



CENTRAL SQUARE
FOUNDATION

The Long Bet

How Contemporary Indian
Initiatives *are* turning Potential
into Excellence



Introduction by
GURCHARAN DAS

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Initiatives *are* turning Potential
into Excellence



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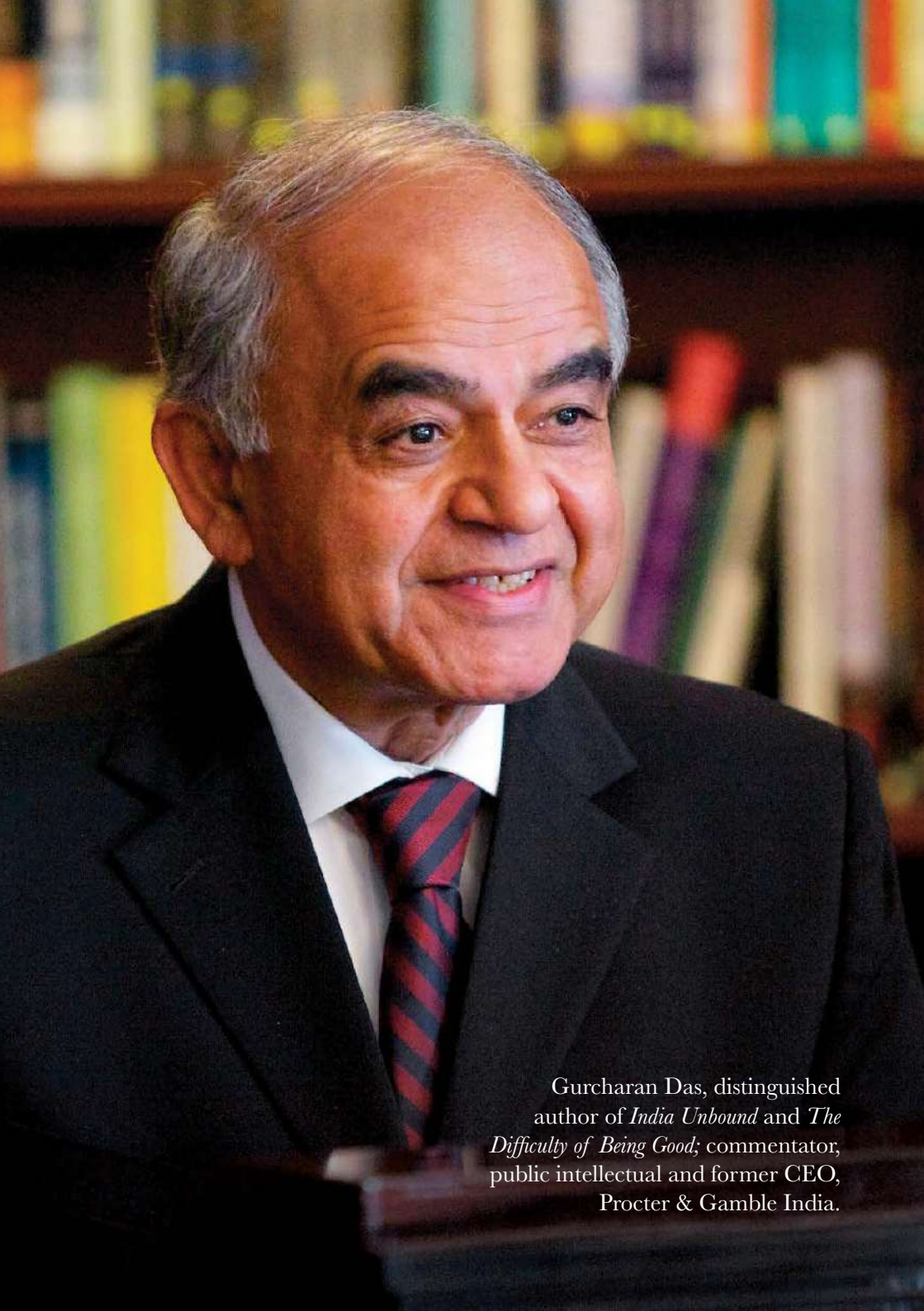
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HOW TO NURTURE THE GIFTED IN A DEMOCRACY

India has done reasonably well in providing universal access to primary education. Almost every Indian child is in school today. But there is still a long way to go before the average child receives high quality education. While the nation's focus is rightly on the latter objective, it is important to begin to find ways to cultivate the talent of 'gifted' children – those who have a higher than normal potential to contribute to the common good when they grow up.

Human abilities are profoundly unequal. Some children display extraordinary cognitive, artistic or scientific capacities early in life. If these capabilities are not developed, the nation stands to lose innovations, discoveries and leadership that could eventually benefit all. This book offers nine extraordinary

examples from India of how talent is spotted, nurtured and cultivated, especially among the disadvantaged, through private philanthropy. It does not examine, however, initiatives of the state – such as the 660 Navodaya schools network that admits only around 2% of the applicants annually (50,000 out of 2.5 million). Nor has it looked at meritocratic exams at a later stage – such as the sequential Joint Entrance Exams that admit less than 1% of the applicants into the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology. This is a worthwhile project for another book.

Institutions of excellence everywhere try to admit candidates with the highest potential. The philosophical question is, can a democratic nation cultivate the talent of the exceptional without betraying its commitment to equality? Even though the benefit to the common good far outweighs the perceived ‘unfairness’ of extra spending on their education, there is a legitimate fear that initiatives focused on the talented tend to create an elite, a social caste, that weakens the democratic fabric.

PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS OF GIFTED EDUCATION

The philosophical roots of gifted education are ancient. In the Republic, Plato advocates selective education for the talented, who will go on to exercise philosophical and civic leadership. Although his vision appears unapologetically elitist to our democratic ears, his essential insight is important. Political communities require individuals of talent and talent requires to be nurtured through special education.

The strongest argument for gifted education is not elitist but civic. Exceptional talent—when properly directed—can generate public goods: scientific breakthroughs, artistic

achievements, institutional reforms and entrepreneurial innovations that transform economies. History suggests that a small number of individuals can have a disproportionate social impact. If society systematically fails to cultivate its most capable minds, it impoverishes itself.

HISTORICAL ATTEMPTS TO HARNESS THE TALENTED

Some states in history have tried to harness the talents of high potential individuals for the common good. The most famous was the Chinese Mandarin scholar-bureaucrat who administered the imperial government of China for over 1,300 years, roughly 605 ACE to 1905. Mandarins were an educated elite, often from wealthy ruling classes, recognised by their specialised, ranked clothing and deep mastery of Confucian classics. (The word 'mandarin' is from the Sanskrit mantri, but it came to the West via the Portuguese.)

It was not a hereditary aristocracy in the strict sense, but a meritocratic elite selected through rigorous imperial examinations (Keju). Certain groups – servants, actors, entertainers, etc. – were forbidden from taking the exam. The exams were not immune from bribery; for example, the 1711 Yangzhou xiangxi protest saw massive resentment when children of wealthy merchants bribed their way to passing. During the 'foreign' Mongol and Manchu dynasties, quotas were created for the ruling minority, creating resentment among the Han Chinese majority. By the end of the Qing Dynasty, the system was seen as rigid, corrupt and disconnected from the needs of the people, contributing to its abolition in 1905.

Other historical attempts by the state to engineer the talented

for the common good were:

- The Devshirme System in the Ottoman Empire, wherein talented young boys were recruited from the empire's Christian provinces and trained at the Palace School to become ministers or elite military officers.
- After the French Revolution, the state wanted to replace the old aristocracy with a 'Republic of Talent'. This led to the creation of the Grandes Écoles, elite higher education institutions like the École Polytechnique. Via rigorous competitive exams (concours), it recruited and trained these graduates (known as the 'Grand Corps') who still run the French government, industry and military to this day.
- Inspired by the Chinese model, the British created the Indian Civil Service (the so-called 'Steel Frame' of the empire). Entry was based on a gruelling exam in order to create a class of 'Platonic Guardians' who were intellectually superior and impartial to administer the Indian Empire.

THE DEMOCRATIC DILEMMA

Like all modern democracies, India faces a dilemma. It is founded on a commitment to equality – equal dignity, equal citizenship and at least an aspiration for equal opportunity. Yet in every society, there is a small minority of 'gifted' individuals. By spotting and nurturing them, the nation not only helps to realise their potential but also promotes the common good. In doing so, however, it runs the risk of entrenching privilege – not of the wealthy but of a meritocratic elite – thus betraying egalitarian ideals. How should a democracy respond to this dilemma?

A more appropriate philosophical defence for a modern democracy comes from the American philosopher, John Rawls and his notion of fairness. Although a democratic society is rooted in the principle of equality, Rawls concedes that inequalities can be justified if they benefit the least advantaged. He would defend special education for the gifted if nurturing exceptional talent increased overall prosperity in such a way that it improved the life prospects of the worst off – i.e. a gifted programme would have to demonstrate that social gains do trickle down; that selection respects the principle of the equality of opportunity, say via scholarships for the gifted poor. If gifted education becomes gilded cages for the elite, it fails Rawls' fairness test.

There is also a pragmatic argument in favour of educating the gifted. Children of high potential tend to learn quickly and suffer boredom, disengagement and even behavioural problems in a normal school. Thus, they sometimes create a problem for the school. Providing such children a different form of instruction—faster paced, deeper inquiry and exposure to complex material—is not a luxury but the undoing of mis-education.

Ultimately, a gifted programme in a democracy is defensible if the initial selection universe is universal and meritocratic – i.e. there are guardrails against the very real risk of elite capture by the privileged and the benefits are not only widely shared but improve opportunities for the disadvantaged. In other words, it must be able to demonstrate that it is nurturing geniuses not for their own sake, but for the good of the whole society – and this includes the worst off.

INDIAN INITIATIVES TO TURN POTENTIAL INTO EXCELLENCE

There are nine inspiring stories in this book, all of them about institutions of excellence for the talented and all funded by philanthropy:

- The oldest programme, Jnana Prabodhini, was founded in 1962 in Pune. It runs a full-time school from grades 5-10 for intellectually gifted students. It has its own research institute, which studies how high-ability learners develop over time and feeds these insights in continuously improving the curriculum.
- Also in Pune is Avasara Academy, a semi-residential school for high-potential girls from poor families, serving 350 students in Grades 6-12. It offers multi-year, holistic learning, using the flexible Cambridge curriculum, with socio-emotional training under low academic pressure. It also develops leadership skills via student-run community projects and provides career counselling beyond graduation.
- The Lodha Genius Programme at Ashoka University selects and trains talented high school students in Grades 9-12, with a fully funded residential summer immersion in advanced Mathematics and Science, with one faculty for five students. It is followed by year-round online tutoring with global faculty when the student is back in regular school.
- The Akanksha Foundation runs Project RISE, a four-year after-school enrichment programme for high-potential students in Grades 6-9 in its network of

public-partnership schools in Maharashtra. It uses a constructionist approach in which students build, design and test ideas to understand and master a subject. A mentor model pairs experts with teaching assistants, many of them Akanksha alumni, ensuring both rigour and responsiveness.

- Avanti Fellows has given so far 80,000 students from poor families an opportunity to crack India's most competitive STEM exam for entry into prestigious colleges. It offers 20 hours of weekly instruction online, operates within public school systems (such as the Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya network) with resident tutors. It deliberately over-invests in girls, who represent over half of its successes.
- The National Law Scholars Program prepares small groups of rural, first-generation learners for entry into India's leading law schools. It works with children at meritocratic Navodaya schools to build habits of close reading, argument and critical reasoning rather than rote learning to help them pass competitive law entrance exams.
- The Udayan Shalini Fellowship supports high-potential girls from low-income families through a five-to-six-year journey from late secondary school into higher education. Operating across 38 chapters in 15 states, it has so far mentored over 18,000 girls with high capability through financial support, professional exposure and leadership development through social responsibility.
- The Abhyudaya initiative at the S.P. Jain Institute of Management & Research in Mumbai develops the talents of 40–70 high-potential students a year across seven

years, from municipal schools in Andheri West through daily after-school classes and one-on-one mentoring by business school students who gain course credit in the process. It thus aims to achieve both objectives of developing socially conscious business leaders while nurturing high potential talented learners.

- GenWise is a 2-3 week summer immersion for the gifted at Manipal Academy of Higher Education, which is based on the principle of enquiry-based learning without tests or grades.

LESSONS FROM THESE INITIATIVES

The following are lessons learned from these initiatives:

1. Not every gifted child needs a separate school; many benefit from enriched classes, mentorship with university labs, summer institutes, online advanced courses or differentiated classroom instruction.
2. In spotting talent, it is better to use multiple identification methods, rather than relying only on a single high-stakes test. To reduce socioeconomic bias, there are a number of additional multi-measures that have been found useful: teacher referrals, portfolio reviews, dynamic assessments, creativity and problem-solving tasks.
3. The role of parents is crucial in providing moral and other forms of support. Parents' involvement also signals mutual commitment and ownership of the programme.
4. Invest in the re-training and professional development of teachers in the pedagogy for high ability students.

5. Measure and publish outcomes transparently. Track not just test scores but long-term outcomes: well-being, civic engagement, career achievements and social mobility.
6. Continuously assess programmes, improving them from year to year. While modifying a programmes, it is prudent to pilot a new idea before scaling it.
7. Providing career counselling beyond graduation is crucial. It is a good idea to create links with good universities for early research internships for the gifted (lab placements, supervised projects).
8. A summer residential immersive institute for gifted high school students, with scholarships for the needy, is a powerful idea. Following up with weekly online tutoring when students are back in school continues to cultivate their talent.
9. Near-Peer mentors (teaching assistants, ex-students, alumni, students from similar backgrounds only a few years ahead) provide a trusted, relatable layer of support that bridges faculty and students. This reduces the psychological cost of not knowing and makes it safe to ask questions. Alongside this, exposure to practitioners and researchers of genuine expertise raises students' horizons and exposure to high-rigour environments about what is possible in their fields.
10. Link personal development to social obligation, so that talent is not seen as a private advantage but as a trusteeship for society's benefit.
11. Sustained, multi-year engagement is better than short or episodic interventions to translate potential into sustained achievement, especially in the case of first-generation learners.

12. Deliberate investment in students' mental and emotional well-being must accompany intellectual rigour to ensure that high expectations are paired with consistent care and support.

LESSONS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

There are also lessons for India from the experience of a number of countries, who have tried to spot and fast track the gifted, and wrestled to find the right balance between excellence and equality.

