey was to be able to express and share stories of otherwise unheard people. This allowed me to spread the word about the Merasi community. With the support and encouragement of my Fellowship team and host organization, I was able to have an impact on the people, influencing and motivating them toward positive change.

Lok Kala Sagar Sansthan works for the well-being and development of the Merasi community of Jaisalmer, Rajasthan. Despite their long history and musical legacy, the people of the Merasi community are subjected to continuous discrimination in society. As an AIF Fellow, I was working with the Merasi School to improve the quality of education and to bring awareness to the Merasi community through education, helping them shape a better future for themselves. Through proper education, the Merasi students and community members become more aware of their rights, and this awareness does not only help the present generation to make the right decisions for the future but also provides a path for future generations to make the Merasi community the most sophisticated community of the region.

While working online, it is very difficult to get what we need to implement a project successfully, but the support and encouragement I received from both Lok Kala Sagar Sansthan and Folk Arts Rajasthan was very valuable and helped me to properly implement my project.
This was a transformative year of my life because...

I got connected with people who intend to bring positive change to their communities.

The Fellowship provided me with the opportunity to...

Influence and bring a positive impact on the lives of the Merasi community through education.

“The most powerful thing the AIF Fellowship did for me was connecting me with my host organization.”

Q & A

How did the pandemic shape your experience?

The pandemic has changed the overall working style and techniques of people working in different fields. For me as a development professional, this was the first time to work online with students and teachers. In the beginning, I found it very difficult to work with them remotely but the pandemic has changed the way we think and work. Working at the juncture of this pandemic helped me to invent and discover different techniques to connect with people using digital platforms. Overall, this experience helped me come out of my comfort zone and do something creative.

What was your most rewarding professional experience?

Coming from the southern part of the county and having a different language, culture and tradition that is entirely different from the people I work with were challenging. The intangible heritage and diversity of India and the warmth we receive from the people of this land are incredible. The Merasi community of Rajasthan is one such incredible community with a rich cultural heritage and a musical legacy that has been carried on for generations. Getting to know the people of the Merasi community and working with them and sharing an emotional bond with them was an achievement that I am most proud of as a part of this journey.
I lost my mother when I was very young. Then, my aunt got married and I was the only female left in the family. There were days when I worked through day and night to finish household work. It was a very difficult time in my life.

A 9th class Yuwa student shared this during a speech competition while sobbing in front of the entire school. Despite being a child, the fact that she was female burdened her with household chores and responsibilities. She spoke further about how a former Yuwa staff emotionally supported her through this difficult time and helped her continue her education.

She found a support system in Yuwa that helped her persevere or else she could have been in a very different situation. Jharkhand ranks among the worst in female literacy rate, human trafficking, and the ratio of teachers per government school in India. In addition, 6 out of 10 girls drop out of school and become child brides. I knew about these numbers and figures before I started working with Yuwa, but this story of the 9th grader had a deep impact on me. There are around 120 girls studying at Yuwa School and every girl has a story to share. I was able to “see” gender-based discrimination through someone else’s lived experience.

This experience strengthened my will to bring social change and gave me further clarity on why I follow this path. Additionally, this experience gave me broader insights into how development professionals can communicate the impact of their work. While it is important to present statistical data and figures, it is also crucial to emotionally connect with the audience. This can be done by first emphasizing the nature and scale of the problem briefly using illustrations and then sharing photos or testimonials to invoke an emotional reaction.

Yuwa aims to empower adolescent girls by providing them with employability skills and a support system. It runs various programs such as girls school, football practices, life-skills workshops, and family outreach. During my Fellowship, several youth coaches and graduates expressed their hope for some improvement of Yuwa’s programs and communication with the organization. Even though Yuwa provided opportunities for regular group discussions to share ideas and day-to-day functions, there was a lack of mechanism that could systematically capture feedback and perceptions from all the participants in one place.

