faces of the fellowship

Connections that Shaped Us
A Portrait Series by 2022-2023 Banyan Impact Fellows
ABOUT THE AMERICAN INDIA FOUNDATION
The American India Foundation 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. With offices in New York and California, twelve chapters across the U.S., and India operations headquartered in Delhi NCR, AIF has impacted 16.51 million lives across 36 States and Union Territories of India. Learn more at www.aif-india.org.

ABOUT THE AIF BANYAN IMPACT FELLOWSHIP
The AIF Banyan Impact Fellowship is an immersive bi-national volunteer service program with immense strategic importance in the US-India corridor. In its third decade of service, the Fellowship continues to facilitate exchange and collaboration between professionals from India and the US, thereby helping shape the next generation of leaders. Through its emphasis on a service-leadership model, the bilateral program places professionals and socially-minded changemakers from the US and India in service with communities and organizations across the two countries for mutual learning, capacity building, and leadership development. Since its inception in 2001, the Fellowship has placed 539 Fellows in Service with ngos, social enterprise across India; enabled 238 partners to build their capacities to achieve their missions in education, livelihoods, public health and beyond across 25 states and union territories of India.

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The excitement of starting life in a new place is closely entwined with the anxiety of finding a community. Connections that cherish all our little quirks and help us feel a little more at home are worth their weight in gold.

Along our fellowship journey, we had the pleasure of making friends in the most unexpected places. These friendships encouraged us to find joy in the little things and reaffirmed our belief in the power of the extraordinary kindness of ordinary people. Be it the sabzi waale bhaiya (vegetable vendor) who saves you his best produce or the neighbour aunty whose love language is food, these actions have the power to make your day go from the worst to slightly bearable. They shaped who we are today.

This portrait series is a compilation of the meaningful connections that have shaped us as 2022–2023 AIF Banyan Impact Fellows serving with the India Service Track. This series can be read in many ways: as an ode, a token of gratitude, or a collection of memories. Beyond everything, it is a slice of the most endearing parts of our lives in the fellowship. These connections have been our calm during the storm, adding generous amounts of humour, warmth, and strength to our fellowship journey.
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BIF Fellow Ashley Benedict serving with
Lok Kala Sagar Sansthan (LKSS) and
Folk Arts Rajasthan (FAR)

(Jaisalmer, Rajasthan)
As a Banyan Impact Fellow, I was placed in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, to work with Lok Kala Sagar Sansthan, a community-driven NGO that works towards the preservation of the Merasi community's intangible cultural heritage and musical legacy as well as the betterment of their lives through education.

In the Jaisalmeri Merasi community of storytellers and musicians, education has become a huge source of inspiration and self-empowerment. Defined locally by their caste and often not given access to quality education, the Merasi community decided to change their own destiny by establishing Merasi School in 2007.

These portraits are an homage to the staff—both current and former—who have helped this school endure despite all of the challenges they have faced. Together, they continue to work towards a future where "No More Manganiyar" becomes a reality.

For a community whose voices are so often drowned out, quietened, or simply unheard, I made it my own mission to include as little of my own voice as possible. The quotes included from each Merasi school staff member are an example enough as to why they inspire and impact me every day. In my own moments of weakness, they are the pillars of strength I look to keep myself moving forward.
"In Merasi school, all are Merasi. If they come to Merasi school, we don't turn them away. Merasi means we support everyone."

~Saina Khan Merasi

Saina Khan Merasi
Teacher of Middle Class B and a gifted henna artist with a passion for art
(Jaisalmer, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Ashley
"Being a Merasi is a wonderful gift for me, because as a Merasi, I can enjoy every color of life."

~Satar Khan Merasi

Satar Khan Merasi

The newest teacher at Merasi School for the Littlest Class with unrivaled skills on the kartol (Jaisalmer, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Ashley
"Education is power. The rights which we are not getting will one day be available to us because of education."

-Nawab Khan Merasi

Nawab Khan Merasi
Teacher of Little Class at Merasi School and an incredible cook (Jaisalmer, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Ashley
"Education and legacy are a big power for us. One hand on pen, one hand on dhol. Because we have two hands, we can do both easily."

~Seema Khan Merasi

Seema Khan Merasi
Teacher of Middle Class A and current principal of Merasi School (Jaisalmer, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Ashley
"In my heart, Merasi school is a diamond or a star. Education is the only thing to change the world. If girls get educated, we can change our life. If our daughters are sent to school, they can fight for themselves. The community has changed after understanding girls' education."

-Former Merasi School Teacher and Principal
Portraits of former teacher drawn by Merasi school children
(Jaisalmer, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Ashley
"Life is hard. In this generation, we can see progress. We are trying so hard every day to feed the children education and make their lives softer. They are our future."

-Akaram Khan Merasi
Akaram Khan Merasi, rickshaw driver for Merasi School and master of 21 different instruments (Jaisalmer, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Ashley
"Many people want us to quit, but we keep trying and trying."

-Irfan Khan Merasi

Irfan Khan Merasi

Computer Class teacher and my English mentee, who is an absolute prodigy on the dholak (Jaisalmer, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Ashley
"Being born into a community of musicians makes me happy and proud to be Merasi."

-Sahil Khan Merasi

Saina Khan Merasi

Teacher at Merasi School for the Littlest Class, who never forgets to water the plants (Jaisalmer, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Ashley
BIF Fellow Divya serving with SAFA India

(Hyderabad, Telangana)
Working in Hyderabad, I anticipated a truly unique experience unlike any other place I had lived before. Filled with curiosity and enthusiasm, I eagerly sought out stories, memories, and voices that often go unheard within the community. Over time, this passion transformed into deep compassion and an unwavering drive to work proactively.

Throughout my fellowship journey, I had the privilege of encountering numerous individuals who left an indelible mark on my life. Each person I met had a story to share, contributing to the mosaic of experiences that shaped my time here.

In my everyday life, there were a few remarkable individuals who left a lasting impact. They strive relentlessly to establish their own standing in society, unwavering in their dedication and tireless in their efforts.
Having Joshilyn and Sidharth, both Banyan Impact Fellows, placed in Hyderabad was a positive experience as it allowed us to share what was happening in our lives. For the first time, I was living independently without any supervision, and having them around made it easier to cope with the challenges.