Singapore has long operated a formal Gifted Education Programme (GEP) run by the state by identifying high-performing primary students through national assessments and placing them in enriched tracks and specialised 'GEP centres'. It has resulted in high academic achievement, providing the nation with a strong pipeline in science and technology fields. Its strengths lie in a rigorous curricula backed by strong teacher training. It has, however, faced criticism related to heavy reliance on testing, late broadening of opportunities and creating an elite, thus weakening social cohesion. The Ministry of Education has had to reform the system to broaden access and reduce 'narrow' labelling. Singapore demonstrates that gifted education can coexist with normal education, but requires sensitivity to criticism and continuous recalibration.

The United States, in contrast, has a patchwork of decentralised gifted programmes: magnet schools, 'Advanced Placement' tracks, specialised high schools and enrichment initiatives. The diversity allows innovation, but access varies dramatically by school district. In cities like New York, selective schools like Stuyvesant have become flashpoints in debates over

racial representation and elitism. America's strengths lie in the diversity of its initiatives, providing a path to Ivy League and research excellence, and philanthropic support for innovation. The weaknesses are inequitable identification of talent, inconsistency of quality and constant political volatility due to legal and political battles over 'equity vs. excellence'. These result in frequent programme cuts to balance budgets or to address racial disparities. The American case illustrates both the dynamism and fragility of gifted education in a vigorous democracy.

Israel views giftedness as a national security asset. The Department for Gifted and Talented Students provides 'Pull-out Centres' where students spend one day a week at a specialised centre with university-level labs, while remaining in their local schools for social integration. It also operates specialised Science and Mathematics schools (as does China and Eastern Europe), which admit students through competitive examinations. These institutions often produce world-class mathematicians and scientists. Research suggests that there is upside in the correlation between these programmes and Israel's success in tech and innovation. The downside is a clear bias in early selection against students from poor families.

South Korea has set up specialised residential Science High Schools for the top 1% students in STEM subjects. It attributes its rapid industrialisation and global dominance in tech sectors (Samsung, etc.) to this focused human capital. However, this extreme 'shadow education' with private tutoring has meant high rates of student burnout and mental health issues.

Finland, on the other hand, represents the opposite from early selection systems. It seems to have achieved excellence through universal quality rather than stratification. Renowned

for its egalitarian, comprehensive system, it minimises early tracking and emphasises high-quality instruction for all. While it does not institutionalise extensive early gifted tracks, it allows flexible differentiation within classrooms and supports enrichment. Its secret may well lie in giving unusual autonomy to its teachers. The only negative that critics report is the lack of sufficient challenge for the high performers.

The experiences of these countries offer some more lessons in balancing excellence and equality for a gifted programme in a democracy. They reinforce or supplement what we have learned from the experiences of the nine private Indian initiatives recounted in this book:

- *Universal Screening:* To solve the elitism problem, initiatives must move away from parent-nominated testing -- which favours the savvy and wealthy -- to universal screening. Every child should be tested for high-potential logic and spatial reasoning early, say in the second grade.
- *Low Floor, High Ceiling Pedagogy:* Instead of physically separating a gifted child, general classrooms can adopt 'Low Floor, High Ceiling' tasks. These are assignments that a struggling student can complete (the low floor) but that a gifted student can take to a much higher level of complexity (the high ceiling).
- *The Tinkering Subsidy:* governments and philanthropists could also think of providing micro-grants directly to gifted students for independent projects—e.g. coding a new app, building a fusion reactor in a garage, or writing a novel—rather than just funding more 'classroom hours.'

THE WAY FORWARD

A democracy grounded in egalitarianism does not have to fear initiatives for the gifted. The big watchout is that one does not end up with a brittle meritocracy—technically brilliant but socially fragmented. Where initiatives and countries have succeeded, they pair high-quality instruction and resources with transparent processes and active outreach. Where they fail is when the programme becomes a mirror of existing privilege. Institutions must, therefore, be designed with care so that identification of the talented is fair and inclusive, evaluation is transparent, benefits are broadly shared and social cohesion is preserved. The task is delicate, but not impossible.

The choice is not between equality and excellence. It is between thoughtful design and careless stratification. If democracies neglect their most capable minds, they squander potential. If they cultivate them without regard for justice, they undermine legitimacy. The challenge is to combine a sense of fairness with pragmatic recognition of human differences—to build systems where talent is not a birthright of privilege but a discovered and nurtured gift, drawn from every corner of society and returned in service to all.

Let us remember: a gifted individual is a society's most valuable asset. It is this 'genius' who finds a cure for a disease that was thought incurable, or discovers a new form of energy, or transforms our lives in other ways as an entrepreneur, or offers visionary leadership that hugely benefits the whole society. Inspired by a great philosophical tradition beginning with Plato's desire to nurture great leaders and ending with

Rawls insight about fairness, there is an answer: nurture genius but make inclusion, reversibility and redistribution integral to the design. Spotting and supporting exceptional young talent can thus bring very large social gains.







1.

Walking with
students as
they grow

**What becomes possible
when support is steady,
relationships are strong
and expectations
remain high over many
years?**

These models reimagine support not as a set of programmes, but as a sustained environment for growth. Designed for students with potential from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, they weave together academic rigour, mentorship, personal development and socio-emotional support within a deeply immersive experience.

What distinguishes these initiatives is not only their intensity, but their continuity. Over several years, they shape daily experiences in ways that build stability, confidence and aspiration, conditions many students might otherwise lack. The ecosystem becomes a dependable space where potential can surface, be stretched and mature, supported by strong adult relationships, peer communities and intentionally nurtured cultures of learning and care.

Rather than addressing isolated gaps, these models transform the student's developmental journey as a whole.



Fortitude (n)

/ fɔːr-ti-tude / 4 >

Strength, firmness, physical and
personal strength to address challenges



Avasara Academy

Avasara Academy

A school model for long-term development of high-potential girls from under-resourced backgrounds

On her first visit to the Avasara Academy campus, a mother sat outside her daughter's classroom, uncertain and watchful. She had sent her child to this unfamiliar school on Pune's outskirts despite people from her community advising against it. As she was waiting, she looked through an open doorway and saw something unexpected. Her daughter, the quiet girl she knew, stood before her classmates, speaking confidently and engaging in conversation with one of the founders of the Academy. *"My daughter can speak so much. She has so much talent"*, the mother recalled years later. *"I didn't know that. I felt so good to see her"*.

The apprehension that had gripped her for weeks began to dissolve. Over time, she noticed more changes: her daughter participating in conversations at home, expressing opinions and asking to be included in family decisions. This was not simply academic progress. It was agency - a young girl beginning to see herself as someone with a voice and choices.

“When I first sent my daughter so far away, people questioned me. Today, those same people say, ‘Send our daughters there too’. They see the difference in how she speaks and how she carries herself.”

Mother of an Avasara Alumna

That first year, in 2015, only six students from that community enrolled. Today, ten years later, that same community sends more than 80 girls to Avasara Academy.

The Problem Hiding in Plain Sight

When Avasara Academy was founded in 2015 by Roopa Purushothaman and Joseph Cubas, it was conceived as an experiment rooted in a troubling economic reality. Around that time, girls’ enrolment in education was improving rapidly, with near-parity at many levels of schooling¹. Yet these gains did not develop into opportunity: women’s participation in India’s workforce remained low and continued to decline through the mid-2010s, dropping to among the lowest rates globally². Education was expanding access, but it was not

¹ Derived from gender-disaggregated Gross Enrolment Ratios reported in UDISE, 2011-12 to 2015-16.

² Estimates of female labour force participation vary by source; however, both NSSO/PLFS data and ILO-modelled World Bank series show a sustained decline in women’s participation in India through the 2000s and into the mid-2010s.

reliably translating into confidence, aspiration or sustained participation, particularly for talented girls from low-income and marginalised backgrounds. Early promise was being identified, but not held.

“We kept seeing clearly capable girls, but after a point, their growth flattened. Not because they lacked ability, but because nothing around them was designed to hold them.”

Avasara Leadership Team

Avasara was conceived as an experiment to interrupt that pattern. The question was: How do you design an environment that can carry this high potential through adolescence and beyond?

This led to a series of deliberate choices that would shape everything to follow: beginning in middle school, when identity is forming, investing deeply in a small cohort rather than spreading resources thin, creating a single-sex learning environment where girls could speak without hesitation and committing to support that would extend far beyond the school gates.

“Avasara was started with the belief that one girl, given the right environment, can change the course of her own life and sometimes those of others around her. That belief shaped everything we built.”

Avasara Leadership Team

This belief finds expression in Avasara’s shared values - integrity, fortitude, excellence, optimism, empathy, interdependence, reflection and a deep sense of sisterhood, shaping how students

learn, relate and take responsibility within and beyond the school community.

From this foundation emerged a deliberate system designed to hold and sustain the potential of high ability girls from under-resourced backgrounds, ensuring that early promise translates into opportunity.

STARTING SLOW: ACADEMIC DESIGN FOR UNEVEN READINESS

Admissions at Avasara look beyond marks to identify potential in a broader sense, including curiosity, reasoning, creativity and ambition. The process combines assessments, conversations with students and their families to understand motivations, ambitions and creative potential, and close attention to educational and home contexts. The focus is on girls who show intellectual spark, but may not have had access to teaching that fully develops those capacities.

When students arrive at Avasara in Grade 6, they arrive confident, proud and ready to excel. Then they sit down in an Avasara classroom and everything changes. English is faster. The questions are open-ended. The teacher is not asking them to recall facts but to explain reasoning. Instead of copying from a blackboard, they are expected to discuss, debate and question.

*“At Avasara, I realised the problem wasn’t my ability,
it was the way I was being taught. Once learning
made sense, everything changed.”*

Avasara Alumna

Avasara treats the first three years - Grades 6, 7 and 8, not as

regular academic years but as a deliberate bridge period. In this critical phase, students are not sorted, labelled or tracked. Avasara delays judgment entirely.

“Our students come from very different schooling environments altogether. When they enter Avasara, they are not on the same footing. We recognise that the transition itself takes time.”

Rajvi Dalal, Development Manager

This recognition shaped every early academic decision in the school’s life. After reviewing multiple curricula, Avasara chose Cambridge for one specific reason: pedagogical flexibility. Cambridge does not prescribe fixed textbooks, rigid syllabi or predetermined pacing. Teachers have the freedom to curate content, revisit concepts multiple times, slow down when needed and adapt to how students actually learn rather than racing to cover material. Language development, reading comprehension and academic habits are prioritised alongside, sometimes even ahead of, subject knowledge.

In the initial months, teachers focus less on performance and more on how students learn: how they read, how they frame questions, how they respond to uncertainty and how they persist through difficulty. Gaps are expected and treated as information, not as evidence of limited ability.

There is no ranking system at Avasara. There is no public posting of results. Excellence is defined through growth, consistency, collaboration and application, rather than relative position. Report cards include Cambridge-aligned letter grades, but these are secondary to detailed teacher commentary and structured student reflection. After each trimester, students are required to reflect on their performance in each subject, drawing

on the feedback they receive to make meaning of their progress and challenges. Translating feedback into action, identifying what to continue, what to change and how to move forward, is treated as the student's responsibility, reinforcing ownership of learning rather than passive receipt of evaluation.

Teachers use frequent low-stakes quizzes, conduct one-on-one conferences after tests regardless of performance and share clear rubrics that make the path from current understanding to mastery visible.

“Mastery does not look the same for every child. What matters is whether each student is moving forward from where she started.”

Rashmi Sharma, English Teacher

When students continue to struggle, despite all the support, Avasara's counsellors conduct formal psycho-educational assessments. Once the challenge is identified, instruction is adjusted. Formal accommodations are coordinated with Cambridge: extra time, scribes and modified papers. Students who might have been written off in conventional systems go on to achieve strong academic outcomes once teaching aligns with how they actually learn.

Teachers at Avasara are trained in 'Avasara Style', an instructional model that prioritises interaction over lectures. Classes are structured around short instructional bursts, followed by discussion, peer learning and application. Practices such as think-pair-share, turn-and-talk, group problem-solving and the norm of 'C3 before me', asking three peers before approaching the teacher, are embedded across classrooms. These are not individual teaching styles, but shared expectations.

Another defining feature of the Avasara environment is its



intentional flattening of hierarchy to cultivate student agency. Students are trusted with autonomy and encouraged to speak up, ask questions and offer feedback in respectful ways. This is reflected in everyday practices, such as not requiring permission for basic movement, open dialogue in classrooms and the ease with which students approach teachers and school leadership. This helps girls internalise a crucial belief: their voices matter and they have both the right and the responsibility to use them thoughtfully.



“Our teaching-learning practice is deeply intentional. Every lesson, conversation and challenge develops both thinking and self-awareness. In a rigorous yet supportive environment, girls do more than acquire knowledge; they find their voice, build confidence and reimagine who they can become. As Principal, I witness this transformation every day. It is this aspirational learning that defines Avasara.”
Atreyi Saha, Principal

These practices are sustained by educators who see Avasara’s mission as an opportunity to contribute to something larger than themselves. This sense of purpose translates into deep relational investment, willingness to examine personal biases and commitment to learning and unlearning together.

Together, this architecture prevents early promise from

flattening before it has room to grow. Potential is not assumed at entry; it is deliberately constructed through time, support and the refusal to judge before readiness is built.

EXPERIENTIAL LEADERSHIP: REAL PROJECTS, REAL STAKES

From the outset, Avasara set out not only to educate individual girls but to nurture visible role models from underserved communities who could challenge entrenched beliefs about what girls and women can become. The founders believed lasting change would emerge not from rhetoric or isolated success stories, but from a growing community of young women whose choices shift expectations within families and communities. By supporting girls to pursue paths in fields where women remain underrepresented, from STEM and policy to finance, design and the arts, Avasara makes new possibilities tangible and demonstrates that girls can drive socioeconomic change across generations.

This vision shaped how leadership itself would be taught. Leadership is developed through real-world responsibility, not conferred through titles or isolated activities. This approach is embedded through the Leadership, Entrepreneurship and India Studies (LEI) programme, which runs alongside the academic curriculum across all grade levels.

“Leadership wasn’t taught as theory. We went into our communities, identified real problems and tried to solve them. That experience still shapes how I work today.”

Avasara Alumna (First-batch student;
education professional)

LEI brings together three connected ideas: leadership, entrepreneurship and an understanding of India and its communities.

Leadership and Entrepreneurship

Leadership and entrepreneurship at Avasara are cultivated through carefully designed immersive experiences, including retreats, student-run enterprises and projects addressing real-world challenges.

In the early years, the focus is inward, on helping students develop self-awareness, reflect on values and understand their place within a group. Gradually, learning moves outward, connecting personal growth to real-world questions.

Students participate in annual grade-level retreats aligned with their developmental stage and leadership journey. These experiences move learning beyond routine academic spaces into shared, reflective environments where leadership is shaped through real-world exposure, observation and participation. For instance, one grade visited Pune's coppersmiths to understand how craft, identity and leadership are passed across generations, while another spent time in senior citizens' homes to foster empathy and intergenerational connection. Retreats help students connect personal values with community, culture and responsibility, reinforcing a core LEI belief: leadership is a practice developed through sustained engagement with the world.