I designed an anonymous feedback mechanism for all the programs together with involved stakeholders at various levels. Launched in the form of online surveys, the feedback involved subjective and objective questions on coaching, communication, decision-making, shared values of Yuwa, and upcoming steps. It will now be circulated annually and has already been implemented for two programs. Together with information from smaller group discussions, data collected from the anonymous survey helped in identifying three most pressing challenges and guiding next steps for mitigation. The systematized feedback mechanism became a tool for Yuwa girls to express their criticism in a safe space and drive change in programs that affect them deeply.
I experienced an accelerated personal and professional development in a short time span. This was a transformative year of my life because...

The Fellowship provided me with the opportunity to...

Learn from and connect with other social change makers across the country.

“The most powerful thing the AIF Fellowship did for me was to help me understand the true meaning of female empowerment.”

How did the pandemic shape your experience?

My Fellowship journey began in December 2021 with a virtual Orientation Conference, designed to prepare the Fellows for a smooth transition into our host organization’s culture and projects. Even though the virtual Orientation could not replace the in-person experience, a plethora of social-emotional learning exercises helped me bond with the Banyan Impact Fellowship cohort.

I could not relocate to Ranchi until after the third wave of COVID subsided in January 2022. Therefore, I began observing Yuwa’s school activities online and witnessed social innovation emerging in the field of virtual education in rural India. Digital illiteracy, lack of resources, and parents’ skepticism about online learning were some of the challenges that Yuwa’s girls faced. They adapted to group studies and asynchronous classes to continue their education online. Later, I could investigate similarities and differences between the online and in-person learning that guided my decisions in revising the monitoring and evaluation system at Yuwa.

What was your most rewarding professional experience?

I created a system of feedback for Yuwa’s various programs. I am proud of the fact that I made the process of designing this system of surveys very transparent and participatory from the beginning, incorporating ideas, opinions, and criticism of various stakeholders at every step. I began the process by attending various meetings of students and teachers, coaches, players, and facilitators to actively listen and also familiarize myself with everyone. I then studied various complaints received by Yuwa management over email. Using content, tone, and language from these sources, I drafted questions that captured various issues and perceptions.

Then I discussed these questions with the stakeholders in multiple meetings to get further input and address any doubts or questions. I made revisions as needed and then shared the draft for final comments. After I conducted the surveys, I produced summary reports along with recommendations and shared them with everyone. Also, I designed a participation format for a series of round table discussions, where stakeholders discuss the most pressing issues and arrive at solutions that will work for everyone.
It has been a pleasant experience working with Ms. Aishani Jaiswal and the AIF team. Aishani has contributed to our team’s achievements and has contributed with the value she has added to the project. She demonstrated her willingness to learn new things and picked up well. The AIF team has been extremely cooperative and accommodating of the health issues faced by Aishani and has managed to be so without being intrusive. Our sincere gratitude to Chandni, Amanpreet, and the entire AIF Team for their patience and support. We look forward to hosting more fellows in the years to come.

-Arpan Bose, Assistant Director SAATHII
Supervisor of Aishani Jaiswal
Aishani is interested in pursuing public policy through active community participation. She is passionate about providing simple and tangible solutions to marginalized communities through research and practical methodologies. She actively works towards creating a positive and thoughtful work environment and wishes to use her Fellowship experience for diverse populations.

“I would just like to say that this journey has made me stronger and more cognizant of my surroundings. Despite their personal struggles, the people of SAATHII have shown me that you can channel that energy into your work and deliver world-class outputs, all while cracking jokes and remaining positive.”

Journey

I have always been an overachiever of sorts since I was a child. I was never pressured to prove myself better than others, and despite being an only child, my parents never restricted me from doing whatever I wanted. I have had a relatively privileged upbringing wherein my mother and I were never in serious financial trouble. It is the emotional and life-changing traumatic experiences that I have struggled to cope with since I was 12 years old.