Knowing that there were familiar faces in the same city was reassuring, especially during the initial months before I made new friends at work. Overall, it was a good feeling to have people I could connect with and confide in during this period of transition.
Banyan Impact fellows, Joshilyn Binkley & Sidharth Hendre
(Hyderabad, Telangana)

Submitted by Divya
During my AIF fellowship, I had my first prolonged experience of living on my own, without the shelter of a university hostel or the presence of my parents. I met Manisha, who inspired me with her determination and courage. Despite losing her parents at a very young age and having to run from her family, who wanted her property, she persevered and survived on her own. She even adopted a child at 27 and was willing to give up her property to gain approval for the adoption. Her willingness to take responsibility for her actions and stand up for herself and her daughter taught me the importance of facing challenges with resilience and resoluteness.

I now aspire to adopt a similar mindset and take ownership of my decisions in life, no matter how difficult they may be. Her courage has taught me that it's important to face life's challenges with strength and not shy away from taking responsibility for my actions.
Manisha Ben Gothi, Finance Manager,
SAFA India
(Hyderabad, Telangana)

Submitted by Divya
On my first day at my host organization (SAFA), I met Nahid Fatima, who seemed completely opposite to me in terms of our backgrounds, cultures, personalities, and interests. I doubted that we would ever connect. However, our frequent interactions while working on an event for Deloitte brought us closer.

What really impressed me was her dedication to her work. She is the manager of Luqma, a cloud kitchen run by SAFA, and I saw how much she cared for it, treating it as if it were her own restaurant. Her passion for work inspired me to work harder on my own project, especially during times when it seemed like it wasn't going anywhere.

As we spent more time together, we became friends and started to hang out outside of work. We explored many places in Hyderabad together and eventually formed a group of friends with a few more colleagues. Despite our differences, it felt great to find someone with similar views and character, with whom I could relate and have fun.

It taught me the value of taking the time to get to know someone and being open to different perspectives. In the end, it was our shared values that brought us together, and I'm grateful to have found a friend like her.
Nahid Fatima, Luqma Manager,
SAFA India
(Hyderabad, Telangana)

Submitted by Divya
On my way to the metro station, there's a small stall of Panipuri run by Bhaiya. I often visit his stall, and we have developed a special bond over time. We have become familiar with each other's routines to the point where if I don't show up for a few days, he'll inquire about my absence, and vice versa.

What's remarkable is that he always knows what I want to eat before I even order. Whenever I'm feeling down or have had a rough day, I make it a point to stop by his stall. Seeing him smile as I approach his stall on that road gives me a breather for the day.
Golgappe Wale Bhaiya, Czech Colony,
Sanath Nagar
(Hyderabad, Telangana)

Submitted By Divya
Nehal, my office desk mate, became a close confidante with whom I could share my thoughts and experiences. We often took breaks from work to have long conversations about life and reflect on recent events in each other's lives. She was someone with whom I could easily discuss personal matters without fear of judgment. It was comforting to have a friend in such proximity at work, and our conversations added a positive dimension to our shared workspace.
S. Nehal, Communication Coordinator,
SAFA India,
(Hyderabad, Telangana)

Submitted By Divya
BIF Fellow Dnyaneshwar Surwase serving with Seba Jagat

(Kalahandi, Odisha)
Working in remote areas before, I was aware it would not be a big adjustment to explore the culture, forests, and mountains in Kalahandi. Curiosity and enthusiasm to listen to stories, memories, and unheard voices from the margins turned into more compassion and energy to work proactively. While nihilism was cutting apart the very human existence, sufferings were erupting from inside, I tried to feel a sense of belonging and initiating interactions that all contributed to a connection of solidarity, fraternity, and empathy.

There were hundreds of people I met and thousands of stories I heard during this small journey. These are a few of the people and places that made this journey possible.

These people are sources of inspiration and self-development. Having inadequate resources, poor access to education and employment, and coming from vulnerable locations, they hold tremendous potential and compassion to help people, develop the community, and inspire the young ones to believe in humanity.

These frozen moments are just a tiny attempt to tell the stories of people at the grassroots. They continue to work for a community where there is no more caste, class, or gender discrimination.
Dhansingh Majhi is a tribal leader, but he says he never felt like he was a leader. He calls himself a volunteer. He has been working in Kalahandi district since 1992 for Jal, Jungle, and Jameen, i.e., Water, Forest, and Land. He started working on issues of education, child marriage, caste-based issues, health, and other problems in the Kondh community. As a leader, he has been doing reforms, especially in the Kondh community, where he belongs. He has been promoting the value of cultural roots along with women's rights and helping people realize the value of land and the rights they have in connection with it.

Looking at him and his work during my fellowship journey, I actually felt the language of educate, organize, and agitate that revolves around infinite potential, the clarion call which I have been listening to since my childhood.
Dhansingh Majhi, Community Leader
(M. Rampur, Kalahandi, Odisha)

Submitted by Dnyaneshwar
Satyama Baliarsingh works as a staff nurse and Kavita Fetasingh as an ANM at the Health and Wellness Centre (primary health centre) in Lankagarh in District Kandhamal, Odisha, managed by Seba Jagat. The Lankagarh PHC (HWC) falls under the V3 category (vulnerability category) in the state of Odisha. Satyama has been working at the PHC for the last 1.5 years. Satyama says, "Many pregnant women say if you can't handle our delivery case, then the doctors at CHC will also not be able to help us." Further, she said, "We refer the delivery cases to the CHC or district hospital only when it is too critical; otherwise, we give our best medical services to the patients. Recently, we had a delivery case of twins; it was a normal delivery. We feel very happy while helping mothers and their infants." On average, they handle 15–20 delivery cases per month. They are constantly trying their best to reduce the MMR and IMR in the area.