During the middle grades, students lead real, functioning enterprises on campus. Currently, approximately 75 students from Grade 9 run 15 functioning businesses on campus. These are not simulations. Students are responsible for budgeting,

procurement, pricing, customer interaction and delivery. Ventures have included a library-lending service, edible cutlery production and platforms designed to promote small local businesses. Teachers remain present, but do not take over execution.

In Grades 11-12, leadership moves beyond campus and into the surrounding community through year-long 'Hero Projects'. These are not short social service stints. Students identify a problem, conduct field research, map stakeholders and commit to sustained engagement. One group designed and ran an education programme called 'Project Vruddhi' for the children of construction workers at a nearby university campus. Students planned curricula, managed logistics, coordinated volunteers and adjusted their approach when attendance dropped or materials failed to land. Grade 12 students organised a multi-school leadership conference with participants from more than ten schools. After researching issues relevant to youth in Pune, they selected four urban themes and managed outreach, logistics, media, research and facilitation.



“For us, leadership is not about preparing students for a stage or a single event. Those moments matter, but they are not the goal. What we are really trying to build is the ability to take responsibility in everyday situations, in classrooms, in hostels, in teams and in how students respond to problems around them.”

Anupam Deshpande, LEI Lead

UNDER THE BRIDGE: A STUDENT-LED INTERVENTION

When Divya, an Avasara student, noticed daily-wage workers gathering under a bridge in Pune each morning, she spent months researching labour markets, interviewing over 20 workers and union leaders, and studying similar initiatives in Delhi and Hyderabad, none of which operated in Pune.

Her fieldwork revealed unexpected realities: most workers were local Maharashtrians rather than migrants and informal hiring was shaped by complex power dynamics, unions and worker preferences. Based on these insights, Divya is developing Under the Bridge (UTB), a digital platform designed to transparently connect workers and contractors. Unlike existing models, UTB distinguishes skilled and unskilled labour, uses union-facilitated data collection in Marathi, pilots with a small group of contractors and incorporates accountability through a review system.

The project remains ongoing and intentionally unfinished. Other students have joined to support research, data management and contractor outreach, allowing UTB to continue across cohorts as a legacy initiative rather than a one-time assignment.

As one mentor reflected: “She couldn’t do it alone, so she invited others in. And they stepped forward”.

India Studies

Within LEI, the India Studies strand grounds leadership development in an understanding of India's history, diversity and lived realities. Students engage with India not as an abstract subject but as a complex context they belong to and will help shape, through classroom inquiry and experiences such as Diversity Day celebrating the cultures and traditions within the community.

Learning is immersive and project-based: students explore historical eras and translate research into tangible forms, from city planning layouts and a Mauryan treasure box to replicas of Ashoka's Pillar conveying messages of peace and ethical governance. Together, these experiences strengthen connection to India's past, deepen reflection on its present and encourage students to imagine their role in shaping its future, reinforcing leadership as rooted in cultural awareness and responsibility to context.

What distinguishes LEI is how leadership is embedded: inclusive, sustained over multiple years and grounded in real responsibility rather than performance. LEI anchors it in India's lived realities, its diversity, its inequities and the specific contexts students will navigate. Students are assessed on judgment, iteration and follow-through, allowing forms of potential to surface that short-term or high-visibility leadership roles rarely reveal.

Beyond LEI, sport at Avasara reflects its broader approach to leadership development. The school intentionally expands girls' participation in spaces where they have historically been underrepresented, offering access to disciplines ranging from indigenous sports such as Kho Kho and Silambam to team and

individual sports. Participation is valued not only for well-being, but for building the confidence to occupy public space, take risks and recover from setbacks.

THE SAFETY NET THAT ALLOWS RISK: HOLISTIC SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNING INTEGRATION

Many Avasara students come from families experiencing poverty, limited educational exposure and trauma. The gap between their starting point and destination requires comprehensive emotional support.

“When you consider where our students come from and the aspirations we want them to build, it’s a huge leap. We know the journey won’t be smooth. SEL is about equipping them with the tools to navigate it.”

SEL Team



In response, the academy invests in support structures that run alongside academic learning through its socio-emotional learning (SEL) programme. Counselling is normalised from the outset and introduced in Grade 6 as a routine part of learning and growth. The focus is on building resilience, emotional intelligence and life skills proactively, equipping students to navigate challenges before they escalate.

“Earlier, I thought showing emotions meant I was weak. Avasara taught me that emotions are not a weakness. They are something I can understand and manage, not hide.”

Student, Grade 9

The school operates a three-tier SEL system. Firstly, every section in every grade has a one-hour counselling class built into the timetable per week. These are universal, normalised and cover topics like interpersonal skills and communication, emotional regulation and stress management, identity and gender, financial literacy, decision-making, body image and self-worth, and navigating conflict. Avasara ensures counsellor continuity by assigning the same counsellor from Grade 6 through Grade 12, allowing for a deep understanding of each student’s journey.

Classes are highly interactive. Counsellors facilitate, but students lead conversations. Activities range from creating mandalas during stressful exam weeks to writing ‘morning pages’ where students sit anywhere on campus and write whatever thoughts come to mind. One particularly powerful unit focused on the teenage brain, explaining the neurological changes happening during adolescence, why emotions feel so intense and why peer relationships suddenly matter so much.

Secondly, students belong to advisory groups of 20-24, led by two teachers, meeting twice a week. These spaces are used for structured conversations about stress, conflict, belonging and values. Students discuss real challenges they are facing academically or socially.

Thirdly, Grade Level Seminars (GLS) bring entire cohorts together to address shared challenges and reinforce community norms once a week. GLS serves multiple purposes, from reinforcing school values and culture to addressing grade-specific challenges (Grade 10 exam stress, Grade 12 college applications).

To understand whether its SEL programme is truly working, Avasara looks at changes in how students live and lead. Each year, surveys track growth in self-efficacy, resilience and hope, while students themselves design and run anonymous feedback for teachers. Increasing numbers of girls now self-refer for counselling and many alumni continue seeking support years after graduation, reflecting persistence and trust. At home, parents report daughters speaking up more in family decisions and in school, participation in SEL consistently aligns with stronger academic performance. Together, these signals show not just well-being, but sustained agency over time.

“Our students come to us mostly with no stigma. They come in with a really open, fresh mind and we get to sort of paint that canvas. They’re very open to counselling services. Most of the students in counselling right now are self-referred. Very few are actually referred by their teachers or their advisors.”

Pooja Rao, School Psychologist and Head of Impact

Avasara does not treat socio-emotional learning as a separate outcome. Sustained engagement builds self-efficacy, confidence and the willingness to take academic and personal risks. Over time, students who develop emotional regulation, help-seeking behaviours and a sense of agency are better able to persist through challenges, recover from setbacks and engage more deeply with learning. This growth supports smoother transitions, informed decision-making and well-being under pressure.

At Avasara, SEL functions as foundational infrastructure: potential is not protected by lowering expectations, but by ensuring students have the internal tools to meet them.

OPENING DOORS (AND KEEPING THEM OPEN): COLLEGE, CAREER AND BEYOND

When Avasara's first batch approached graduation in 2020, the school faced a reckoning.

“We realised many parents were unskilled workers and students had little exposure to higher education or professional work. Career counselling became an organic, essential piece.”

Philip, College & Career Counsellor

The problem was not ability. The problem was navigation: How do you apply to universities when your parents have not been to college? How do you choose between courses when you have never met anyone in those professions? How do you afford tuition? And perhaps most crucially: How do you persist when you are the first in your community to attempt this, when the

pressure to drop out is constant, when early marriage is always presented as a safer option? Avasara's College and Career Counselling (CCC) programme emerged as a response to these questions. What began as pastoral support evolved into a structured, multi-year pathway designed to bridge aspiration, access, financial feasibility and ongoing support.

Career Exploration and Preparation

Students are introduced to 16-17 career clusters across disciplines, from agriculture and health sciences to design, commerce and the creative arts. They are intentionally assigned clusters outside their academic stream to broaden exposure and encourage informed choice rather than early specialisation.

At the end of Grade 10, students choose A-level subjects with support from aptitude and interest assessments, counselling sessions and 'taster weeks' in different streams. Stream changes remain possible in Grade 11, with catch-up support provided where needed.

By Grade 11, guidance becomes more intensive. Students attend counselling classes twice weekly, build résumés and participate in mock interviews. Targeted college fairs, industry visits and interactions with professionals help translate aspiration into informed decision-making.

Donors as a Professional Network

Recognising that aspiration grows through exposure, Avasara leverages its donor and partner community as an extended professional network. Mentorship, internships, workplace visits

and professional conversations help students build confidence and understand professional norms. This access to social capital, often unavailable to first-generation learners, strengthens pathways beyond school and helps sustain aspirations over time.

Financial Support for Higher Education

Even when students secure admission to strong universities, affordability can remain a barrier. Avasara supports students in maximising merit- and need-based aid and works with donors to bridge remaining gaps. Families contribute according to their means and additional support from donors typically ranges from ₹50,000 to ₹1.5 lakh annually.

The school also partners with universities offering substantial scholarships and uses scholarship agreements with families to reinforce continuity and discourage early withdrawal. Application costs and procedural barriers are addressed through targeted support.

“We always look for colleges that provide scholarships. In the last five years, about 80% of fees are covered by college aid; we support the remaining gap with families.”

Kalika, College & Career Counsellor

For one alumna from Dharavi, this support made it possible to pursue computer science, a path that once felt out of reach.

“Knowing finances wouldn’t hold me back changed how I thought about my future. It gave me the courage to aim high.”

Avasara Alumna

Transition Programme

After A-level examinations, students participate in a one-month transition programme preparing them for university and independent adulthood. The programme focuses on financial planning, decision-making, independent learning strategies, digital and workplace tools, and practical life skills that build confidence and self-sufficiency.

Alumni Support

Although formal schooling ends after undergraduate studies, support often continues through the Alumni Support Team, which offers financial aid, emotional support, career guidance, placement assistance and networking. Regular check-ins track academic progress, career transitions and well-being, recognising that early professional environments can be as challenging as academic transitions.

Beyond formal support, Avasara's donor and partner network often functions as an informal incubation space where alumni can seek mentorship, test ideas and explore early career or entrepreneurial pathways with guidance rather than in isolation.

PARENTS AS PARTNERS, NOT BYSTANDERS

A core insight at Avasara Academy is that student outcomes depend as much on parental trust as on in-school design. Academic and personal gains can unravel if families lose confidence or face external pressures.

For first-generation learners in particular, sustained growth requires families to understand, trust and actively support their daughters' journeys.

Parent engagement is therefore treated as essential infrastructure. Structured Parent-Teacher-Student Meetings (PTSMs), held two to three times a year, help families understand progress, areas for growth and next steps. Conversations are largely student-led, reinforcing reflection and ownership, while grade-specific workshops support parents at key stages, from understanding the school's mission to navigating board exams, subject choices and college planning. Sessions on safeguarding and school support systems further strengthen trust and alignment.

At the centre of this partnership is the school's social worker, who serves as the primary bridge between school and families. The social worker's engagement with families begins before enrolment through home visits and continues through financial guidance, access to scholarships and government schemes, documentation support and ongoing communication, enabling early intervention when challenges arise. When families face pressure to withdraw daughters, the social worker helps them use protective clauses in scholarship agreements as leverage. Additional measures, such as employing mothers as bus monitors, further strengthen communication and community trust.

Over time, this sustained engagement has shifted community attitudes from scepticism to advocacy, with parents becoming strong ambassadors for the school. Avasara's experience underscores a clear lesson: without a dedicated social work function anchoring parent partnership, even well-designed educational interventions struggle to hold.

DESIGN INSIGHTS FROM A DECADE OF PRACTICE

What began with 50 students and five teachers in three modest rooms has grown into a semi-residential campus serving more than 350 students in Grades 6-12, drawing girls from across India, alongside an alumni network of more than 200 graduates now studying at leading universities and working across diverse sectors.

“Before Avasara, I never imagined a future beyond what I could see around me. Over the years, the school taught me how to think, how to lead and how to believe that my voice mattered. That change didn’t happen overnight; it grew with me.”

Avasara Alumna, Economics & finance student
at Ashoka University

For instance, a first-generation learner from a family that ran a small local business is now pursuing Quantum Physics at the University of Chicago; a domestic worker’s daughter is training to become a doctor with the intent to return to her community and a student who grew up in informal settlements is studying engineering and economics while mentoring younger girls and supporting her family.

Yet the school’s leadership is careful not to define success only by destinations. What matters just as much are other, equally important indicators of growing confidence and independence: girls delaying marriage, travelling independently for education and work, participating in household decisions and entering professions previously unseen in their communities.



“At Avasara Academy, education goes beyond achievement. It is about cultivating voice, values and vision in young women who will shape the future. This belief guides our learning culture, leadership practices and commitment to ethical, purpose-driven education.”

Lakshmi Kumar,
School Director

Certain design choices have consistently mattered: delaying early judgment, giving students real responsibility, embedding emotional support as a universal feature, supporting key transitions, and treating parent partnership as infrastructure rather than outreach.

While the intensity of the Avasara model may limit direct replication, its underlying principles are transferable, particularly in assessment practices, authentic leadership development, transition support and the normalisation of counselling and help-seeking.

Avasara’s contribution is evidence that when time, structure and support align over years, talent is more likely to translate into sustained agency.









Jnana Prabodhini

Nurturing ability for nation building

Jnana Prabodhini was founded in 1962 at a time when India was confronting complex challenges of poverty, development and social equity. Its founder, Dr Vinayak Vishwanath Pendse, a psychologist, educator and social activist inspired by Swami Vivekananda's vision of man-making education, did not begin with an institutional blueprint. He began with a question: *How do you train youngsters to lead and address the problems of independent India?*

His early work in rural communities showed him that social problems are rarely straightforward and cannot be addressed through fixed approaches. They demand intellectual ability,

creativity, judgement and leadership. This insight shifted his focus from isolated interventions to long-term human development. His research suggested that high-ability students, when purposefully motivated, can become changemakers at the frontiers of society. From this understanding emerged Jnana Prabodhini's guiding philosophy: *motivating intelligence for social change*. In this view, intelligence extended beyond academic achievement. It encompassed reasoning, creativity, leadership, emotional sensitivity, concern, compassion and ethical judgement. The task was not merely to identify high ability early, but to nurture it deliberately through formative years.

Jnana Prabodhini Prashala, established in 1969, became the institutional embodiment of Jnana Prabodhini's vision: a full-time school for intellectually gifted children. As practice deepened, Jnana Prabodhini identified a complementary need: *systematic study of the concept of intellect, its scientific identification, assessment and development*. This led to the establishment of the Jnana Prabodhini Institute of Psychology (JPIP).