At the beginning of this Fellowship journey though, I was suddenly mandated to perform reflections on myself by the kindest and warmest people who just wanted me to see myself in a better light. At SAATHII, I felt inexperienced and much younger than everyone else. In every room I entered I was the youngest, with the least experience, but my supervisor Arpan Sir and the founder of SAATHII, Dr. Subha, made sure that I was actively involved in the work of SAATHII. Dr. Subha chose to trust me with hugely important tasks such as designing their national training modules for medical personnel, which gave me a chance to voice my opinions in national level meetings on HIV/AIDS campaigns. Dr. Subha actively asked for my opinion to make me feel like I was somehow her equal. This Fellowship instilled knowledge, humility and kindness in me by the virtue of learning from everyone around me.

Partnership Story

My work within the organization has reaffirmed my faith in myself. I had been going through a rough patch since the pandemic first began. I felt extremely demotivated and did not have a clear path set out for myself anymore. Coming to SAATHII and beginning this Fellowship reaffirmed my faith in the system so to speak. SAATHII employees are a group of extremely hardworking and focused individuals all of whom have vast experiences. I came as an early development professional who was completely new to the sector. I’d like to think that I brought a fresh perspective to how SAATHII works and to some of their projects including how they view gender sensitivity, emotional learning as well as new softwares to complete their tasks.

Aishani is passionate about providing simple and tangible solutions to marginalized communities through research and practical methodologies. She actively works towards creating a positive and thoughtful work environment and wishes to use her Fellowship experience for diverse populations.
Despite almost losing my entire family to COVID-19, I was able to learn and form a distinct path for my future. This was a transformative year of my life because...

The Fellowship provided me with the opportunity to...

Work with real change makers who are tirelessly working on the ground to bring change.

"The most powerful thing the AIF Fellowship did for me was making me believe in myself."

How did the pandemic shape your experience?

I had a rather unique experience during my Fellowship. Disaster struck us at home when my mother and grandmother fell sick with COVID-19 and spent 16 days in the ICU. I had to drop everything and head back home for a month to make sure everyone was keeping well. I really thought I would not be able to continue with the Fellowship. Everything inside was broken and it also took a physical toll on me. But luckily, the Fellowship team and my host organization understood the gravity of the situation and were quick to console me and support me. I will always be grateful to Chandni, Aman and Ankita for it. The surge in cases in January and illness in my family brought my work to a halt for a month. The pandemic truly had a significant impact on my Fellowship journey.

What was your most rewarding professional experience?

The public health system in India is very complex. I would go so far as to say that the HIV/AIDS care system is even more complex! It took me almost 2 months to understand the work of SAATHII and an additional month to understand HIV/AIDS care. I am extremely proud of the contributions I have made to the content of the National Training Modules that will be used for all HIV/AIDS service providers that are currently working on the ground. Their number is roughly around 24,000 workers. I have also helped draft the methodology to field test these modules on the ground. My greatest achievement, however, has been to understand how the system works and recognizing its nuances.
It is absolutely a wonderful experience to work with Mr Manoj. He has given a new insight to our ongoing activities. He has helped in both ways strengthening community organization as well in developing technical knowledge of colleagues. His simple lifestyle, commitment to the cause of poor and adapting to the situation has been a learning experience for all of us. We also thank the AIF Fellowship Team for their timely follow up and being the cause of a good bonding between Fellow, Supervisor and organization for an impactful work.

-Rosnara, Seba Jagat
Supervisor of Manoj Das
DEDICATING VULNERABLE BOYS TO REDUCE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

If one word could describe my Fellowship journey, it is CHANGE. I joined the Fellowship as an individual who is naturally low-key and not very expressive. Even though this was an amazing opportunity, I kept my expectations low and simply moved through the new experiences. But something happened on the way; I grew along with the daily frustrations and responsibilities. I met some people who challenged my beliefs, and I also got to know myself better. The first half of this Fellowship was spent designing and planning my project. But the second half brought its launch and the opportunity to meet two groups of people who enriched my experience - interns and ex-inmates.