Despite the loneliness, sleep deprivation, tears and laughter, and adjustment to a completely different way of life as a non-traditional, out-of-state non-Odia fellow, I feel happy when I go to them and find something that significantly impacts the lives of tribal people who are vulnerable and have been standing at the margins for ages. Kavita and Satyama are bridging the gap in our healthcare system and addressing healthcare disparities at the grassroots level.
Satyama Baliarsingh, Staff Nurse 
(Lankagarh, Kandhamal, Odisha)

Submitted by Dnyaneshwar
Kavita has served at the Health and Wellness Centre in Lankagarh for the last 10 years, when there was no electricity, roads, or basic infrastructure. It’s 2023, and many of us complain about 5G, but in Lankagarh, only BSNL can accommodate 2G network services. There are no other mobile or internet services. In the initial days of her job, 10 years ago, she had to treat patients and institutional deliveries in the light of lanterns.

Kavita and Satyama are popular in the region for handling delivery patients. The pregnant women in the region prefer both of them to get help and medical services in their institutional delivery.

I saw how these powerful women profoundly influence a person’s life, especially in a situation where they needed help the most. They strip bare the exteriors and the interiors and reveal what life is actually about on a daily basis. I like their work; it’s inspiring not just because it is serving people but also because they bring new life to the world and enable them to rise and shine!
Kavita Fetashingh, ANM at Health and Wellness Center
(Lankagarh, Kandhamal, Odisha)

Submitted by Dnyaneshwar
Jogiram started his work by volunteering with my host organization, Seba Jagat. He completed his Secondary School Certificate and was a hosteler at Ramakrishna Mission. At that time, his interests were working in the fields of health and education, as he recognised that the people in the region didn't have access to quality health services or education. After getting enough knowledge, he started mobilizing tribal landless and other marginalized community members to avail themselves of employment opportunities and the right wages from MGNREGA.

The public transportation system is very poor in the region. Since getting a new bike, Jogiram has taken more than 200 patients and pregnant women to the hospital. He has taken more than 300 students by bike to hostels, schools, and colleges.

He helps the students in his area go to the Kalinga Institute of Social Science for higher studies. Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences is the largest residential institute for tribals in the world, providing accommodation, food, and education from KG to higher education. Jogiram mobilizes parents to educate their children and advocates for students who have dropped out.

Currently, he is associated with Ekta Parishad for land rights, along with Seba Jagat, in promoting millets, developing land under FRA, etc. Jogiram transformed himself into an effective grassroots leader, mobilizing the forest-dwelling community to assert themselves and demand their rights and education for their children.

Respect, Empathy, and Solidarity!
Jogiram Majhi, Community Resource Person
(M. Rampur, Kalahandi, Odisha)

Submitted by Dnyaneshwar
Sharada Nani (Nani means elder sister in Odia) has proven to be an excellent example of a community leader who overcame her personal grief to become a fighter and ally for her community’s rights. Hers is the story of the rise and shine of a young tribal woman from the shadows of Odisha, playing a vital role that depicts the power of conviction and commitment. She has also been instrumental in the setting up of Jailaitamu (a network of tribal women), which addresses contentious issues in the villages. She works for land rights, health issues for women, forming a Federation of Single Women, maintaining the biodiversity of the villages, education, training, and capacity building for women, and so on. She says her location never holds her back. Women like Sharada Nani not only rise and shine but also influence and inspire hundreds of others like me to be benevolent and proactive community leaders.
Sharada Majhi, Leader and Community Resource Person (M. Rampur, Kalahandi, Odisha)

Submitted by Dnyaneshwar
Talking about decentralization of power and wealth but not working at the grassroots level, always sitting in air-conditioned meeting halls, and publishing papers is not enough. Pradip says, "I like risk-taking, this risk-taking habit taught me a lot." He has been working in the Kalahandi region for the last 20 years on issues of Education, Environment and Livelihood.

Working with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), he understood that the government was only developing roads, lakes, and ponds. He mobilized people in the villages, did micro-level planning for MGNREGA, and told them about the 261 themes of work in MGNREGA. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he formed a group of people from the remote villages in Kalahandi and taught them how to get contracts from the government. This is how he helped people from marginalized communities challenge the monopoly and mastery of the traditional power holders. Now the contract for the work in the village is given to the contractors of the same village. They now get contracts for various works at the taluka and district levels as well.

I feel this is a good attempt to decentralize power and wealth in such a way at the grass-roots level. His passion to learn new skills, share and get new information have influenced me to be an ardent learner.
Pradip Sahu, Project Coordinator Seba Jagat
(M. Rampur, Kalahandi, Odisha)

Submitted by Dnyaneshwar
In the Indian society, special care is required when talking about maternal, infant, neonatal, postnatal, and adolescent health with stakeholders. These subjects have been ghettoized by shame, silence, taboos, stigmas, purity, and pollution. It's been months now since I've been regularly interacting with pregnant and lactating women and adolescent children. Sufferings, experiences, stories, gossip, ideas, identities, expressions, criticism, comments, suggestions, and a lot more they have inside that they want to share, but the only problem, they say, is the safe space. Acceptance, awareness, and advocacy are what I'm learning while working with them, and for that, creating safe spaces plays a vital role. Many of them just want a listener who can be their safe space, a person with empathy and without judgment.

Sometimes a listener needs a safe space too. These trees, the soothing sound of the river, and the crystal-clear skies became my safe space and my buddies in this place.
Safe Spaces
(M. Rampur, Kalahandi, Odisha)

Submitted by Dnyaneshwar
BIF Fellow Erin Burneson serving with Ecowrap's project Muskaan

(Jaipur, Rajasthan)
I am incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity to return to Jaipur, not only to the same gully (street) I have lived on before but also to the same home. I knew that many of the friends and neighbours I had grown to love over the past eight years would be one of my strongest support systems during the fellowship. I had faced a lot over the past two years and had grown into the most authentic version of myself. While I was returning to many familiar faces, I knew this time would be different.

My work with Ecowrap’s project, Muskaan, felt purposeful as I poured my heart and creativity into helping rural women secure sustainable livelihoods for themselves through opportunities in up-cycling. As I got my feet wet in India’s social/development sector, I met people who were like-minded and others who couldn't be more different from myself. I am grateful for both. I still spent time with old friends who would save waste for me to up-cycle and help me brainstorm product ideas to launch, but I also shared my time with coworkers, fellows, interns, and creative partners as well.