Over the past six decades, Jnana Prabodhini has evolved into an ecosystem in which research, schooling, family engagement and alumni involvement reinforce one another. JPIP and Prashala work in sync and are critical to this ecosystem. Classroom experience generates research questions; research reshapes programme design. Underlying this structure is a consistent recognition: *nurturing giftedness is a long-term developmental endeavour shaped by multiple, interconnected influences rather than any single intervention*.

This integrated design is ultimately oriented toward a particular kind of outcome: not merely academically successful students, but individuals equipped with the socio-emotional depth and inner motivation to lead responsibly.



“At its core, our work is about helping high-ability learners build strong socio-emotional foundations. We aim to nurture their leadership potential, not in a transactional sense, but in a transformational one. Transactional leadership is largely skill-based and often operates at a surface level. Transformational leadership is rooted in attitude, motivation and values. What we seek to cultivate are young people who become leaders in their own fields, individuals with both the capability and the inner drive to create meaningful change.”

Dr Anagha Lavalekar,
Director & Professor, JPIP

JNANA PRABODHINI INSTITUTE OF PSYCHOLOGY

The Jnana Prabodhini Institute of Psychology (JPIP) serves as the research and outreach arm of Jnana Prabodhini. Permanently affiliated with Savitribai Phule Pune University and recognised by the University Grants Commission, it is guided by the conviction that a developmental, whole child approach must extend beyond a single institution into mainstream schools, family environments and the wider educator community.

JPIP advances this vision through its research and educational programmes, most notably Prajna Prabodhan Varg, Prajna Maitra and its postgraduate diploma programmes, which have trained hundreds of educators across India in principles such as developmental identification and staged curriculum design. Underlying all three is the same research-practice loop: decades of longitudinal observation inform programme design, while programme experience continually feeds back into research.



“Our best questions come from moments of confusion in classrooms. When something doesn't work, that is where research begins.”

Kshama Datar, Prajna Prabodhan Varg (PPV) Facilitator and Coordinator, JPIP

Through JPIP, Jnana Prabodhini's philosophy reaches far beyond a single institution or programme.

Intentional & Multi-Dimensional Identification

JPIP defines giftedness through three interrelated traits: above-average intellectual ability, creativity and sustained commitment.

As Dr Sujala Watave, Former Director of JPIP and one of the leading researchers on gifted education in India, explains:

“High ability is one of the things; then there should be passion and creativity. So, these three things together we can call giftedness. We believe that many of the children in our country are intelligent and we should identify them and then we should nurture their intelligence accordingly.”

Dr Sujala Watave, Former Director JPIP; Member, Jnana Prabodhini Samshodhan Sanstha

Guided by Dr Pendse's founding vision, JPIP adds a fourth trait: *concern for society*. This framing goes beyond test scores and shapes how JPIP identifies and nurtures its students.

JPIP's identification framework draws from J P Guilford's Theory of the Structure of Intelligence (SOI) as a constellation of multiple abilities rather than a single, unitary score. Over time, JPIP developed a comprehensive set of 120 assessment tests. These were developed for Indian socio-cultural contexts, assessing not only reasoning but also creative and socio-emotional dimensions.

This philosophy extends to Prashala's selection process. Each year, more than 1,000 students appear for Prashala's entrance assessments; approximately 80 (40 boys and 40 girls respectively) are selected as the final cohort. Yet the institution is careful about how it interprets this selection outcome. Identification is treated as a hypothesis about potential that must be tested and refined through sustained engagement.



“In many other institutions across the world, the work stops at identifying individuals. That's only the first step here at Jnana Prabodhini. What matters is what you do with those children.”

Dr Aakash Chowkase,
Prashala Alumnus
(currently Post Doc at UC Berkeley and Faculty at Yale University)

Parents attending the entrance process are explicitly told that non-selection does not imply the absence of giftedness. The assessment identifies children whose profiles align with Prashala's developmental approach; it does not establish any generalised thumb rule. From the outset, intelligence is seen in many forms, with no one type considered superior.

Experience reinforced this stance. Some children who scored strongly at age ten struggled with motivation during adolescence. Others required time for emotional maturity to align with cognitive ability. In a few cases, abilities that were not immediately visible during assessment emerged only after years of engagement.

Prajna Prabodhan Varg

Prajna Prabodhan Varg (PPV) is JPIP's after-school enrichment programme. Serving non-Prashala students from Grades 5 to 11 through weekend sessions and residential camps, PPV



is a multi-year developmental pathway shaped by the same longitudinal insights.

PPV follows a staged progression through two programmes: Kishor (Grades 5-7) and Kumar (Grades 8-11). Early years focus on strengthening foundational cognitive processes: observation, reasoning and imagination. Later stages deepen inquiry, collaboration and self-regulated learning. Each stage builds on the previous one.

Assessment is built into activities rather than conducted as separate tests. Facilitators observe how students approach ambiguity, respond to feedback and collaborate with peers. These observations shape ongoing programme adjustments and generate research questions about what gifted learners actually need at different developmental stages.

Equally important is peer cohorting. By bringing together students with similar intellectual intensity but diverse backgrounds, PPV reduces isolation while building social calibration and emotional balance alongside cognitive growth.

Prajna Maitra

Prajna Maitra is a long-term engagement programme for parents of high-potential children. It begins with a simple recognition: *children do not develop in isolation*. When expectations and responses differ across school, home and community, progress may stall. For gifted or high-ability children, this misalignment can be particularly disruptive. Behaviours that teachers recognise as curiosity or intensity may be interpreted at home or in the community as defiance or disobedience.

Through Prajna Maitra, JPIP works to align the environment around the child by equipping parents and caregivers to understand high-ability development and respond constructively. The aim is the creation of a supportive ecosystem in which the child's development is reinforced across contexts.

“Our effort has been to build a holistic support system around these children, engaging parents, teachers and students in a 360-degree approach. The aim is to create a conducive environment by preparing those around them to nurture their development.”

Dr Dhanashree Sowani, Head, Academic Section, JPIP

Many parents initially interpret behaviours such as boredom with repetitive work or emotional intensity as defiance. One parent described her son submitting blank exam papers because he felt he had already mastered the material; conventional discipline only deepened his withdrawal.

Through Prajna Maitra, the family reframed the behaviour as an unmet developmental need rather than misconduct. They introduced greater intellectual challenge, shifted

from instruction to dialogue and reduced anxiety around performance. Over time, the child's engagement stabilised.

The programme operates through three pillars: understanding the multidimensional nature of giftedness; learning nurturance practices centred on communication and recognising giftedness as a societal resource, not merely a personal advantage. Conducted in closed groups over extended periods, Prajna Maitra creates space for honest reflection and peer learning.

As one parent-facilitator reflects:

“When parents understand giftedness, their reactions change. Calm replaces anxiety. The child feels safer and learning resumes. The biggest learning from this programme is communication. When communication increases, reactions reduce. We learn to stay calm, listen first, then respond. Once parents change their way of communicating, the child's confidence increases and mistakes start reducing on their own.”

Meghana Gokhale, Prajna Maitra Alumna and Facilitator



Prajna Maitra does not train parents to manage gifted children. It reshapes the developmental environment around them.

While JPIP builds the environment around the gifted child, Prashala builds the child itself. It is here at this intersection that Jnana Prabodhini's developmental philosophy takes its most complete and sustained form.

PRASHALA: A FULL-TIME SCHOOL FOR GIFTED CHILDREN

A full-time school admitting approximately 80 gifted/ High ability learners each year from Grade 5 through Grade 10, Prashala was built on a conviction that the years between ten and sixteen are not merely preparatory - they are the years when identity, values and purpose are most malleable. Prashala was designed to use those years deliberately.

Research-informed Curriculum Design

Giftedness does not unfold evenly. A child may think far ahead of their years, while emotional maturity and values develop more gradually. Recognising this uneven trajectory, Jnana Prabodhini has built its educational approach on a foundation principle: *curriculum decisions must be grounded in careful observation of how children actually develop, not assumptions about how they should.*

Rooted in this philosophy, Prashala organises its curriculum around five pillars: knowledge, skills, attitude formation, motivation building and value development. Research showed that intellectual capacity without corresponding socio-emotional development leads to fragmentation, so the sequence prioritises attitude formation first.

“We prioritise building attitudes and motivation first; knowledge and skills are developed on that foundation.”

Dr Mukulika Thatte, Vice Principal, Prashala

Early grades (5-7) emphasise breadth of exposure. Students explore nine different creative arts - harmonium, tabla, dance, singing, drawing, elocution, writing, sculpture and drama alongside cognitive domains. By Grade 8, having established breadth, students begin deeper engagement in chosen areas.

“We get to express ourselves through nine different vocations... Till 7th grade, we explore all these kinds. From the 8th grade, we choose one art form that we are interested in.”

Prashala Students



Grades 9 and 10 shift toward application through leadership roles and social exposure. Observations over the years have shown that students need reflection on purpose before being asked to lead.

Children do not develop at the same pace across all areas. A student may be far ahead in Mathematics but closer to age level in language or emotional maturity. Based on this insight, Prashala moved away from grade-based grouping (e.g., Classes 5, 6, 7) in Mathematics and languages. Instead, students are grouped according to demonstrated ability.



“Students should be allowed to learn at their own pace. By putting all students of the same age in the same classroom, we demotivate most children. The one lagging gets taught the same level repeatedly. The one with higher speed doesn’t get the next level. Both are demotivated.”

Dr Milind Naik,
Principal, Prashala

Prashala also gives teachers pedagogical freedom to prioritise depth over syllabus completion. Teachers can reduce content coverage; however, they are required to go deeper to ensure conceptual mastery. Even in Grade 10, a board exam year, this principle holds. Exam-focused preparation begins only in the final months, with the majority of the year devoted to understanding concepts rather than grades.

Libraries and laboratories remain open and accessible without constant supervision. Students explore materials, conduct experiments and pursue interests independently. This design stems from research showing that self-regulation develops when students are given responsibility, not restriction. Sustained observation across academic classes and extracurricular activities allows teachers to distinguish early promise from enduring potential, feeding back into individualised support.

Cultivating Responsibility, Purpose and Social Orientation

At Jnana Prabodhini, character formation is treated as a developmental process embedded in lived experience. The institution recognises that intellectual ability alone does not ensure responsible action. For high-ability learners in particular, the capacity to influence systems must be accompanied by ethical grounding, social orientation and clarity of purpose.

Jnana Prabodhini Prashala creates structured experiences that expand students' sense of identity, deepen their understanding of social realities and cultivate responsibility through practice. Through social immersion, cultural engagement, identity reflection and leadership roles, students gradually move from self-development toward societal contribution.

From early grades, students participate in rural exposure programmes. In one instance, students helped install a hand pump in a village and spoke with women who described walking kilometres daily to fetch water. A student later reflected that she had never connected water scarcity to children's education until she realised that time spent collecting water meant time lost for income generation or homework support. These programmes help students build a more nuanced understanding of complex social realities.

Prashala shapes cultural practices such as Ganeshotsav to emphasise discipline and collective responsibility. Students participate through Barcha, a disciplined bamboo stick group dance performance. Dr Pendse, the founder, initiated this practice to transform how Ganeshotsav was celebrated, shifting from distorted commercialisation to disciplined cultural expression. Earlier, students also sold crackers and magazines door-to-door (and now Ganesh idols instead of crackers to avoid polluting materials), not to raise funds but to develop comfort in engaging with strangers, handling rejection and persisting through difficulty.

In Grade 8, students participate in *Vidyavrata*, a year-long programme that helps them develop a sense of purpose and responsibility. Adapted from traditional coming-of-age practices, it includes 13 interactive sessions covering six areas of development: physical, emotional, intellectual, social, moral and spiritual. Students set personal goals related to learning, character and social contribution, followed by a four-day residential camp focused on study, reflection and dialogue. Drawing on the *Panchkosh* concept from Indian knowledge traditions, the programme encourages students to see intellectual growth as part of broader personality development.

Supported by mentors, they begin to take greater ownership of their learning and life choices.



“Education is empowerment. But empowerment without expanded identity can be misused. Vidyavrata reminds students that they are more than a limited identity.”

Satyashray Hasbnis, Alumnus
and Mathematics Teacher,
Prashala

Prashala also helps students discover their *Swa-Dharma*, a concept approximating life purpose or calling. It is not simply career selection but finding what one is meant to contribute. Students begin with small goals and gradually expand their circles of concern and capability. The goals may change over time, but the practice of seeking purpose begins early.

Prashala introduces *Paristhiti Jnana*, a dedicated period in senior grades focused on current affairs. Students analyse contemporary issues through historical context, multiple

perspectives and long-term implications. The goal is not to shape opinions but to build the ability to think carefully in situations that are complex and uncertain.

Students also participate in Special Purpose Groups that explore areas such as rural development and public health. Alumni frequently return to guide these groups.

Leadership roles taken up by senior students, for instance, in the student council, involve real responsibility for coordination and decision-making.

Alumni point to the long-term impact of Jnana Prabodhini's deliberate character-building initiatives. During Prashala's 50th anniversary, a follow-up study with the first batch of alumni found that across diverse careers, they described making choices shaped by values formed during school years. Many pursued work with explicit social missions. Even those in conventional careers described approaching work through a lens of trusteeship.

Through layered experiences - social immersion, cultural reframing, identity reflection and structured leadership, responsibility emerges through practice rather than prescription.



BUILDING SELF-DIRECTED LEARNERS

Across both Prashala and PPV, learning how to learn is treated as foundational. Self-study skills, the ability to plan, execute and regulate one's own learning, are seen as essential to long-term intellectual growth. These capacities form the 'minaret' of the developmental architecture: foundational techniques such as reading strategies and time management support higher-order skills like metacognition and self-regulation.

Systematic instruction begins early. From Grade 6 at Prashala, students are explicitly taught how to break down complex material, identify gaps and test their own understanding. One student reflected, *"From 6th grade itself, we built a habit of self-studying on weekends. We cover almost all subjects on our own."*

A distinctive practice reinforces this philosophy: self-study camps. Before board examinations, students spend a week on campus with no formal classes, arriving early in the morning and staying until evening. Teachers are available for guidance, but students design their own schedules, set priorities and adjust through self-assessment.

PPV follows similar principles. From Grade 5, students participate in dedicated modules on study skills, then apply these through project-based inquiry.

The emphasis is deliberate. Gifted learners may progress quickly, but without metacognitive tools, their growth can plateau. By explicitly teaching and practising self-paced, self-regulated learning, Jnana Prabodhini cultivates not only knowledge, but independence.