My organization has interns who are studying social work at various colleges, all of whom helped ease some of my overwhelming tasks. I felt much more supported and less alone, when I could share my workload with them. And I also learned how to delegate and divide responsibilities and manage a team as a leader. Since the Unlearn Fellowship is simultaneously acting as a method of reformation and reintegration, I had the opportunity to interact with ex-inmates on a daily basis, because they are a part of my project as peer Fellows. I conversed with them extensively during their month-long training and I also took regular sessions on life skills at Jail No. 5, Tihar where I interacted with present inmates too. I learned about their good and bad experiences, witnessed their efforts for change and felt their fears. I have more faith in humanity than I used to have in the past, and I am more positive and hopeful about society as a whole. I now believe that people are good and want to be good. My low expectations were exceeded, and I am exceedingly happy about that.

Ilika is finding her way in the professional arena with experience in research, academia and now, the social sector. She wants to work in the field of human rights and is hoping to find her niche for further research. She prioritizes learning above all, and new experiences motivate her best.

“I designed modules on gender based issues to sensitise vulnerable boys in observation homes and I personally facilitated sessions for the inmates of Tihar Jail No. 5.”

Created 7 facilitation modules with 18 sub-themes on gender issues
Targeted 250-300 beneficiaries in observation homes and prisons
Trained 9 Fellows as facilitators
Rehabilitation of 4 Ex-inmates as Peer Fellows
Created 2 sets of Baseline and Endline surveys for impact assessment
Designed the framework for TYCIA’s Better Life Prison School, at Tihar Jail
Created an introductory brief about TYCA’s Prison Program

Unlearn Fellowship is an independent initiative at my host organization, which envisions reducing violence and crime against women by working with young men in vulnerable communities like high-crime areas and juvenile homes. The organization had some tools in place like the Pehal Toolkit (a curriculum which includes an alphabet chart, playing cards, a board game and a set of comics on topics like consent, equality, gender based violence and rights and responsibilities of good citizens) and some sessions on violence, but not much beyond this. During my time at TYCIA, I worked on designing the program structure of their new eight-month long Fellowship – the Unlearn Fellowship, and I developed several extensively researched facilitator modules and successfully launched the program. My contribution kick started a stagnant project which was in its initial stages and was forced to be at a further standstill because of the ongoing pandemic.

I remember being completely clueless about the process and resources of Project Unlearn since there was not too much the host organization could share with me. Even creating a work plan for myself felt like a monumental task. However, a few months down the line, the resources that I had developed for Unlearn were eventually emulated by another colleague for the design and launch of another project. Today, I’m grateful that I could help create a system which can now be used by the organization to further their goals and projects.
I met people who challenged my perceptions and showed me the capacity for change in human beings. This was a transformative year of my life because...

The Fellowship provided me with the opportunity to...

Explore my potential in the social sector.

"The most powerful thing the AIF Fellowship did for me was opening up the world behind the high walls of prisons. Interacting with these forgotten citizens gave me a unique perspective that I didn't know I was missing."

How did the pandemic shape your experience?

For our cohort, the Orientation and Midpoint Conferences of the Fellowship were held online. This was a hurdle when interacting with my co-fellows and the Fellowship team. I was looking forward to this experience which I was unable to attend. Blessedly, my host organization was in the same city as my current place of residence and I was able to visit the office a few times a week. I regularly worked from the office since the risk of the pandemic had reduced and I was able to go for some visits including taking regular sessions at Jail No. 5, Tihar. There was a lot of uncertainty during the project planning stage, since our program cannot be done without meeting the beneficiaries in person. But we went ahead with conviction and our program could be launched successfully.

What was your most rewarding professional experience?