When people ask me why I love this place so much, it is still the little day-to-day interactions that come to mind: waving to the uncle who passes his time watching over our gully in the morning; the kiddos mimicking my American accent when they say goodbye to me; the aunties who are unafraid to shoot their shot at arranging my marriage. There is something so beautiful about the mundane and simply doing life alongside people—it has the power to heal.
I never laugh harder than when I am with Arti jija ("older sister" in the local language). All of my cultural blunders supply us with hours of things to crack up about.

I tell her all the time that I moved to Jaipur because of her and her sister-in-law, Meenu jija. I know she doesn’t believe me because she always laughs it off, but it is true. When I first met them, I told myself that if I had friends like them, I could thrive in Jaipur.

Arti jija and her kiddos were the first faces to welcome me back to Jaipur when I arrived for the fellowship and will forever be the reason a piece of my heart lives in this city.
Longtime friend/sister, Arti jija
(Jaipur, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Erin
I was uncertain what it would look like to be back in India for the fellowship and simultaneously grieve.

Meenu jija asked questions, listened without judgement, held my hand while I wept, reminded me that I am seen, and pointed me towards the truth I had forgotten.
Longtime friend/sister, Meenu jija (Jaipur, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Erin
I want to be like Vidhi when I grow up. She is unapologetically herself and doesn't change who she is for anyone. She dances with reckless abandon. She is inquisitive and compassionate.

I was heartbroken when I thought I had hurt her feelings when something got lost in translation. After going home that night, I messaged her mom to apologize. Sensing my concern, I received a voice note from Vidhi in reply: "I am too happy, Erin didi, because you are my best friend. Don't feel sad."

In India, there is no thank you or sorry between friends.
Longtime friend Vidhi & "Rosy" the sloth
(Jaipur, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Erin
Uncle ji, my makaan maalik ("landlord"), can always be found with his hands busy doing work around the house, whether that be painting the terrace swing for the fourth time, creating new stands for his plants that he waters religiously, hanging new photos or trinkets in the stairwell, or helping me fix my air conditioning unit. Uncle ji is my Hindustani papa. I come to him in the same way I come to my own father. He helps me assemble furniture, drives me to the airport late at night, and reminds me to turn out the lights when I leave a room. He is a fellow upcycler who is always finding a good use for waste materials. For this reason, throughout the fellowship, he has been invested in my project. He is always as happy to see my latest innovation as I am to come home to discover his.
Ganga Singh, Landlord, Hindustani papa, and fellow up-cycler, Uncle ji (Jaipur, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Erin
During Makar Sankranti, everyone in Jaipur hangs out on the roof for the whole day, flying kites, listening to music, and eating pakore. Samne Wali Auntie ji called me on the phone, like she often does, and told me to come outside on the terrace. As soon as I stepped outside, something whizzed by my head and hit the wall close to where I was standing.

I looked up to see Samne Wali Auntie (otherwise known as Sassy Wali Auntie, for obvious reasons) cackling from her rooftop across the street.

"Did she really just whip a pakore at me!?"
I stood there, trying to make sense of the scene.

Yes. Yes, she absolutely did.
Good arm. Bad aim.

Upset that I didn't catch it, she wound up and pitched another one, this time nailing me in the shoulder.

"खाना खाओ! (Eat)" , she hollered
Friends don't let friends miss out on holiday festivities.
Samne Wali Auntie
(Jaipur, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Erin

Pakore
(Jaipur, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Erin
To date, I don't know Padosee Wali Auntie ji’s name, and I suspect she also doesn't know mine either, but every day I leave for the office, she is sitting outside her rented room in her plastic chair, and every day when I return from the office, she is there, simply sitting. Sometimes, after a long day, I sit on the stool with her too. Talking isn't necessary or even expected. One week, Auntie wasn't there for a few days, and I became increasingly concerned. One week I took a few days off, and she didn't see me go to the office, and she was concerned.

"We don't take anything from each other, but we simply enjoy each other's company."
Padosee Wali Auntie ji's chair
(Jaipur, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Erin
It's a powerful thing to encounter people who hold space for you to be your most authentic self....
BIF Fellow Dnyaneshwar (Dehradun, Uttarakhand)

Submitted by Erin

...who don't make you feel like you have to change any part of who you are in their presence.
"When no one is there to praise you..."
"...you must learn to praise yourself."

-Angraj Swami
One of the things I have always loved about India is that while you can sometimes feel like an outsider, there is always at least one auntie who instantaneously embraces you as family.

Our carpenter's mom, Bhua ji (Jaipur, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Erin
Though 10 years younger than me, I have learned so much from this sweet friend and intern. She has taught me that the face of resilience can look like cool, collected, unwavering grace, abounding patience, and humility.

Muskaan strategy design intern & friend, Himani
(Jaipur, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Erin
Learning a new art form later in life can be simultaneously humbling and empowering. It requires inner strength to accept that you may not get it right the first time you try but that it is worth trying anyway. Urmila Devi demonstrated this resilience and power as I sat alongside her to teach her how to weave. She was quick to laugh off her mistakes but even quicker to backtrack to fix them. Sitting with her that day made me question what it would look like for me to accept my mistakes as growth rather than a hindrance to progress.
Muskaan Creative Partner, Urmila Devi (Jaipur, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Erin
It has been my greatest joy to watch Muskaan's creative partners, Nikita and Mamta, grow in confidence over the course of the project. I have watched them master a craft, advocate for themselves, express a desire to use their voice on a wider stage, and begin training more women.

Empowered women empower women.
Muskaan Creative Partners, Nikita & Mamta (Jaipur, Rajasthan)

Submitted by Erin
BIF Fellow Hamsini Balaji serving with Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society

(Ranchi, Jharkhand)
My fellowship placement was with the Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society in Ranchi, Jharkhand, which is an autonomous society responsible for implementing livelihood initiatives for the rural poor under the National Rural Livelihood Mission.

Oftentimes, we face situations and individuals who challenge the very core of our foundation, i.e., our beliefs, values, and ways of seeing and understanding the world. Growing up, when I visited India for vacations, the elders in the family had a saying, "Even if God fulfils your desire, the priest obstructs it" (originally in Tamil). I never really understood what that entirely meant until I was faced with a challenge during the fellowship that required me to raise my voice, stand my ground, and stand up for myself through the challenge in order to accomplish a goal.