WHAT SIX DECADES OF PRACTICE DEMONSTRATES

Jnana Prabodhini's journey demonstrates that nurturing giftedness is not a short-term intervention but a sustained developmental endeavour. It challenges the assumption that high ability can be addressed through isolated enrichment, accelerated curricula or one-time identification. Potential matures through coherence: across years, institutions and relationships.

What makes the model distinctive is not any single programme but the architecture connecting them. JPIP's research informs how both Prashala and PPV are designed. Prajna Maitra ensures that the family environment reinforces rather than undermines what the school and enrichment programme build. Alumni return as mentors, facilitators and educators, forming what the institution's leadership describes as a 'chain of wisdom transfer'. Each element depends on the others; none would work as well in isolation.

Four insights emerge for the field. First, identification must be treated as a hypothesis, not a verdict; assessment opens a developmental conversation and does not close one. Second, the curriculum must respond to how gifted children actually develop: unevenly and asynchronously across intellectual, emotional and creative domains. Third, the community around the child, including family, peers and alumni, is a developmental variable that must be actively shaped rather than left to chance. Fourth, purpose is not discovered through classroom teaching alone but cultivated through lived experience; social immersion, identity reflection and structured leadership shape orientation, not just competence.

JPIP's postgraduate diploma programmes have carried these principles beyond Pune, training hundreds of educators across India. Alumni of these programmes have contributed to national policy conversations, including aspects of the National Education Policy 2020 related to gifted education.

When these conditions hold over time, they shape not only competence but orientation. Students begin to view their abilities differently, not as personal assets to be maximised, but as capacities that carry obligation.



“We see ourselves as trustees of our talents, not owners. If I am a trustee, I am responsible for how I use what I have.”

Dr Ajit Kanitkar, Secretary, Jnana Prabodhini
Samshodhan Sanstha; Alumnus of Prashala

This idea of trusteeship is among Jnana Prabodhini's most transferable contributions. Giftedness, in this model, is not a private advantage. It is an entrusted capacity to be exercised with judgment and responsibility, toward the problems of society and toward the nation that invested in the first place. For education systems seeking to support high-potential learners equitably and responsibly, that reframing may be the most important lesson of all.







Abhyudaya

Creating opportunities for growth for under-resourced urban students

Mumbai is famously known as ‘the city of dreams’, even as it houses dense urban settlements. In its low-income housing, entire families share 10x10-foot rooms. Birth certificates, when they exist, often show only January 1 or June 1 as birth dates: placeholders rather than truths. Documentation is scarce, parents work multiple jobs and children study by streetlight when electricity fails. Students in these communities are academically capable, but their potential is constrained: not by ability, but by information gaps, limited social capital and economic vulnerability.

It was to bring opportunities to these students' aspirations that Abhyudaya was conceived in 2008 by Dr M L Shrikant, Honorary Dean of the S.P. Jain Institute of Management & Research (SPJIMR), an institute located in Mumbai's Andheri West. He also observed that India's management education had long focused on technical competence and yet the question of what makes an effective leader extends beyond analytical skills. Within SPJIMR, the presence of management students from diverse backgrounds created a context for an individualised mentorship programme that could strengthen support systems for under-resourced students while cultivating socially conscious leaders.

The programme was thus designed at this intersection: to provide supportive environments to high potential children from municipal schools in Mumbai's K-West ward (suburban Andheri West), home to over 7,00,000 people, while engaging management students in sustained, community-rooted mentorship.

Today, Abhyudaya operates as a community-focused initiative embedded within SPJIMR, serving approximately 360 students annually. In addition to providing daily after-school enrichment in multiple subjects, the programme also pairs each first-year Post Graduate Diploma in Management (PGDM) student at SPJIMR with a child, known as a 'Sitara' (star), for an entire academic year, spanning their academic journey from Grade 7 through the first year of post-school education, whether it is an undergraduate degree or vocational skills training. For SPJIMR's students, this is a mandatory two-credit course worth 40 hours of engagement, including seven home visits by mentors and two campus visits for the Sitaras.

Since 2008, Abhyudaya has supported 1016 Sitaras and engaged 4046 PGDM students.

The families Abhyudaya works with are largely working households supported by modest and often informal livelihoods. Primary earners typically work as drivers, domestic workers or skilled technicians; others run small shops, work construction sites or are self-employed. Many families are first-generation urban migrants navigating an unfamiliar city system without the social networks that make it legible. Most primary earners have not completed secondary school and with an average monthly household income of ₹25,164 against expenses of ₹26,556, families operate within narrow financial margins. Despite this, they consistently prioritise their children's education and sustain participation in a programme that asks a great deal of everyone under the roof. These realities shape schooling choices, mobility and timelines and inform, in concrete ways, how Abhyudaya designs its support.



“This is not tutoring. This is not charity. This is growing together.”

Arati Nagaraj, Programme Director

At its core, Abhyudaya rests on a simple insight: *academic potential is widespread, but opportunity is unevenly distributed*. By identifying motivated students, holistically supporting their journeys and building sustained mentoring relationships, the programme seeks to ensure that aspiration and effort translate into expanded educational and life pathways.

IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL THROUGH SUSTAINED OBSERVATION

Abhyudaya’s selection process for Sitaras is designed to assess sustained commitment and family support over an entire year, rather than relying on a single entrance exam. This approach reflects a key learning from the programme's history: academic potential alone does not ensure that a student can thrive in a seven-year journey that requires consistent engagement, family commitment and motivation to access the opportunity.

Outreach, Screening and Selection

The process begins with outreach to over 50 schools in the K-West ward. More than 300 children in Grade 5 are nominated annually through teacher recommendations. From this pool, approximately 225 appear for a written aptitude test: Raven’s Progressive Matrices consisting of 60 marks across five sections. The test is puzzle-based, assessing logical reasoning and problem-solving rather than curriculum knowledge.

Sections A, B and C cover foundational skills; sections D and E are progressively harder. Evaluation of papers begins within ten minutes of completion. Students who meet the cutoff are invited for immediate interviews. This entire process is conducted in person at the SPJIMR campus in a single day.

The interviews are conducted in small groups of four to six children with two interviewers present. The presence of other peers reduces anxiety amongst children and allows evaluators to observe social interaction, communication comfort and problem-solving approaches in a more naturalistic setting. The team assesses not just answers, but how children engage with one another, whether they show curiosity and how they respond to gentle challenges. Critically, the final grade maps both test performance and age-to-grade appropriateness. In government schools, for instance, one may encounter a 14-year-old and an 11-year-old both studying in Grade 5. The former faces different developmental and contextual challenges than the latter, though they are in the same grade. This nuance informs whether a child is selected for the next stage: Pre-Sitara.

Pre-Sitara: A Year of Observation and Commitment

From the initial 225 test-takers, 100-120 are invited to join Pre-Sitara, a year-long weekend programme held each Sunday at the Abhyudaya centre housed within SPJIMR. Even after this rigorous filtering, the programme retains a larger cohort than the final requirement, as dropouts are anticipated due to waning engagement over the year, given the programme's demand for continued and rigorous commitment. By year's end, 40-70 Pre-Sitaras get selected as Sitaras to begin their Abhyudaya journey.

The Pre-Sitara programme runs every Sunday from 7:45 AM to 12:45 PM, July through March. Children primarily attend three classes: Spoken English, Foundational Mathematics and Science, and Social Skills. The programme works with children from eight different language medium schools, including English, Hindi, Marathi, Urdu, Gujarati, Tamil and Kannada. Pre-Sitara, however, is not solely an academic intervention. It is an observational period. The Abhyudaya team tracks attendance, family engagement patterns, behavioural shifts and motivation.

“Monday to Saturday, they are in regular school, right? Despite this, coming on a Sunday every week shows that the child has that urge to strive for something more.”

Shenaz Halai, Programme Team

There are many instances of deep dedication from both students and parents. One morning, for instance, a mother arrived with her son, whose leg had been fractured just two days earlier. The family had come by bicycle because the boy refused to miss class. What the programme offers is certainly a great opportunity and yet to access it also requires great dedication, shared among multiple family members.

“Sundays stopped being holidays and became days for personal development. The mindset that you must do something different and grow beyond your surroundings has stayed with me till today.”

Abhyudaya Alum, Batch 10



GUESS WHAT ARE
THESE MADE OF ?



Before the year's end, the Abhyudaya team also conducts visits to each Pre-Sitara home, primarily to ensure accessibility and feasibility of continuity in home visits over seven years. One final stage of observation occurs in the summer: a 20-day intensive camp in April-May, precisely when many families migrate back to their native villages. The camp invites students to come to the SPJIMR campus every day and offers sports, arts, lectures and other similar enrichment activities. Its complete goal, however, is also to affirm student commitment and provide engagement opportunities in a time when many students may disengage from learning due to breaks from school.

Through this year-long process, approximately 40-70 children become Sitaras and join the after-school programme for Grades 7-10.

RELATIONAL MENTORING THAT BUILDS IDENTITY AND ASPIRATION

At the heart of Abhyudaya lies a mentoring relationship that extends far beyond academic guidance. Each Sitara is paired with a first-year PGDM student from SPJIMR, creating a sustained human connection that supports the child's growth through adolescence and into early adulthood. Over time, these relationships become a source of trust, stability and aspiration.

Designing Compatibility for Meaningful Mentorship

Mentors enter Sitara homes and become part of a child's life. Compatibility is therefore treated as a core design consideration

rather than an administrative task. Each year, the Abhyudaya team manually cross-references 360 Sitara profiles with an equal number of PGDM student profiles. Both complete detailed forms covering languages spoken, school medium, academic background, interests, aspirations and practical constraints, not to find ‘perfect’ matches, but to reduce avoidable friction in long-term relationships.

Gender balance requires flexibility. While there are more female Sitaras, the PGDM cohort has more male students. Younger Sitaras (Grades 7-8) are often paired with male mentors, while same-gender mentors are prioritised for older Sitaras to ensure comfort as they grow, particularly for girls.

Language is treated as an early point of access and mentors are matched with awareness of home language and school medium. By senior secondary school, academic alignment becomes important: students preparing for Commerce pathways, including Chartered Accountancy, are matched with mentors familiar with those routes, while Science students considering engineering receive guidance from mentors with similar academic backgrounds.

“It’s like matchmaking. You don’t meet anyone. You only work with information. And yet, each decision has consequences for how the relationship unfolds.”

Alka Mhatre, Programme Team

Mentors also undergo structured preparation on cultural sensitivity, family engagement and problem-solving before their first visit by way of a lecture by Programme Director Arati Nagaraj.



Building the Didi-Bhaiya Bond

PGDM students are not called mentors. Sitaras address them as *Didi* (elder sister) or *Bhaiya* (elder brother), framing the relationship as familial rather than transactional.

“At first, we hoped I wouldn’t be selected because we felt uncomfortable about having mentors visit our humble home. But once the programme started, it was enjoyable, that guidance was crucial at an age when it’s easy to be influenced in the wrong direction.”

Abhyudaya Alum, Batch 2

Mentorship is deeply personalised and extends beyond academics. Mentors help bridge information gaps and support

decision-making in contexts where families may lack access to guidance networks.

Support varies according to need. One mentor, noticing her Grade 8 Sitara's strong academic ability but weak reading habits and English skills, began reading comics with her to build comfort with texts. Another created a spreadsheet of engineering colleges within a 15-kilometre radius, listing eligibility, fees and placement records so his Grade 12 Sitara could make informed decisions. A different mentor encouraged a student to include her singing in a résumé after recognising it as a strength.

“My Sitara didn't speak much initially, but she showed me her Pinterest boards on architecture and design. I helped her refine her search prompts and taught her about AI and prompt engineering. I realised I can guide her digitally even when I'm not physically there.”

PGDM 2024-26 Sitara Mentor

The mentoring model emphasises how to study over what to study: mentors teach study techniques, time management, problem-solving and information access. For Sitaras, mentors become a compass and a window to a broader world. For PGDM students, the experience is often transformative, building empathy, leadership and problem-solving skills.

Mentors also help students recognise their strengths across academics, arts, sports and leadership, building self-worth and expanding horizons. Conversations about careers, college life and future pathways make unfamiliar possibilities feel attainable while grounding decisions in financial and family realities.

Continuity Through Transition (Hastantaran)

Although mentors change each year, continuity is deliberately designed. Outgoing mentors prepare a detailed ‘Growing Together Report’ documenting academic progress, family dynamics, effective strategies and unresolved challenges, allowing new mentors to begin with a deep understanding of the child’s journey.

<p>What is your [redacted] big dream? (Future plans and help them plan A and Plan B. Why do they want to choose those paths? What do they need to do to reach those dreams? What else can they do?)</p>	<p>[redacted] dreams of excelling in Science & Technology, He is aspiring to become an engineer/scientist!</p> <p>Plan A:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pursuing higher studies, participating in competitive exams, and securing scholarships. <p>Plan B:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore technical skills (digital arts / applied sciences / maths) to build a stable career. <p><i>He is motivated by his love for learning, but he needs mentorship, access to quality education, and improved communication skills to make this a reality</i></p>
<p>What did not work?</p>	<p>Things which didn’t work were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> [redacted] hesitation in public speaking remained a challenge (not sure till when) Family constraints limited access to e-learning tools, slowing his progress in studies. Personal efforts lacked many times from his end due to his busy schedule. Expected pace was not matched and remained slow <p><i>Addressing these issues requires continuous mentorship, different learning methods and also identifying accessible support programs for growth.</i></p>
<p>Any unconventional or innovative methods of mentoring adopted?</p>	<p>To make learning engaging:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Role-playing exercises helped me to explain healthcare and financial planning. Video-based learning through YouTube tutorials improved his English comprehension. Experiential learning methods Interactive group activities I held with his neighbourhood friends built confidence and social skills. <p><i>These unconventional methods encouraged [redacted] to learn beyond textbooks, creating a well-rounded approach to education and development of skills while making learning enjoyable and relatable!!</i></p>

Glimpses from a Growing Together Report (prepared by a PGDM Student for a Grade 8 Sitara before Hastantaran)

Each August, Abhyudaya marks this transition through *Hastantaran*, which literally means ‘handing over’, when second-year PGDM students formally pass their Sitaras to the incoming cohort. What the ceremony makes visible is a year of relationship; what remains unseen is the careful design that sustains continuity.

Through these relationships, Sitaras gain more than academic support: they gain role models, advocates and trusted guides. Students describe mentors remaining in touch years later, during exams, college decisions and job applications, reflecting bonds that extend well beyond the formal mentoring year.



Topic 7
<http://ai.sarthak.org/ai>

Topic 7
<http://ai.sarthak.org/ai>



HOLISTIC SUPPORT FOR SITARAS’ GROWTH

Abhyudaya recognises that academic ability alone does not determine whether a child can thrive. Students in under-resourced urban communities navigate health concerns, financial pressures, family responsibilities and limited exposure to opportunities. In such contexts, learning gaps are only one part of a larger web of constraints. The programme therefore supports each Sitara’s growth across academic, personal and social dimensions - strengthening foundations while addressing the broader conditions that shape learning.