Unlearn Fellowship is an initiative to educate and sensitize boys and young men through a contextually developed gender sensitization educational model. My responsibility for this project was not limited to one specific aspect. Since this was a strategic initiative, there were numerous components to this project, and I had no experience with the responsibilities I was given. My project management responsibilities included project funding, hiring, collaboration with other organizations, training, curriculum development, impact assessment of the intervention as well as social media promotion and logistics. All of these were extraordinarily complicated tasks which were not easy to handle, especially with no prior experience in the development sector. Although this was overwhelming at times, I consider managing these multiple roles to be my professional achievement during this Fellowship. One does not usually get so much responsibility so early in one’s career, and I am happy that I got the opportunity to challenge myself in this manner. I look forward to handholding the Fellows in their community work and acting as a mentor in the coming months.
FOCUSED ON CAPTURING THE IMPACT AND VISUALIZING IT FOR THE WORLD

After five years of professional experience working in the development sector at the grassroots level with a variety of communities, I was ready to take on a new challenge. When I was about to join the AIF Fellowship, my peers asked me why I was going to “start from the beginning.” My reply was simple: I wanted to bring myself out of my comfort zone, collect all the assets that I had acquired and move to an uncomfortable zone that would allow me to challenge myself. The Fellowship proved to be a turning point. It was initially a very tough decision to make but I knew it would bring about a great change in my life, and I could carry forward with all that I had learned in my previous job. And I believed in order to take the next step in my professional career, the exposure and wealth of experiences that the AIF Fellowship offers would be a valuable opportunity for me.

I feel the Fellowship is a great way to learn firsthand from organizations that are doing inspiring work in this sector, approaching issues through programs and using tools that were new to me. Moreover, the chance that I got to interact with and learn from co-fellows who have vastly different experiences was a rare growth opportunity. My most significant takeaway, however, were the connections that I made over the months. I have further honed my skills in data analysis, data management, report writing, and advocacy. This experience taught me the ropes of not just effectively managing various data systems but also enabled me to analyze their impacts, monitor past learnings, and come up with better data-oriented solutions and systems. All in all, it was an amazing experience for me.

The project that I was assigned to is 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. The program was implemented in three states of India: Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. An exploratory study assessed the benefits of Milaan’s Girl Icon Program by comparing beliefs and attitudes toward gender norms, leadership skills, and self-positive traits between Girl Icon participants and non-participants.

My work on the project had two sides: one was to work with programmatic data management, and the other one to focus on capturing the impact and visualizing it for the world. I also assisted the team in drafting a results based report that included various recommendations for improving the effect of the program on the ground. I supported the team in creating progress reports on the program and amplifying courageous voices, examining the gaps, and creating a narrative backed by facts and numbers.
I was able to do things that I had never thought of doing such as writing blogs, writing poems, and making my own life map, as well as giving me exposure to other things that I had never thought of. This was a transformative year of my life because...

The Fellowship provided me with the opportunity to...

Think out of the box and explore myself more and more.

“The most powerful thing the AIF Fellowship did for me was making me believe that I am capable of doing more than what I had previously done.”

How did the pandemic shape your experience?

The pandemic made me pause and think about how I could upskill and push for my personal growth in order to be a more impactful professional in the development sector. When I started my Fellowship, I decided to move to a location near my office. It was a time when the pandemic had slowed down. My family members were a little worried about how I manage, and whether it would be safe or not. I was not sure if I would be able to work in the office, meet new people, interact with the staff, and witness the fieldwork of the organization. I am really happy that I took the decision to move and not work from home. I am happy that I was able to get the chance to go to the office and to a new community and experience this amazing journey.

What was your most rewarding professional experience?

The professional achievement that I am most proud of is that I was able to lead the impact assessment for the Girl Icon Program. Most of my professional roles thus far had been very structured. I always knew what to do, when, and how. While working with Milaan as a Fellow, I got the opportunity to share my thoughts on the kind of data that was collected on the ground and to identify whether the data was accurate or not. Leading this not only gave me the confidence to share my ideas and thoughts with the team but also gave me the chance to understand the process of designing surveys, analyzing data, and authoring the captured findings in the reports.