During that time, I met Mr. Sanjay Prasun (pen name), who is the Human Resources Programme Manager at the host organization. I remember from my very first interaction with him that he would always say, "Raise your voice." We developed an amicable friendship, and the poem below represents a productive self-expression of the complexity of emotions we faced and an expression of our learnings from collaboratively tackling the challenge.

The creative vision behind the poem was to give space for each collaborator’s individuality while bringing cohesiveness to the core message of the poem. The poem has been written in three languages: Hindi, Urdu, and English. While I am most comfortable in English, there is power in language, and certain emotions can only be captured in a specific language. This poem represents the values of community, collaboration, and interdependence. As collaborators, we hope that this poem inspires change through action, as it did in our case.

Poem by Hamsini Balaji and Sanjay Prasun
Hamsini Balji

(In flight somewhere between Ranchi, Jharkhand & Chennai, Tamil Nadu)

Written by: Hamsini Balaji and Sanjay Prasun

A Spoke in the system, Unassuming
Quiet and Soft, yet Strong
“Use your voice”
Assertive yet Sensitive

रूपांतरण: Catalyze Transformation

क्योंकि बोलना भी ज़रूरी है खुद के अस्तित्व के लिए
कि रह गए जो चुप हम किसी के पाश्चिमकता में
तो यूँ होंगा कि वो और बली होगा और हम
धीमे धीमे शाने: शाने: हो जायेंगे मृत
ज़िंदा रह कर भी सदा के लिए
A Leader - Integrity with the Truth  
हर हाल में शब्द क्रांति होगा, बावजूद कि  
Fire shall be faced, fear shall be burned  
ये भी होगा ...

उठेंगी उँगलियाँ तुम्हारे सतीत्व पर, तुम्हारे अस्तित्व पर  
Despite that, will you be?

A Leader - Compassion as a Compass  
तब जब कि आज्ञामाईश होंगी हर इक अस्मिता  
And humanity within shall undeniably be tested  
सत्य का पुरोधा तब भी होगा संघर्षशील और प्रकार  
Despite that, will you be?

A Leader - Commitment to Transformation Within  
करने होंगे चित्तन अंत: चित का, सोचने होंगे उपक्रम क्रांति का  
A commitment to Growth, A commitment to Expansion  
छोड़ने होंगे कुठिल विचार और ढूंढने होंगे समग्र आचार  
Despite that, will you be?

A Leader - Brave Enough to be the First  
बावजूद इसके क्या होंगे आप सारथी परिवर्तन के?

Sanjay Prasun  
HR Program Manager  
during the day, Poet by night  
(Ranchi, Jharkhand)  
Submitted by Hamsini
BIF Fellow Kannan Kaviya serving with Youth4Jobs Foundation

(Hyderabad, Telangana)
After volunteering for 3 years in the disability space during college, I was selected for this fellowship and was placed with the Youth4Jobs Foundation in Hyderabad. I am grateful to be working with an organization that aligns with my values and offering my learnings to the community that I've utilized in the past or learning new skills that are in alignment with the organization's goals. As time is something we can't get back, I see giving my time as a way to support the cause. It has been an eye-opening experience to see how much being a disabled person impairs your ability to function, no matter how capable you are.

I've had so many experiences that I wouldn't have been exposed to otherwise. I've learned a lot about life in general by hearing so many people's stories at my organization, and most importantly, I've learned that this community is doing something for the benefit of society without expecting anything in return.

It has always been a mixture of fun and seriousness at my workplace. Growing and thriving in a new environment is always challenging, especially if you just graduated from college, but my colleagues at Youth4Jobs have always been supportive and made sure I am comfortable and also able to absorb and learn new things every day!
Jyothi, my supervisor, is like the perfect recipe - a dash of tech expertise, a pinch of sweetness, and a whole lot of love for her colleagues. Not to forget her love for both sweet and spicy foods, which make for some interesting lunchtime debates. Jokes aside, I feel so lucky to have her as my supervisor. She's not just brilliant, she's also kind, patient, and always willing to lend a helping hand. I feel lucky to be working with her during my first professional experience.

My Supervisor, Jyothi Bezawada (Hyderabad, Telangana)

Submitted by Kaviya
Pal is like a web-designing witty person crossed with a marathon runner. He's got the endurance to run several kilometers and the creativity to make an amazing website in record time. And not to forget his love for chicken although his food intakes are pretty much low. He has taught me about designing, website making methods, and social media outreach. Plus, he's always willing to lend a helping hand, even if he's in the middle of some urgent work. Overall, Pal is an amazing person. He's patient, knowledgeable, and has the zeal to teach many more juniors to come in the future.

My second Supervisor, Satyander Pal (Hyderabad, Telangana)

Submitted by Kaviya
BIF Fellow Katie Koppen serving with The Naz Foundation (India) Trust

(Delhi NCR)
My time as a Banyan Impact Fellow has been an incredible learning opportunity that has provided me with invaluable exposure to diverse perspectives, cultures, experiences, and methods of approaching development work. The people I've bonded with have had the largest influence on my experiences. My time as a fellow has been shaped by the personal and professional connections I made and maintained while working in Delhi. I'd like to highlight one person who has not only been an invaluable source of knowledge and encouragement but also a bright spot in my day.
Gudiya and I became friends in December, when she began working as an intern for the Naz Foundation. I'll never forget her shy giggle that accompanied her beautiful grin when we first met. Eventually, we got to know each other and the reasons we'd both ended up in Naz. Gudiya is now a permanent member of staff after previously participating in the Aath Kadam programme. She has been a bright spot in my day, and I always look forward to our walks to the dukaan across the street. When I need a good laugh, I know I can count on her to deliver. This young lady is incredibly hard-working and strong. Gudiya aspires to improve the lives of those around her and believes the most important thing one can do in life is be a good and kind person.
Intern with The Naz Foundation (India) Trust,
Gudiya Pant (Delhi NCR)

Submitted by Katie
BIF Fellow Megan McKinley serving with Pudiyador’s project Playquity

(Chennai, Tamil Nadu)
My fellowship project has brought me to eight states over the last nine months. Throughout these travels, it has not been the places that have had the deepest impact on me, but the individuals I have met. While I wish I could highlight every person who has been part of my fellowship story, these are a few of the individuals whose presence has shaped me and whose conversations have influenced me.