Daily after-school sessions build core competencies in English, Mathematics and Science while introducing coding, digital learning, general knowledge and exam readiness. This consistent academic scaffolding helps bridge learning gaps, build confidence and enable students to keep pace with formal schooling. Many students describe the regularity and intensity of this support, alongside practical provisions such as uniforms and meals, as critical to building discipline and sustaining aspiration.

“Today, the Abhyudaya team is preparing us for board exams. They are putting in continuous efforts to teach us, guide us and help us perform our best. Their support has given me confidence not only for exams, but for my future as well.”

Sitara, Grade 10

Early programme experience revealed that learning cannot be separated from basic needs. When students brought uneven

or no meals to Sunday classes, disparities became visible and distracting. In response, Abhyudaya introduced structured meal support, ensuring that all students receive lunch during after-school sessions and meals during camps. This simple intervention ensured that all students ate together, reducing visible disparities and allowing them to focus on learning, while contributing to improved attendance and engagement.

Mentors and programme staff respond to everyday challenges, from illness and fatigue to access barriers, recognising their direct impact on attendance and learning continuity. Health camps and regular check-ins help identify issues that may otherwise go unnoticed.

Group activities and socio-emotional learning sessions are woven into the weekly schedule to build teamwork, self-belief and emotional resilience. Design thinking workshops and creative activities encourage problem-solving and help students see themselves as capable contributors rather than passive learners.

As Sitaras progress into Grades 11 and 12, daily enrichment gives way to monthly check-ins and focused transition guidance, reflecting their evolving needs. Exposure sessions, alumni interactions and career counselling broaden awareness of educational and vocational pathways, while mentors help students weigh aspirations against practical realities.

Abhyudaya collaborates with specialised partner organisations, extending its reach by bringing diverse expertise into the students' learning ecosystem. For instance, Tata Strive offers vocational training; Tech Mahindra Foundation provides healthcare pathways, Magic Bus Foundation supports IT skills; Curiosity Gym runs Design Thinking workshops where Sitaras build circuits, code robots and prototype solutions to real

problems; Creative Vision teaches Abacus and Vedic Maths to younger children; Artscape conducts expressive arts therapy to promote personal development and well-being of students.

“Through one of our partners, a Sitara secured a nursing internship, something her family had never imagined. These partnerships help convert aspirations into practical opportunities.”

Arati Nagaraj, Programme Director

Support continues beyond school through academic guidance, scholarship assistance and personalised transition support. By sustaining engagement into early college and vocational pathways, Abhyudaya helps students navigate critical transitions with clarity and confidence, reducing dropouts and enabling continuity in their educational journeys. For instance, many of the organisations mentioned above offer four to eighteen-month long vocational training, accompanied by on-the-job training and even internship and job placements. Through such engagements, students build practical skills, explore interests and encounter new possibilities.

RIPPLE EFFECTS BEYOND THE SITARA

The programme strongly believes in the potential of each Sitara to create impact within their communities. Abhyudaya balances depth of impact with breadth within the K-West Ward through a unique rule: only one child from each family can become a Sitara. While at first glance this may appear restrictive for children whose siblings have already been a part of the programme, a deeper glance at the on-ground functioning reveals something unique. Mentors, while assigned to focus on the Sitara’s nurturance, have

mentioned interacting with the students' younger siblings and even friends on multiple occasions. The Sitaras themselves also engage in knowledge-sharing with peers in school, based on their learnings from the after-school programme.

“Students are learning science and problem-solving by figuring things out themselves rather than depending entirely on the teacher. They understand that everyone has different strengths, which builds teamwork, just like in a workplace where people contribute different skills. This is our second year in the programme and it has also helped teachers upskill in domains like design thinking, with strong support throughout.”

Principal, local school in the K-West Ward

Additionally, while the programme does not formally enrol multiple students from the same family, it provides learning support to the Sitaras' families regularly. It is not uncommon for Sitara siblings who express motivation to learn more deeply, especially at critical academic thresholds (such as Grade 10 board examinations), to be welcomed to the centre at SPJIMR and be tutored by volunteers from one of the three institutes housed in Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's campus. Nagaraj fondly recalls the story of a mother who, inspired by her Sitara daughter reached out to the Abhyudaya team for support and returned to school education herself.

IMPACT AND LONG-TERM VISION

Since 2008, Abhyudaya has supported 1,016 Sitaras - 56% girls and 44% boys and engaged 4,046 PGDM students from SPJIMR as mentors. The numbers matter, but what they reveal is more consequential than scale: patterns of upward mobility, self-determination and generational change that the structural conditions of K-West ward make improbable and that Abhyudaya has made quietly ordinary.

In a ward where secondary school dropout rates hover around 17%, Abhyudaya's students follow a different trajectory. Nearly 72% of Sitaras from the most recent graduating cohorts are pursuing higher education or vocational pathways, the outcome of sustained relationships that extend beyond the school gate. Pathways remain varied and pragmatic: some pursue degrees in commerce, science or the humanities; others enter nursing, IT or technical trades; many combine study and work to meet household realities. Mentors are trained to offer guidance that is not inspirational in the abstract but grounded in lived constraints: the kind of counsel that helps a student balance ambition with what a family can sustain.

For earlier batches now in the workforce, employment rates range from 54% to 94%. More telling than the percentages is the shift in occupational mobility: children of auto drivers and domestic workers are becoming nurses, teachers, software professionals and commerce graduates. Alumni support younger siblings' education, reshape family expectations and expand what schooling is understood to make possible. One former Sitara is now a faculty member on the same campus where the programme is housed, a year after being steadied through a personal crisis by the team that had known her since Grade 7.

The programme has built infrastructure around these transitions, helping students close the gap between aspiration and action. Several Sitaras have secured full undergraduate scholarships; others have accessed internships and training opportunities their families had never imagined.

The impact flows in both directions. For SPJIMR students, home visits often become the most formative experience of their

education. Recruiters describe graduates as *zara hatke*, shaped, Nagaraj believes, by the experience of sitting with their Sitaras and understanding, perhaps for the first time, what five rupees can actually mean. This is what SPJIMR's founder envisioned: not empathy as a classroom module, but as an experience sustained over time.

In 2024, SPJIMR received the FICCI Award for Excellence in Institutional Social Responsibility, citing Abhyudaya's impact. Within the programme, however, evolution remains constant. Nagaraj describes each year as a new version shaped by what students and families need. In moments of decision, the team returns to a single question: *What is best for the Sitara?* The answer guides choices large and small, from documentation practices that ensure continuity to shared meals that protect dignity. It also shapes the programme's stance on scale. *"There is enough work here,"* Nagaraj says. Going wide is not the point. Going deep is. Yet depth has its own reach. Institutions across cities have expressed interest in replicating the model and Nagaraj's invitation is simple: come and see the work. Understand the community. Build relationships that last.

Her vision remains expansive:

"This needs to become a movement. We need more stars, more constellations, more galaxies."

Arati Nagaraj, Programme Director

Over seventeen years, Abhyudaya has demonstrated that potential is everywhere, opportunity can be built and relationships sustained with care can alter not only a life, but the lives around it.







A young boy with dark hair and glasses is focused on his work at a desk. He is wearing a blue shirt and is working on a circuit board with various colored wires (red, yellow, green, blue) connected to it. In the foreground, there are two blue and white battery packs. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people working at desks. The overall scene is one of concentration and learning in a classroom or workshop setting.

2.

Expanding how
they think

**What happens when
young minds are given
the space and challenge
to think far beyond
what their everyday
environments demand?**

These programmes create intellectually rich experiences that extend beyond routine schooling. Often designed as focused, time-bound interventions, they offer depth, complexity and exposure that many students might not otherwise encounter.

Through enrichment, inquiry and domain-specific exploration, they stretch students' thinking and invite them to grapple with demanding ideas. The emphasis is not only on performance, but on cultivating advanced reasoning and intellectual confidence. Even when shorter in duration, these experiences are intentionally immersive and rigorous, often reshaping how students see themselves as thinkers.

Rather than replacing school, these initiatives expand its boundaries, widening both intellectual horizons and students' sense of what they are capable of.



Lodha Genius - Ashoka University Programme

Creating opportunities for academic
advancement

Across India's schooling system, students with exceptional academic potential in Mathematics and Science face persistent constraints in mainstream curricula that prioritise syllabus completion and examination performance, leaving little room for inquiry or exploration.³ Meanwhile, the enrichment opportunities that do exist often benefit only those students

³ Inam, A. (2024). "Fostering critical thinking in Indian students through interdisciplinary STEAM pedagogies." *Journal of Education, Arts, Law and Multidisciplinary*, 14(2), 23–30.

with prior exposure or the advantage of access, leaving latent talent unrecognised among those from diverse backgrounds.⁴

The Lodha Genius - Ashoka University Programme (LG-AUP), launched in 2023, is creating a space for students to explore their scientific passion freely, without academic pressures or resource barriers. Today, having completed its third year, the programme attracts thousands of applications from across India and serves approximately 300 students annually. Its goal is not to identify only that talent which is already leading to achievement, but to create an environment where children who have motivation and potential to excel in STEM fields, including students from under-resourced communities, can engage deeply with ideas.

As LG-AUP's Programme Lead Dr Anupama Ambika Anilkumar describes it, *"the intent is to offer students a place to test themselves academically, without being judged by outcomes alone and to expose them to forms of learning that schools are structurally unable to provide"*.

LG-AUP is a fully funded, multi-year talent acceleration initiative, led by the Lodha Foundation in partnership with Ashoka University. The programme enrolls students from Grades 9 through 12, beginning with an annual residential on-campus summer programme (approximately 4 weeks), followed by year-round continued learning modules that include online classes, mentorship, project work, research opportunities and pathways to prestigious internships and scholarships. Teaching is supported by over 50 faculty members from global institutions, including Harvard, Stanford, Caltech, Ashoka and Warwick, alongside 70+ teaching assistants and a dedicated

⁴ Salvador, Z. G. (2022). "Instructional Preparations and the Learning Skills of the 21st Century Students." *International Journal of Educational Management and Development Studies*, 48-64.

programme team, creating a 5:1 student-faculty ratio that enables personalised attention.

The academic core offers deep disciplinary immersion through two distinct levels. For Grades 11 and 12, students have the option to choose between Maths and Science Tracks. These focus on specialised rigour, featuring advanced Mathematics specialisation and problem-solving, alongside cutting-edge Sciences like artificial intelligence (AI) & Robotics, Physics and Quantitative Biology. Conversely, for Grades 9 and 10, the Junior Track emphasises inter-disciplinary discovery, blending STEM with creativity through BioArts, Science Theatre and Foldscope exploration. Both pathways integrate architecture, sustainability and professional workshops as well.

Protecting Academic Depth Without Narrowing Access

From its inception, LG-AUP made deliberate design choices that continue to shape the programme today. Inclusion remains a foundational principle for the programme and to stay true to this idea, one must begin with the very definition of who is considered to have potential. In a country with vastly uneven schooling conditions, geographies and socio-economic strata, it is difficult for the expression of talent to be even. For many, this potential is never recognised if not visible through grades and ranks.

The selection process for LG-AUP thus emphasises curiosity, reasoning and openness to learning, rather than polished performance alone. An initial national-level, application-based assessment focuses on reasoning, pattern recognition

and problem-solving in unfamiliar contexts through a Multiple Choice Question-format online test. The emphasis is on how students approach questions, how they make sense of complexity, persist with difficulty and adapt their thinking.

This is followed by an interview stage that allows the programme team to understand students' seriousness of intent, curiosity and readiness to commit to an intensive learning experience. Importantly, this stage also provides the space to identify students who may not yet appear confident or fluent, but who show strong indicators of growth when allowed to explain their thinking.



“Our selection process is meant to recognise students’ starting points, not to make a final judgement about where they will end up.”

Prasenjeet Patil, Senior Programme Manager, LG-AUP

To ensure that this opportunity is made available to students from under-resourced backgrounds, the programme has entered into strategic partnerships with six Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), including Akanksha Foundation, Karta Initiative, Udayan Care and Agastya Foundation. This enables outreach to students studying in government⁵ and government-aided⁶, affordable private and NGO-run and aided schools. Recognising that some students come from different language medium schools or may not be fluent in English, LG-AUP also offers a five-day Academic Bridge Programme: an online workshop designed to enhance English communication before students arrive on campus.

Beyond the selection process, the programme places academic integrity and freedom at the centre of its model from its inception. Faculty members are invited not as instructors delivering a predefined curriculum but as intellectual partners with the freedom to design and teach their courses in the process of co-creation. Crucially, programme leadership separated academic responsibility from operational responsibility. While a central team manages logistics, student welfare and parent communication, faculty is insulated from administrative demands and allowed to focus entirely on teaching and learning. This separation emerges repeatedly in faculty interviews as a key enabler of depth.

“I didn't have to worry about anything as the LG-AUP programme team took care of everything, except what I wanted students to learn and how best to get them there.”

Prof. Sudipta Tung, Biology Faculty at LG-AUP

⁵ Schools are fully funded and managed by state or central government bodies.

⁶ Privately managed schools which receive some financial support from government bodies.

CREATING CONDITIONS FOR ACADEMIC RIGOUR TO FLOURISH

Trust-based Curriculum Development

Students in the LG-AUP come with varying starting points; some have had advanced training opportunities, while others struggle to articulate even foundational ideas, despite having a good understanding of them. At first glance, therefore, it may seem like an impossible task to bridge this gap in a way that these students learn seamlessly in the same classroom.

LG-AUP addresses this challenge through a two-pronged approach. First, it trusts students with difficulty, treating challenge as a natural and necessary part of learning. Second, it trusts faculty with pedagogy, giving teachers the freedom to decide how deep to go and how best to support students based on their individual needs, instead of lowering the level for everyone.

There is no fixed syllabus imposed across tracks, no expectation that courses align with school curricula and no pressure to demonstrate short-term outcomes. Faculty members are encouraged to teach ideas as they would in an undergraduate or postgraduate setting, while remaining attentive to how students are responding and adjusting pace accordingly.

In practice, this means that learning starts with ideas rather than techniques. In Mathematics, for instance, sessions frequently begin with puzzles, visual patterns or thought experiments that surface underlying structures students can reason about together. Formal definitions and notations follow only after students have grappled with the idea informally.

In Science classes, students work with real data sets, field observations and tools early on, encountering uncertainty as part of the process.



“We’re not teaching students how to be good calculators. We’re teaching how to think mathematically and creatively, and that means letting students struggle.”