There were times when I felt too overwhelmed but the resources I found out within myself to deal with the challenges I faced, served me well during the Fellowship period. This Fellowship not only helped me to grow professionally but also on a personal level. I cherish every day of this Fellowship and all those amazing people I got to interact with through this Fellowship.
Prakriti is a psychotherapist, researcher and trainer establishing sustainable community structures for children's and women's holistic development to create an empowering and inclusive ecosystem to challenge the caste, gender, health and educational impediments. Her prolean tool is her experimenting, philosophical outlook, and eloquent spoken and written skills. Her knack for active listening and understanding people helped her sail smoothly throughout the fellowship and create memories that she will carry in her spirit in the form of stories of wisdom, strength and joy.

“For me, the power of participation brought a change in attitude as I could see the field team started breaking up, especially the females of the team, who would shy away from speaking or would silence themselves, so being able to provide them with the space to express was a significant personal and professional victory for me.”

Impact Assessment
1. 8 project proposals, 5 concept notes and 3 reports conceptualized and submitted
2. 15 workshops conducted with 300 plus adolescent girls and 150 plus women on gender, menstrual health, hygiene, sexual and reproductive health and rights
3. 8 workshops conducted with 120 plus children and adolescents, & 4 training sessions conducted with 42 team members on life skills
4. 4 days training on monitoring, evaluation and participatory impact mapping using a participatory learning approach on 8 field team and 12 youth leaders
5. 5 focus-group discussions with 43 people for research
6. 1 internal impact mapping assessment carried out
7. 2 videos created for funders and 3 social media posts
8. 42 team members trained in community engagement and life skills
9. 2 training modules developed on mental health and life skills

The second area of contribution has been monitoring and evaluation, streamlining and training the staff to conduct impact mapping using a participatory learning approach. Adolescent girls and youth groups were involved in making focus-group discussion (FGD) questions and interview schedules. Also, I researched using FGD in the village to understand their perspective on making adolescent boys and young men aware of the health aspects of both genders.

Journey
I embarked on an experience of a lifetime; from a person who had never lived outside my home city, I found myself living and integrating into remote villages of multiple states. Prakriti, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh—understanding the issues villagers face to tackling them myself. Most days, I was waiting in the scorching sun for hours to reach my field and then walked for 3km to get to the village. These walks were accompanied by stories of caste, gender and economic struggles and the resistance of community mobilizers. The word empathy came to life when I walked in the shoes of many.

The issues were distinct in tribal and rural areas; e.g., child marriage is prevalent in rural areas as girls are forced to leave school, and in tribal areas, Dhuku (Dhuku is the tribal practice of couples consensually living together without marriage) is practised. Learning about these issues strengthened my documentation skills, especially project proposals. I saw things through foreign eyes, which troubled me emotionally for days, and the girls' narratives echoed in my skin, not just ears. The fellowship journey made me an authentic leader; I witnessed many leaders and analyzed the kind of skills I wanted to imbibe.

So my word of wisdom would be, “Find your strength in the eyes and experiences of others, keep asking yourself what drives you and keeps you going? It ain't easy to stay with ambiguity, but you must try!”

Partnership Story
I am a firm believer in mutual transformation, and my host organization has catalyzed transforming my journey for good. To look at my contribution, my main area of work has been community initiative, youth development, documentation and monitoring and evaluation. Along with project work, I undertook the ownership of two villages in Chhattisgarh to upscale the community engagement sustainably. In these two villages, work started by tapping into the communities existing structure of volunteers, self-help groups and religious groups. I built the team's capacity in the interconnection of gender, health and nutrition to reach children and communities' holistic development and empower them to take ownership of their village's development. I conducted many trainings with adolescent girls, youth and women to bring about the conversation and in the process, the team followed my footsteps.

Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand

THE REQUIRED LEVEL OF INNOVATION
ASSESSING THE COMMUNITY'S NEEDS AND
THE REQUIRED LEVEL OF INNOVATION

Impact Assessment
Research
Strategic Innovation and Initiatives
Community Initiatives
Young Engagement and Mentoring
Communications and Development

Project proposals, Concept notes, Reports, Workshops, Trainings, Team Members, Days of training, Focus group discussions, Field team, Youth leaders, Videos, Social media posts, Team members, Training modules, Mental health, Life skills

Not only are these numbers staggering, but they also illustrate the scale of the impact that the AIF Banyan Impact Fellowship for Service in India has had on the communities it serves. Through its focus on education, gender and health, the fellowship has provided a platform for young people like Prakriti to develop the skills and knowledge they need to make a difference in their communities. The fellowship has helped to create an empowering and inclusive ecosystem that challenges the caste, gender, health and educational impediments that many communities face.

In particular, the fellowship has helped to empower young people to take ownership of their village's development. This is evident in the stories of adolescent girls, youth and women who were involved in making focus-group discussion (FGD) questions and interview schedules, as well as the many trainings that were conducted with them. The fellowship has also provided a space for young people to develop the skills they need to be effective leaders, as evidenced by the many workshops and trainings that were conducted.

Overall, the AIF Banyan Impact Fellowship for Service in India is a testament to the power of education, gender and health initiatives in empowering young people to take ownership of their communities' development. The fellowship has provided a platform for young people like Prakriti to make a difference in their communities, and it is clear that the impact of the fellowship is significant and far-reaching.
I was pushed out of my comfort zone, and my utopian dream of empowerment and being a liberal was disillusioned. I was grounded and pushed to lock eyes with reality. This experience will dictate my decisions and contribution to society.

This was a transformative year of my life because...

To explore beyond the ambit of my skills and impact the lives of many, passing on the power of voice, knowledge and narrative to others.

The Fellowship provided me with the opportunity to...

"The most powerful thing the AIF Fellowship did for me was challenging me to reinvent myself and use my creativity with empathetic and understanding wings."

How did the pandemic shape your experience?

The Fellowship is like a pizza; it can never taste bad, so even the worst pandemic couldn't affect my Fellowship journey at large. The pandemic affected me indirectly as the community and teams I worked with were severely affected, and the aftermath was painful to witness. Yet, we located feasible solutions, and the pandemic shaped our current project proposals and intervention strategies. It probed me to think creatively and find ways to use digitalization in implementing processes. It also influenced my field exposure visit as I started working on project proposals before visiting the field and conducted online capacity-building sessions. However, this was short-lived, as I reached my project site within a month of starting the Fellowship.

The major downside of the hybrid arrangement was the lost everlasting bonds, informal mingling and fun memories with co-fellows and the BIF team. We missed out on meeting Alumni, the BIF team and creating great networks with like-minded people in person.

What was your most rewarding professional experience?

I am honored and proud to have made sustainable changes in my host organization's existing structures to benefit the stakeholders of remote villages in multiple states and built the capacity of team members through trainings on various themes. I am exhilarated to share my professional accomplishment and proud journey of monitoring and evaluation (M and E), starting with completing an M and E certification course from the International Training Centre of the International Labor Organization (ILO) and gaining a 50% scholarship on a merit-basis. I took on the ownership of M and E as my host organization needed to carry out impact mapping of the existing project. I suggested using a participatory learning approach (PLA) to engage and empower the community-level stakeholders, and I headed this impact assessment initiative.