The relationships I have built through this fellowship have inspired me to go deeper, think beyond the surface, and understand that everyday interactions have the potential to change the world. I hope these words and photos tell a story of small moments and big effects.
“I want to be remembered for promoting humanity and kindness. I want to promote a world where we are there for each other in any matter...”
Playquity Coach, Anjona Mahji (Chabua, Assam)

Submitted by Megan

“...I don’t want a life based on money but want to do things for the sake of self development. I want to lead women’s independence, be self-sufficient, and show other women how to do the same.”

-Anjona Mahji
Pirate delivers water cans by day and manages his 1980s candy cart by night. Though our interactions happen in broken English and broken Tamil, anytime I have run into Pirate around town, I have always left with a smile on my face.

He’s been a familiar face in a sea of people when we ran into each other on the street at night, at an engagement party, at a restaurant, or at a frisbee tournament. He has always gone out of his way to make sure I felt welcomed and included whenever we have run into one another.
Local Entrepreneur, Vel “Pirate” Murugan
(Chennai, Tamil Nadu)

Submitted by Megan
When everything has felt unpredictable, one thing that has remained constant is the jingle on his truck and the smile on his face coming by five times a day. "Saaptiya?" ("Have you eaten?" in Tamil), he would ask.

When I thought no one was looking, he reminded me that I was here and that he was watching out for me.
Civic Worker Satish (Chennai, Tamil Nadu)

Submitted by Megan
When we first met, I thought we could not be more opposite based on our backgrounds, cultures, personalities, and interests. On the surface, Jyoti appears innocent, calm, and obedient. Below that, though, is a fiery, passionate, and outspoken woman who has learned to adapt herself to her surroundings. She is strategic and intentional, and she challenges those around her to consciously assess how they navigate the world around them to do their best.

She has taught me the importance of giving more than you receive, that inner reflection is a daily practice, and the joy of simple moments in friendship. Jyoti is a living example of creating change internally in pursuit of a better world around her and a better future for the next generation.

We spent countless hours together, just the two of us. Through these experiences, our worldviews have expanded, perspectives have shifted, and bonds have solidified. I will never forget the day when she went beyond my colleague and became my Thangachi ("little sister" in Tamil) when she showed up for me and my family during a time of despair.

While Jyoti and I have worked tirelessly together, my favourite moments with her have been the spontaneous chai breaks, cooking lessons, silly cross-cultural mishaps, travel misadventures, and ongoing discussions about life, family, God, and everything in between.
My Colleague, Jyoti Chauhan
(Mumbai, Maharashtra)

Submitted by Megan
We moved to the same city in the same month without knowing a single person.

Her energy has lifted me up. Her cooking has brought me home. Her friendship has given me strength.

Together, we danced. Together, we explored. Together, we found home in a new city across the world.
“People never put labels on themselves until society decides who or what they are”

Friend and Socialite, Oliver Tyson (Chennai, Tamil Nadu)

Submitted by Megan
I am not entirely sure where they go at night, but every day they are waiting for me at the corner near my house. I like to call them my goat friends because they walk with me, say hi when I pass by, and are always there for me when I need a laugh.
Goats (Chennai, Tamil Nadu)

Submitted by Megan
Serendipity brought us together, and I am fortunate that he was one of the first people I met when I arrived in Chennai. He was leaving for Jordan the next day, and I was trying to orient myself to my new surroundings. We bonded over our love for the world, for adventure, exploration, and travel.

Since our initial meeting, our dialogue has deepened, and we continue to peel back the layers of complexity, intersectionality, and paradox in our lives. His presence in my life has proven to me that people are inherently good. As an outsider, he took me under his wing to make sure I felt supported and at home in my new city.

“Faith in God and trust in oneself is the key for happiness and hope for the future.”

~Dinesh Muralidharan

Submitted by Megan
BIF Fellow Sanaa Munjal serving with Mind@Ease initiative by Tech Mahindra Foundation

(Delhi NCR)
Coming from an environment where I was surrounded by support systems at every step of the way, the first few months of adjusting to a new life in Noida was not easy. Eventually, I found comfort in these individuals and solace in mundane things. For me, these faces are more than faces; they are the ones I look at to seek reassurance; they are a sense of home and a sense of being safe. For me, they are humans (and plants) who I can look at, take a breath, and murmur to myself that everything will be okay when the going gets tough. There are so many I could not include here, from my supervisor Chhavi at my host organization who checks in on me every day, to Pramod Bhaiya, who gets us chai at work that gets my day started in the right way, to the (several) auto wale bhaiya who drives me to work every morning and now doesn’t ask me where I need to be dropped off. Even between the briefest encounters, these humans and the connections I have built along the way have provided me with the support I know I could not do without. They have become a part of my daily routine and are unknowingly helping me move forward, day in and day out.
Seema Didi has been there since I started living in Noida. We both don’t understand each other’s language since her first language is Bengali, but every day when she comes, it’s her smile that does the talking. She reminds me of my cook back at home in Jaipur, who has been there with us ever since I can recall, so Seema didi is a little piece of home away from home.
Househelp Seema Didi (Delhi NCR)

Submitted by Sanaa
Although I have lived in Delhi for a few months, Noida is a fairly new place to me. Six months in, these are still the only two people I know in the city who also happen to be my flatmates. The people who helped me get to know the city a little better, who suggested the best burrito place, who cared for me while I was recovering from COVID, and the two people I am lucky to call my friends in this known yet unknown city.
Flatmate Sayantika
(Delhi NCR)

Submitted by Sanaa

Flatmate Srishti
(Delhi NCR)

Submitted by Sanaa
The first thing I got when I moved to my place was a plant, which is when I realized my love for plants and flowers. Day or night, these plants have kept me company in what started as a largely silent place, which eventually turned out to be a sense of comfort and safe space, powered by these green beings.
Plants: a safe space
(Delhi NCR)

Submitted by Sanaa
BIF Fellow Silpaa Gunabalan serving with Forus Health

(Bangalore, Karnataka)
I spent most of my life living in New York State, where I always had a support system close by. Moving to Bangalore alone, with no connection to anyone in the city, was daunting. However, within a few months, the city where I’d feel both excited and overwhelmed became a home for me.