Prof. Sagar Shrivastava, Mathematics Faculty at LG-AUP

In this programme, struggle is reframed as something positive, a sign that students are engaging with ideas at an appropriate level. Because difficulty is framed as expected rather than exceptional, students do not disengage when they encounter concepts they do not immediately understand. Instead, they begin to develop strategies for working through confusion – asking questions, seeking hints and using peer discussion to clarify their thinking.

Over time, students learn that not understanding something right away is not a personal shortcoming but a normal part of learning something meaningful.

*“In school, if I don’t understand something, I feel like I’m behind.
Here, everyone is confused at some point and that’s okay.”*

LG-AUP Student

This is particularly significant for students from exam-oriented school environments, where speed and correctness are often prioritised.



Scaffolded Learning through Near-Peer Support

High academic expectations alone do not guarantee meaningful participation. If advanced ideas are introduced without ensuring a strong foundation, students can struggle to keep pace and even risk getting disengaged with classes. While a low pupil-teacher ratio and dynamic curriculum are part of the tools used by the LG-AUP to ensure this does not happen, there is also an understanding that, in many cases, students' learning needs may require an additional layer of assistance. Near-peer support is a built-in part of how teaching works to combat this issue.

Teaching Assistants (TAs) are not positioned as helpers who step in only when students fall behind, nor as replacements for faculty. Instead, they act as a bridge between faculty and students, helping learners understand ideas, ask questions and stay engaged at the right level.

TAs are typically undergraduates from Ashoka University, close enough in age and experience to be approachable, yet sufficiently grounded in the subject matter to support learning. Rather than providing answers, they help students articulate what they are stuck on. Because TAs live on campus with students, academic conversations extend into informal spaces including hostels, dining halls and walks between sessions. Students approach TAs with questions they might hesitate to ask faculty, ranging from basic logistical troubles to broader concerns about their conceptual understanding.

“Often, the idea is to be their friend and make them feel comfortable if they don’t know something. It is only then that they can confidently work towards growing.”

Sampurna Pandey, TA, LG-AUP

The near-peer model creates safe, trusted spaces that reduce the psychological cost of struggle.

This sustained presence allows TAs to notice early signs of disengagement and respond before students withdraw. From the perspective of partner organisations such as Akanksha Foundation, this layer is especially significant. Students who are new to residential learning or discussion-based classrooms are able to adjust without feeling isolated. As a result, none of Akanksha's students have dropped out due to homesickness or academic intimidation, despite encountering demanding material and living away from home for the first time.

Over the course of the programme, faculty and TAs consistently report observing gradual but noticeable shifts. Students who were initially quiet began to participate more actively in discussions, questions moved from procedural clarifications to conceptual and exploratory ones and students showed greater confidence in presenting their ideas, even when unsure of correctness.

Residential Immersion as a Pedagogical Choice

Short-term academic programmes often struggle to create sustained engagement beyond the classroom. Learning remains

confined to scheduled sessions, with limited opportunity for reflection, peer exchange or informal questioning.

By placing students, faculty and TAs together on a university campus, LG-AUP creates conditions where learning can be seen in peer interaction, informal exchanges and even extra-curricular activities. For the programme, social and emotional development of students is as important as their intellectual development.

Students live on campus for the duration of the residential phase, managing daily routines such as time, meals and shared living spaces. These shared spaces often become sites of learning in their own right. Students continue discussions from class, revisit confusing ideas or ask questions that did not surface earlier. Hierarchies soften naturally when interactions are not limited to formal academic settings. In spaces which foster interactions with students from different disciplines, students also get to know more about the world around them, beyond their chosen courses and specialisations. Learning, therefore, happens even when they are not trying to learn.

An alumna currently (Fall 2025 onwards) studying Computer Science at Stanford University described the social dimension as one of her key takeaways from her LG-AUP experience over three years:

“You can interact with professors outside of class and you get to learn a lot from that. One of our professors used to talk about math with us every evening outside of class and that was really transformative for me. It was also a good taste for what college might be like.”

Mannat Kaur, LG-AUP 2023 Alum



Sir Paul Nurse delivering an address at the Great Ideas Seminar, LG-AUP 2025

THE GREAT IDEAS SEMINAR: LEARNING FROM NOBEL LAUREATES AND GLOBAL THINKERS

A distinctive feature of the LG-AUP is the Great Ideas Seminar series, which brings students face-to-face with some of the world's most distinguished minds. Open to all students regardless of grade level, these seminars are designed not to teach specific content but to expose students to fascinating questions at the frontiers of Science and Mathematics and to show how acclaimed researchers think and problematise.

The 2025 edition featured eleven speakers, including two Nobel laureates: Paul Nurse, who received the Nobel Prize in 2001 for discovering protein molecules that control cell division and Brian Schmidt, awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics (2011) for discovering the accelerating expansion of the universe through observations of distant supernovae. Other speakers included Mossi Traore, one of the most prominent designers and curators from Paris Fashion Week, who spoke about sustainable fashion; Brigitte Godard, a flight surgeon at the European Space Agency; Sharmila Bhattacharya, principal investigator at NASA's Biomedical Performance Laboratory at the AMES Research Centre; and Arvind Gupta, a Padma Shri awardee renowned for demonstrating scientific concepts through simple toys made from everyday materials.

Students consistently describe these seminars as transformative, not because they walk away with answers, but because they encounter the process of inquiry itself. The seminars model intellectual curiosity and build aspirations for future pathways in students.

For many children, especially those from schools where Science is taught as a body of facts, seeing a Nobel laureate explain their thinking process reshapes their understanding of what it means to be a scientist.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES BEYOND THE SUMMER

LG-AUP's commitment to students extends far beyond the summer residential experience. The programme provides a comprehensive ecosystem of forward linkages and outcomes designed to translate learning into opportunity, ensuring that students have access to resources, mentorship and pathways that can shape their academic and professional trajectories.

Continued Learning: Sustaining Momentum Beyond Immersion

While the four-week residential programme is designed to offer depth, intensity and exposure, LG-AUP recognises that such immersion on its own is insufficient to sustain learning over time. Students return to varied school environments where opportunities for advanced inquiry may be limited. Without continued engagement, early gains in confidence, curiosity and conceptual thinking risk fading.

“The level of training they get during this one month is mind-boggling.. But since they might be coming back after a year, there is a huge chance of learning loss in between. So, Continued Learning was conceptualised precisely to address this gap.”

Prof. Sagar Shrivastava, Mathematics Faculty at LG-AUP

Continued Learning at LG-AUP is structured as a flexible, post-residential phase that combines online coursework, mentoring

and project-based engagement. Though optional to enrol in, students are offered access to advanced modules aligned with their interests, opportunities to work through challenging problem sets over longer time horizons and spaces to reflect on their learning journeys.

Importantly, participation is designed to accommodate existing school commitments of children through multiple means. Live sessions take place once or twice a week, often on the weekends and in some cases, students are even given the option to go through the material asynchronously, as they prepare their final projects for the courses. Similar to the residential component, each course has dedicated faculty and TAs, whom the students may reach out to at any time.

Early observations from programme tracking suggest that Continued Learning has helped students retain confidence in engaging with advanced material and develop greater independence in approaching complex problems. For some, it has also served as a bridge to further opportunities such as research exposure, internships and competitive problem-solving competitions.

Internships, Research and Competition

Success

The programme understands that opportunities beyond the LG-AUP itself are also equally crucial for students to excel in their careers and educational pathways. Therefore, it facilitates research collaborations between students and faculty, providing support for students to work on projects that can be patented or published. Another crucial element of creating these forward linkages is internship support. For instance, five

LG-AUP students were selected for the prestigious nine-week Science Internship Programme at the University of California, Santa Cruz, a premier research experience in Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) fields. Other partnerships include access to the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) and additional international laboratories.

Notably, LG-AUP also trained the first-ever team of students from India to participate in the European Tournament of Enthusiastic Apprentice Mathematicians (ETEAM), an international platform for high schoolers to solve open-ended, research-level Mathematics problems. In July 2025, the Indian team made its debut at ETEAM in Lyon, France and secured second place globally among seven teams, an extraordinary achievement for a new entrant. The team of six students, Adhiraj Anand, Anshveer Bindra, Madhur Choudhary, Shresth Bhat, Vamika Singhal and Vedansh Saha, was mentored by Professor Sagar Shrivastava and trained intensively over the course of a year. This achievement exemplifies LG-AUP's capacity to support students not just in consuming knowledge, but in producing original mathematical research at an international standard.

LG-AUP'S IMPACT OVER THE YEARS

Systematic Assessment: Tracking Holistic Development

Instead of defining success narrowly through test scores or competition outcomes, the programme frames its intent

through a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that reflect capacities and dispositions it values: interdisciplinary thinking, creativity and original problem framing, the ability to translate knowledge into application, meta-learning skills such as learning-to-learn and reflexivity, peer learning and social engagement, career-related competencies and ethical and social awareness. These KPIs function as guiding lenses for programme design and reflection, not as scorecards or promises of predetermined outcomes.

Early tracking by the LG-AUP team before and after the four-week residential phase suggests notable shifts in how students engage with learning, particularly in interdisciplinary reasoning, creative thinking, peer interaction and confidence in handling complexity.

It is also precisely these takeaways that determine a student's continuity in the programme in the next academic year, if they wish to continue their engagement with it. Since multi-year engagement is a voluntary component of the LG-AUP, all interested students are required to apply through an alternate route. Here, they are evaluated not only based on their growth and commitment in the programme's previous iteration and performance in the Continued Learning component, but also on how their achievements and aspirations from this past year build meaningfully towards their goals for next year. They are asked to reflect on their learnings, think deeply about what actually motivates them to come back and share how they hope to build on where they are through this continued enrichment.

This holistic framework reflects a deeper truth articulated by programme leadership. When asked to define success for a student attending the programme, the leadership responded:



“For us, a sign of success is a student who has gained confidence and can look into your eyes and talk with curiosity...that transformation as an individual can take them a long way. If they can apply that in all their life and be really happy where they are...I would call that a success.”

Dr Anupama Ambika
Anilkumar, Programme
Lead, LG-AUP

Academic and Career Outcomes

Students develop demonstrable comfort with academic difficulty and gain clarity about interests and future pathways. As alumni reflect, the programme provides diverse exposure into a few topics that they tackle at the university level, allowing them to explore what aspects of Mathematics or Science genuinely resonate with them before making undergraduate choices. One alumna noted:

“I think just having that exposure through the Math apprenticeship program was fun, because you knew what aspects of Math, if at all you want to major in it, are areas you generally just like, or maybe they’re just topics you don’t really click very well with.”

Mannat Kaur, LG-AUP 2023 Alumna

Peer and faculty relationships frequently endure beyond the programme, creating lasting mentorship networks.

While the programme is still young, some early outcomes also include alumni securing admissions to world-class universities across the globe, publishing research in leading international journals and succeeding in highly competitive global internships and competitions.

FINDING EXCELLENCE THROUGH EXPLORATION

The LG-AUP demonstrates that academic excellence and career success are not separate from holistic development. The programme does not chase conventional markers of student achievement like rankings. Instead, it focuses on nurturing each student's unique potential while providing concrete pathways forward through global opportunities and support, financial or otherwise, for higher education. A focus on developing life skills through both in-classroom and social learning adds to this a layer of interdisciplinary thinking and value-based learning, which reaffirms the programme's intent to nurture a generation of 'caring geniuses'.

These principles offer powerful lessons for any programme seeking to develop confident and capable learners without constraining possibilities. By creating conditions where students can discover what they are capable of becoming rather than sorting them by what they already are, LG-AUP redefines what talent development can look like in the Indian context.







GenWise Gifted Summer Program

An inquiry-driven learning space for the intellectually curious

When Satyam arrived at GenWise's summer campus in Grade 8, he was used to being the fastest in the room. School had come easily to him. What he was not used to was uncertainty. In his first physics class, the instructor did not begin with formulas or definitions. Instead, he handed the class a plastic pipe and a cloth, asked them to rub it and then asked a simple question: *What do you notice?*

For several days, there were no answers, only experiments, disagreements and more questions.



*“I was confused. He wasn’t teaching us physics the way I knew it.
He was making us discover physics.”*

Satyam Agrawal, Alumnus and current
Teaching Assistant

This moment reflects the learning environment GenWise works to create, one where students stay with questions, follow them across disciplines and experience sustained intellectual engagement.

A Gap After Identification

GenWise emerged from a recognised need in India's gifted education ecosystem. Between 2008 and 2015, Educational Initiatives' (Ei) ASSET Talent Search identified thousands of high-ability students through above-level testing. During this period, Duke University's Talent Identification Program partnered with Ei to offer enrichment opportunities to some of these learners.

When Duke exited India in 2015, a question remained: *what happens after identification?* Across many classrooms, intellectually curious students performed well, often finishing work quickly and grasping concepts early. Over time, however, the lack of sustained challenge and intellectual peers led some to disengage quietly.

“For years, we got very good at identifying high-ability students. But identification without nurturance is meaningless. The real question was: what happens after you identify them?”

Vishnuteerth Agnihotri,
Co-Founder



In 2016, Agnihotri and Shrikant Patil launched what began as a summer initiative to address that question. Two years later, together with Rajesh Panchanathan, they formalised the effort as GenWise.

Since then, GenWise has worked with more than 2,000 students across over 100 Indian cities, offering year-round programmes for different age groups. At the centre is the flagship Gifted Summer Program (GSP): two to three weeks of residential immersion at the Manipal Academy of Higher

Education (MAHE) campus at Manipal, where 100-150 students aged 11-16 engage in inquiry-driven courses.

Students choose from courses across diverse domains, including physics, neuroscience, artificial intelligence, forensic science, environmental sciences, policy and economics, mathematics and robotics. The programme runs in two phases each summer, typically in May and June, Wizards for older students and Explorers for younger cohorts, allowing students to return multiple years as they progress.

Three design choices define the approach: how GenWise understands and identifies giftedness beyond test scores, how it structures pedagogy around inquiry and mentor autonomy, and how it uses residential design to build both belonging and independence.

DESIGNING AROUND A CLEAR AND EVOLVING UNDERSTANDING OF GIFTEDNESS

GenWise begins with an explicit articulation of what it means by giftedness. Rather than defining it primarily through IQ scores or early academic achievement, the programme understands giftedness as a set of observable competencies and behaviours that emerge over time.

This definition shapes both selection and pedagogy. In practice, this aligns with research that treats giftedness as more than early achievement, drawing on work such as Joseph Renzulli's on task commitment and creativity alongside ability.

GenWise's selection process builds on Ei's ASSET Talent Search, using above-grade assessments in English, Mathematics

and Science. Students scoring at or above the 90th percentile are eligible, with approximately 100-150 selected per summer cohort. The programme has expanded scholarships in recent years to include students from underserved backgrounds.