I am proud of heading and making an empowering engagement for the community. Advocating participation and inclusion is a different ball game and implementing it on the field is another; I am glad I got the opportunity to hone my skills and make the vision come true in practicality.
Since my undergraduate, I have always wanted to work on rural development on the ground. Even though I had visited many organizations in the development sector working on different themes, Vaagdhara was the first where I got to work full-time. It was also my introduction to the professional industry. I must say that Vaagdhara provided me with a very supportive atmosphere. Coming from an engineering background, I had very little understanding of how policies are drafted and evaluated. I was excited to learn about it in detail and work with the people who have dedicated their lives to rural development. But at the same time, I was a little nervous about the role and expectations from the project, especially regarding the need and importance of the work.

My supervisor and the staff at Vaagdhara provided all possible support - from how to collect data in the field to understanding the local language of the tribal peoples.

After spending five months at Vaagdhara, my personal and professional skills had developed beyond what I had expected - understanding the development sector, the challenges of working at the grassroots level, what lies ahead and how to solve it. Apart from this, spending time with amazing colleagues like Jayesh Joshi Ji and Sudeep Ji gave me new insights and fresh perspectives on society.

My task at Vaagdhara was to understand the issues faced by the children related to their nutrition and education and how these issues can be addressed at the grassroots and policy levels. For this, my primary contribution was towards the policy brief for the state governments that were being prepared. Along with this, we were studying the best practices from different Gram Panchayats (the villages’ governing councils) and working out how these can be replicated in other villages across different contexts. Our target was to make all the Gram Panchayats in Banswara, Paratpargh, Dahod, and Jhabua child friendly.

I was working towards making a structure that was to be replicated at the ground level and used to create a standard operating procedure for the Gram Panchayat to begin addressing child rights issues. For this, I drafted a policy note for the state government. I also prepared a document on what initiatives Vaagdhara can take in its own capacity as a civil society organization to achieve the target of child-friendly Gram Panchayats.
This was a transformative year of my life because...

I got the chance to understand and work with the tribal community.

The Fellowship provided me with the opportunity to...

Deepen my understanding of society.

“*The most powerful thing the AIF Fellowship did for me was giving me an opportunity to work and live with the Vagad community.*”

How did the pandemic shape your experience?

The pandemic did not impact me much as most of my work was based on the secondary data available from the government and other trusted data providers. Also, in the host community area, there were very low COVID cases, and almost everyone was vaccinated, resulting in no restrictions from the government.

What was your most rewarding professional experience?

I am very grateful for the various opportunities I got during this Fellowship, especially for working on creating a supportive environment for the tribal children in villages. My engagement and contributions were like a drop in the ocean during the Fellowship. Still, I am very pleased and hopeful that this work in the future will help make the dream of a fulfilling childhood for tribal children here in the Vagad region a reality. During this Fellowship I got to learn how to interview and engage people at the grass root level.
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Alaap

SUDEEP SHARMA
Vaagdhara

CHANDNI WADHWANI
Program Head, The Banyan Impact Fellowship

ANKITA BISHT
Program Associate, The Banyan Impact Fellowship

RIDDHI JAIN
Intern, The Banyan Impact Fellowship

DR. BJÖRN TECHNAU
Program Manager, The Banyan Impact Fellowship

ANKITA BISHT
Program Associate, The Banyan Impact Fellowship

RIDDHI JAIN
Intern, The Banyan Impact Fellowship

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RIDDHI JAIN
Intern, The Banyan Impact Fellowship

DR. BJÖRN TECHNAU
Program Manager, The Banyan Impact Fellowship
On behalf of the AIF Banyan Impact Fellowship Team, we would like to thank the following people for their continuous support towards major events during this programmatic year. Their engagements and insights enriched the Fellowship Program and proved to be monumental in driving Fellows towards greater heights of personal and professional growth.

**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 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, provide leadership, and engage the broader public. In the second phase of the RIST AIF partnership, RIST has generously supported the Rural India Supporting Trust (RIST) AIF 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. Lata Krishnan’s and Ajay Shah’s historic gift ushers the Fellowship program into its 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 Ajay 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, we couldn’t be happier to have the continued support of RIST in our pursuit of creating a socially just World.