I learned to develop deeper connections with a few people rather than focusing on building as large a community as possible. Meaningful conversations with people from different upbringings became the driving force behind building connections for me. The following photos include some of the people who impacted my personal and professional development during the fellowship and made me feel grounded during periods of uncertainty.
Who knew that Facebook would be the tool that saved me from months of loneliness? When I met Lopa in the “Bangalore Flats and Flatmates” group on Facebook, I did not expect to find such a good friend.

Although we had very different upbringings, we quickly bonded over similar tastes in music, a shared love of “New Girl,” and our past experiences. From cooking me dinner to trying to teach me how to speak Hindi, Lopa helped make Bangalore feel like home. She is the first person I call when I want to check out a cool eatery or spend the day in the park.

Lopa is synonymous with Bangalore for me. After a long day at work, I look forward to sharing stories with her over a delicious cup of masala chai. She provided me with a support system and filled my fellowship with fun.
Roommate & Friend, Lopamudra
(Bengaluru, Karnataka)

Submitted by Silpaa
Although I only spent a few days with Kajal on a field visit, we connected over our experiences and perspectives on public health. “I think if you’re trying to implement a project, the organization and the partners need to be on the same page with the same goals. Otherwise, it’s a waste. Because then you’re putting in so much effort and exerting yourself, and it’s not leading to anything good in your life.”

Colleague, Kajal
(Pune, Maharashtra)

Submitted by Silpaa
Dikshitha moved into my flat in February. She inspires me whenever I learn more about the journey she took to overcome the challenges life dealt her.

“2021 was hard. Not only did we have the second wave of COVID, but I was dealing with a lot in my personal life. I moved to Bangalore to find the freedom and independence I needed. Since then, I’ve learned the importance of living for myself and not letting others dictate my happiness.”

Roommate & Friend, Dikshitha (Bengaluru, Karnataka)

Submitted by Silpaa
BIF Fellow Sivakami Prasanna serving with India Health Action Trust

(Shahdol, Madhya Pradesh)
I had arrived in Shahdol with much anxiety, as it was far away from everything familiar to me. However, with its picturesque lakes and lush sal forest, Shahdol’s quaintness soon had me in its spell. More than the place, it was the wonderful people around me that made this city home. At times when life got a little tough, it was a friendly smile or a greeting that helped me keep going. This is a note of gratitude for the people who make my day a little better.
Rupa and I share the same balcony in the house we live in. Initially, I used to routinely run into her "coincidentally" whenever she was out to catch some fresh air. She is 18 and from a village in the nearby district. She lived with her two brothers in the neighbouring flat. She was always used to having people around, and I missed my friends sorely. This was enough for us to develop a solid friendship. She would show up at my doorstep whenever her brothers were not around. During one of the many conversations we had, my inability to make round and soft rotis came up. She bravely took the mission upon herself and showed up the next day with all the ingredients. The process, which included kneading, rolling, and cooking the perfect phulka, took her 15 minutes while I watched in complete awe. I made my first roti under her guidance.

When I left Shahdol for a short while in February, I expected to come back to Rupa. After all, she had promised to teach me how to make puris and a variety of pedas. However, I came back with a bad surprise. Her family had moved back to their village while I was away. She did not own a phone, so I had no way of contacting her. It was lonely and a little disconcerting, but soon I got used to the absence of a goodbye.

Now I make rotis once every week, and out of the thousand ways to do it, I still follow the method she taught me. Hopefully, one day, I will make the perfect Phulka just like she did.
From our first day of Roti tutorials, Rupa, Neighbour
(Shahdol, Madhya Pradesh)

Submitted by Sivakami
Niharika walked back into my life at a perfect juncture. Though we had met the previous year as classmates, our connection had strayed somewhere along the line when life happened. My fellowship placement helped me reconnect with her. We lived at two ends of Madhya Pradesh, in Shahdol and Betul, working in the same thematic area with different organisations.

At a point in time during the fellowship when I struggled to find the strength to go on, Niharika became my voice of reason. Keen on exploring MP together, we took a trip to Panchmarhi. The weekend was spent trekking, napping, and talking endlessly. The comfort of an old friendship is the best antidote to any problem. Our conversations gave me a much-needed perspective that encouraged me to make the most of my fellowship journey. Seeing MP with and through her made me fall a little more in love with this state and its people.
Niharika
(Panchmarhi, Madhya Pradesh)

Submitted by Sivakami
Life in Shahdol is synonymous with Praveen Bhaiya. He has been my introduction to Shahdol and my lifeline here. He was assigned to be my driver from Jabalpur Airport to Shahdol when I first arrived. We slipped into an easy friendship fairly quickly. He was my trusted companion for house hunting, shopping, and setting up my house.

I have never seen Praveen Bhaiya relax; his phone will always be ringing, and he never fails to answer the million responsibilities he takes on. He has been my go-to for any advice on living in Shahdol. I have whined to him and confided in him whenever life became hard. Everything in Shahdol seemed a lot more manageable because I knew I didn’t have to do it alone. His calm smile and constant reassurance, "chinta mat karna, main arrange karwadunga" (don't worry, I will arrange it), have helped me travel, explore, and live my fellowship time to the fullest.
Our many journeys together
(Shahdol, Madhya Pradesh)

Submitted by Sivakami
"Gudiya, aap tho patli ho gayi" (you have become thin). I hear this concern at least once a week from Razil Bhaiya. Razil Bhaiya owns a small vegetable and fruit shop on my street. His shop is positioned perfectly under one of my favourite Gulmohar trees in my locality. He has appointed himself as the guardian of my well-being ever since I moved here in October.

My presence, which initially struck him as an oddity in Shahdol, became the very reason for our friendship. He saved me the best of his produce and fed me pani puri while I taught him to count in Malayalam. His fascinating queries about my home and culture helped me feel more at home in Shahdol. Often, life gets in the way, and we might not meet for a couple of days. When we do meet, the concern in his voice is enough to make me feel cared for. We have become a comforting part of each other’s daily routines.
Razil Bhaiya, Vegetable Seller
(Shahdol, Madhya Pradesh)

Submitted by Sivakami
BIF Fellow Urvashi Suraj serving with ASRA
Samajik Lok Kalyan Samiti
(Dewas, Madhya Pradesh)
Having spent my entire life in a fast-paced city, I was well aware that moving to a small town for the fellowship would be a big adjustment. What started out with waves of excitement, confusion, and a hint of apprehension turned into comfort somewhere along the way. The familiar faces I passed on the street every day, the corner shop owners who went out of their way to help me out when I needed it, and the overall sense of closeness in most of my interactions all contributed to a feeling of connection that I had never quite experienced before.

Although I couldn't possibly do justice to all the wonderful people I met during my time here, these are a few of my favourite connections who made this charming town feel like home.
Kifayati was the first store I ever visited in Dewas, and Ritesh bhaiya was the first friendly face I saw here. Over the last nine months, it became my go-to grocery store on days I wanted to celebrate, on days I needed a pick-me-up, and on days I simply needed groceries. Looking back, a lot of that had to do with how at home Ritesh Bhaiya made me feel. From sharing kitchen hacks to discussing career choices, he has always gone above and beyond his role as a store owner. I’m glad to have witnessed Kifayati evolve from a small grocery store to the mini supermarket it is today!
Ritesh bhaiya, store owner at 'Kifayati'
(Dewas, Madhya Pradesh)

Submitted by Urvashi
I met Vikas when I first started working in the villages of Dewas. He was introduced to me as one of the field coordinators who would help me implement my fellowship project. We come from starkly different backgrounds and don’t always see eye-to-eye, but somehow we clicked from day one. Maybe it's because we both enjoy listening to different perspectives. Or maybe it's because Vikas is just an incredibly kind and genuine person.

Whether it’s listening to him talk about the people he cares about, his love for sports. or his favourite "sadabahar" songs, I have come to truly appreciate his company and unique take on life. There are some days when we're both so tired from work that we don't even bother translating our conversations. We might not understand each other completely, but even on those days, we’ve shared laughter and fun times.

It’s brought me great comfort to know that there's always someone who’s got my back!
Vikas, friend and Colleague (Dewas, Madhya Pradesh)

Submitted by Urvashi
Two things make rides with Mahendra bhaiya truly one-of-a-kind: his warmth and his rickshaw’s personality, which matches his own so well. If you’re riding with him, you’ll likely hear early 2000s Bollywood music blasting through the rickshaw’s music system, which he takes great pride in having set up. Whether it’s a trip to the doctor’s clinic, the town mela (fair), or just a regular commute to the office, he’s been my ride or die despite his busy schedule of ferrying students to multiple schools and colleges every day.

"I enjoy making people feel comfortable. You’re lucky."

I completely agree!
Mahendra bhaiya (Dewas, Madhya Pradesh)

Submitted by Urvashi
I was recently ill when Vishesh auntie, my neighbour, came knocking at my door. She noticed it was unlocked during the day and decided to check in on me. With everything going on, I ordered tiffin service for dinner since I was in no state to cook. The first thing she did was scold me. "Main hoon na yahan, mere hote hue tu tiffin nahi legi. Call karke, cancel karna." (There's no way you're ordering tiffin when I'm here. Cancel your order.)

Within 10 minutes, she had whipped up a warm bowl of khichdi for me. It was the only thing I managed to keep down that day. "Khabardaar jo tune mujhe ‘thank you’ bola toh. Tu meri beti jaisi hi hai" (Don’t you dare thank me. You’re like my daughter.)

Vishesh auntie has been my home away from home. Her loving presence, along with moments like this and the occasional warm hug, have provided me with a sense of comfort, security, and belonging throughout my stay here.
Vishesh Auntie, neighbor
(Dewas, Madhya Pradesh)

Submitted by Urvashi
My interaction with a colleague’s 9-year-old son is my favourite example of finding friendships in the most unexpected places and with the most unexpected people. I’d seen Naman around the office before, but it was only in April that we really connected; he was here on a holiday to spend some time with his father (my colleague). Our mutual love for the puppies in the office quickly brought us together.

Before I knew it, he was spending a significant chunk of his day in my cabin, laughing, playing games on his father’s phone, sharing lunch with me, and asking me all sorts of questions. As his visit drew to a close, we said our goodbyes, but to my surprise, he was back two days later. Our brief exchange that day still makes me smile.

Naman: Aapko mere bina achha laga ye do din? (Did you like it here without me these last two days?)
Me: Nahi yaar (Nah)
Naman: Hai na? Mujhe bhi achha nahi laga! (Right? I didn’t like it either.)
Naman, Colleague's son (Dewas, Madhya Pradesh)

Submitted by Urvashi
These furry friends were a constant source of stress relief and were probably the only connections in Dewas that have been here for a shorter period of time than me.

**Pup A (Shinti):** Loves affection, belly rubs, and sleeping on the welcome mat.  
**Pup B (Snoofy):** Always in a mood to play; makes the silliest faces; has max puppy energy.
Office Puppies
(Dewas, Madhya Pradesh)

Submitted by Urvashi

Pup C (Pinky): Will be remembered as a trooper; she appreciated a good soak; was afraid of cars; had the cutest tail wags

Pup D (Chotu): Loved toast and attention; could sleep all day; wouldn’t hesitate to pick a fight
We dedicate this book to the beautiful connections that have become the face of our fellowship experience. This is how we choose to remember our journey and the people we met through their whispered tales and untold stories. Years from now, this will be our trip down memory lane, reminding us of how surprising and delightful life can be. They represent a beautiful, inspiring, yet easily overlooked part of our Fellowship journey, and we cannot overstate how they shaped us during the last 10 months.

Sincerely,

Hamsini Balaji
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Erin Burneson
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Katie Koppen
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BEST WISHES,

THE BANYAN IMPACT FELLOWSHIP TEAM