ASSET does not measure what students have memorised but how they think when facing unfamiliar problems. A Grade 7 student takes questions at a Grade 9 level. The test does not ask, ‘What’s the formula for area?’ It asks, ‘Given this unusual shape, how would you figure out its area?’

Recognising the limits of test-based selection, GenWise treats identification as a starting hypothesis rather than a final judgment. As Navin Kabra, who teaches technology courses at GenWise, observes:



“The kids who score the highest marks are not always the ones asking the most interesting questions. Mastery of a system is different from curiosity.”

Navin Kabra, Faculty

In one instance, a student who scored around the 80th percentile in ASSET Talent Search emerged as one of the strongest participants. What distinguished this student was diligence, metacognition and the ability to collaborate effectively, qualities not fully captured by standardised assessments.

Giftedness is recognised not only in who enters the programme but in how students engage once there. GenWise looks for certain patterns beyond test performance. As one faculty member observes:



“Giftedness is hard to define. Some are gifted in specific domains, some in their thinking approach. We’ve found that students’ uniqueness often emerges during the course, not just in admission tests. We keep questioning our definition so it doesn’t become exclusionary.”

**Dr Radha Gopalan,
Faculty**

One marker GenWise seeks to cultivate is stamina for sustained intellectual engagement. In GSP, students spend six to eight hours daily on the same subject for three weeks.

“We teach six to eight hours daily on the same subject,” Agnihotri notes. “There’s no dilution in excitement. Students keep discussing ideas late into the evening. That stamina differentiates gifted learners.”

Another marker is comfort with ambiguity and prolonged difficulty. Faculty recount an incident from the first GenWise Mathematics course in 2016 when students struggled with problems for several days. When hints were offered, the students declined, preferring to continue working independently. The willingness to stay with unresolved questions became a meaningful indicator.

The third dimension is depth of curiosity. As Asher Kaul, an alumnus, recalls, a session on fractals led into a discussion on epistemology - how knowledge is constructed through axioms, induction and logic:



“You were allowed to ask existential questions. Understanding how knowledge itself is structured changed how I approached learning.”

Asher Kaul, Alumnus

To GenWise, curiosity is not a momentary spark but a capacity that can either be sustained or slowly diminish, depending on available environments and opportunities. *“Before GenWise, they*



had questions but no place to take them,” observes Soham Mehta, a parent. *“Now they have a forum where they keep asking, years later.”*

SUSTAINING INQUIRY WITHOUT ASSESSMENT

At GenWise, learning begins with inquiry rather than explanation. Courses are designed so that students first observe phenomena, experiment and ask questions before encountering formal concepts or terminology.

This approach rests on two deliberate design choices. First, GenWise adopts an investigatory pedagogy without high-stakes assessment. Courses do not culminate in tests, grades or rankings, which allows both mentors and students to stay with uncertainty, explore ideas deeply and revise thinking over time.



Second, GenWise gives expert mentors full autonomy over course design. Mentors are not required to follow templates or standard syllabi; they design courses around the ideas, problems and questions they believe are most intellectually meaningful.

In environmental sciences taught by Dr Radha Gopalan, students begin with direct observation of phenomena such as groundwater depletion or air pollution rather than definitions. Questions that arise are captured on shared ‘burning questions’ charts and revisited collectively, ensuring that student curiosity shapes the direction of learning.

Similar approaches guide other disciplines. In physics courses led by Dr R D Prabhu, for example, students do not begin with circuit diagrams or textbook laws. They begin with games or fun experiments. They start by rubbing a PVC pipe with a cloth, building simple electroscopes and observing static charge.

Faculty autonomy allows mentors to respond flexibly to student interests. Navin Kabra, who teaches technology and computing courses, structures sessions so that mornings focus on core ideas, midday sessions apply theory through structured exercises and afternoons are reserved for sustained project work. Content is adjusted mid-course based on the questions students raise and the directions their projects take.

GenWise's emphasis on mentor autonomy is supported by who teaches. Faculty are disciplinary practitioners, often with doctoral training or extensive industry experience. A PhD in astrophysics might teach magnetism, an environmental scientist might lead climate discussions or a senior software professional might teach artificial intelligence.

The absence of high-stakes assessment shapes how learning unfolds. With no pressure to complete predetermined content or prepare for exams, courses typically focus on a single theme for three weeks. Students work toward substantial projects requiring persistence, iteration and collaboration.

“The beauty of GenWise is that there is no test at the end. That’s what allows the learning to go deep rather than rush forward.”

Ayan Dharod, Alumnus

Faculty also retain the flexibility to support interdisciplinary exploration. When a student in a technology course insisted on building a hardware-based project despite the course's software focus, the mentor facilitated cross-course collaboration. Such flexibility supports exploratory, student-driven learning.

DR PRABHU'S VAN

Every summer, Dr Prabhu arrives at the GenWise campus in his van. Not with suitcases, with equipment. When Satyam first saw Dr Prabhu's van, he was amazed. *“Not even universities have those kinds of equipment,”* he recalls.

Plasma tubes. Van de Graaff-generators. Materials for the Millikan oil drop experiment. PVC pipes, cloth and simple electroscopes. Equipment that transforms abstract physics concepts into tangible phenomena that students can observe, manipulate and question.

“I could never make a simple motor run when I first learnt it in sixth grade. So I had no right to ask students to read the textbook and memorise it. Whatever you teach has to be so simple and so real and so connected to life that it triggers curiosity.”

Dr R.D. Prabhu, Faculty

The van represents a philosophy: physics is not about memorising formulas. It is a way of asking questions about how the world works.

RESIDENTIAL DESIGN FOR EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AND INDEPENDENCE

For gifted learners, psychosocial development is as critical as intellectual growth. High ability does not automatically translate into social-emotional maturity. Many experience asynchronous development, are advanced intellectually but age-typical socially and may struggle with isolation,⁷ perfectionism or avoiding challenge when success has come easily.⁸

⁷ Rimm, S. B. (2023). Social adjustment and peer pressures for gifted children. *Davidson Institute for Talent Development*.

⁸ Mofield, E., & Chakraborti-Ghosh, S. (2016). Perfectionism, coping, and underachievement in gifted adolescents: Avoidance vs. approach orientations. *Education Sciences*, 6(3), 21.

GenWise treats psychosocial development not as supplementary but as foundational, designing its residential model intentionally to support this need.

“Just because they’re gifted doesn’t mean they’re not children. They still need space to grow socially and emotionally. We challenge them creatively, but we support them emotionally.”

Vishnuteerth Agnihotri, Co-Founder

Three weeks of immersion support three closely linked outcomes: belonging, independence and a clearer sense of self as a learner.

Many GenWise alumni describe feeling isolated in their regular environments. Their curiosity is often intense, their interests niche, their questions persistent. At GenWise, this is not unusual. Students are surrounded by peers who debate abstract ideas, read beyond requirements and pursue interests independently.



“GenWise was where I found my people. You weren’t weird for caring about ideas. You could be intensely curious and that was normal.”

Palak Maheshwari,
Alumna

At the same time, being surrounded by equally capable peers provides perspective. One parent, Kinjal Dharod, observed that her sons realised they were ‘just one among many’. For students accustomed to being the fastest to answer or the first to finish, this realisation can be disorienting. Some arrive expecting effortless success and encounter sustained difficulty for the first time. The emotional infrastructure exists precisely to help students stay with the challenge rather than retreat from it.

To make the environment both demanding and supportive, GenWise surrounds students with multiple forms of adult presence. Faculty serve as intellectual anchors during the day. Teaching Assistants (TAs), often GenWise alumni, provide near-peer support inside classrooms. Close in age and experience, TAs frequently become the first point of contact when students feel confused or uncertain.

Outside academic hours, Residential Counsellors (RCs) provide continuity of care. Each RC oversees 12-15 students. RCs conduct brief one-on-one check-ins during evening hours, facilitate peer bonding activities and maintain communication protocols with parents. They are trained to notice early signs of homesickness, withdrawal or distress.

With small cohorts and a high adult-to-student ratio (nearly 1 adult per 4-5 students), students have accessible points of connection and support. This layered adult presence allows students to experience difficulty without emotional collapse. Support is available, but struggle is not removed.

Several challenges are deliberately built into the environment. The day is deliberately structured: sustained academic immersion from 9 AM - 4 PM, followed by *adda*, fun activities ranging from sports and games to treasure hunts, DJ nights and karaoke in the evening. Device use is restricted with designated



time in the evening and roommates are assigned across courses, prompting conversations that cut across disciplines. Students frequently describe learning as much from peers in shared rooms as from formal sessions.

Over time, these conditions foster visible shifts. Students begin managing routines more independently, taking greater responsibility for their time and engaging with peers more openly and collaboratively.



“They come in nervous, sometimes even homesick. But by the end, they don’t want to go back. That transition always amazes us.”

Eklavya Shetty, Associate Director

Some also gain early clarity about the academic paths they wish to pursue. For Palak, exposure to forensic science confirmed her interest in biology while ruling out other pathways early. For Ayan, forensic science provided hands-on exposure to biochemistry and helped him choose his IB subjects, while robotics clarified that he did not want to pursue engineering. These decisions reflect a different kind of independence, the confidence to choose based on genuine interest rather than external expectation.

Rather than treating belonging and independence as incidental outcomes, GenWise designs for them deliberately. The residential model addresses the psychosocial needs of gifted learners: opportunities to connect with like-minded peers, structured support to navigate challenge and space to develop independence. By shaping the environment as deliberately as the curriculum, GenWise demonstrates that psychosocial maturity and intellectual growth are not parallel tracks but interdependent foundations for gifted learners.



ADDAS: WHERE LEARNING BECOMES CHOICE

Every evening, after formal courses end, GenWise students gather for ‘addas’, hour-long sessions where faculty or external speakers discuss topics outside the structured curriculum. The topics vary widely: quantum mechanics, AI ethics, public policy, the mathematics of music, neuroscience and climate systems.

Attendance is compulsory. However, there are no assignments, no tests, no connection to course grades. Despite this, students engage with openness and genuine curiosity.

Faculty describe addas as spaces where subjects can be explored ‘as they actually are’, not constrained by syllabi or exam requirements.

After Navin Kabra spoke about the physics of perpetual motion machines in one adda, explaining why they violate thermodynamic laws, a student who had been planning to study engineering changed direction entirely. He chose physics instead, wanting to *‘understand why things work at the fundamental level’*.

At GenWise, addas create space for learning that is not driven by evaluation, but by intellectual curiosity, often helping students discover what genuinely interests them for the first time.

WHAT GENWISE MAKES VISIBLE

GenWise demonstrates what becomes possible when gifted education moves beyond identification towards nurturance. By treating curiosity and persistence as central to giftedness, aligning learning with inquiry and mentor autonomy, and designing for peer belonging and independence, GenWise addresses dimensions of talent development that are often overlooked.

The model is resource-intensive and not easily scalable. It relies on expert faculty, small cohorts and residential infrastructure. GenWise is candid that its approach works best for a specific population - intrinsically motivated students and families who value depth over credentials. That around 30% of students return for additional summers suggests the model resonates deeply with those it serves.

Beyond its summer programme, year-round engagement through online courses and peer forums offers continuity, with many alumni maintaining connections years later through study groups, shared opportunities and collaborative projects.

“At first, it was uncomfortable not getting answers quickly. But after some time, I realised that figuring things out on my own was actually the point.

That stayed with me.”

Sheel Mehta, Alumnus



For students, the most lasting shifts extend beyond subject knowledge. Alumni describe GenWise as a turning point in how they relate to learning, where not knowing becomes an invitation rather than a failure and intellectual challenge no longer requires competition.

By creating environments that support depth, curiosity and intellectual risk-taking, GenWise makes visible one way in which high-potential learners can be nurtured through experiences that change not just what students know, but how they understand learning itself.

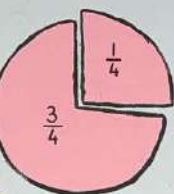




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Project RISE

Inside a culture of deep and advanced learning

Founded in 1991, The Akanksha Foundation was built on a simple but demanding proposition: that students from low-income communities can achieve at high levels when given access to strong schools and serious academic expectations. Over time, this belief has taken institutional form through a network of 27 schools, operated in partnership with municipal corporations across Pune, Mumbai and Nagpur.

As these schools strengthened holistic learning for large numbers of students, a new question began to surface from within classrooms themselves. While many learners were

being brought up to grade-level proficiency, a smaller group consistently demonstrated the capacity to move further and faster, yet had limited opportunities to do so within the regular structure of school.



“We do a lot to support students who need more help, but we don’t always talk about what else we can offer students who are ready for greater challenge. We don’t yet have a structured space for that.”

**Parijat Prakash, School
Leader, Akanksha
Foundation**

Project RISE took shape as a response to this question. Drawing on experience across classroom teaching, school leadership and programme design in India and internationally, Sapna Shah founded the programme in 2023 to create a structured enrichment space for students whose capacity to engage with more advanced work was becoming visible within Akanksha

classrooms, but for whom schools had limited time or bandwidth to design something distinct.

As Shah describes, the motivation for RISE came from observing a persistent mismatch between students' demonstrated capability and the opportunities available to them as they progressed through school.

Addressing this gap required a programme designed not as remediation, but as sustained academic enrichment.

“This programme came from a space of wanting to work with high potential children. What we’ve seen is that our highest achieving children are still not able to access selective pathways... For my children, education is a ticket to social and economic mobility.”

Sapna Shah, Founder
Director, Project RISE



Inside the Programme Design

Project RISE is a four-year, after-school academic enrichment programme for students in Grades 6-9. It is structured as a sustained enrichment experience, with clear processes for

selection, learning design and progress tracking built in from the outset. Students are identified through a multi-step selection process that draws on academic data, creativity and reasoning assessments, student interviews and inputs from teachers and parents, to identify readiness for sustained challenge.

Once selected, students engage in over 250 hours of learning each year. This includes weekly skill-building sessions in Mathematics and English, alongside quarterly intensive, project-based modules in STEM and literacy. Across these experiences, cognitive skills such as reasoning, problem-solving and communication are intentionally embedded into the curriculum.

Student progress is examined through multiple forms of evidence, including project work, portfolio defences and benchmark assessments such as ASSET. Together, these provide insight into both academic development and the ways students are beginning to engage with more complex thinking over time.

At its core, Project RISE reflects a deliberate extension of Akanksha's equity agenda. As foundational learning strengthens across schools, the programme responds to a parallel question: how to create structured opportunities for students who are ready to engage more deeply with complex ideas and demanding forms of thinking. In doing so, RISE seeks to expand the ceiling of what students can attempt and what public school systems can meaningfully support.

HUMANS OF KASARWADI



LEARNING THROUGH MAKING

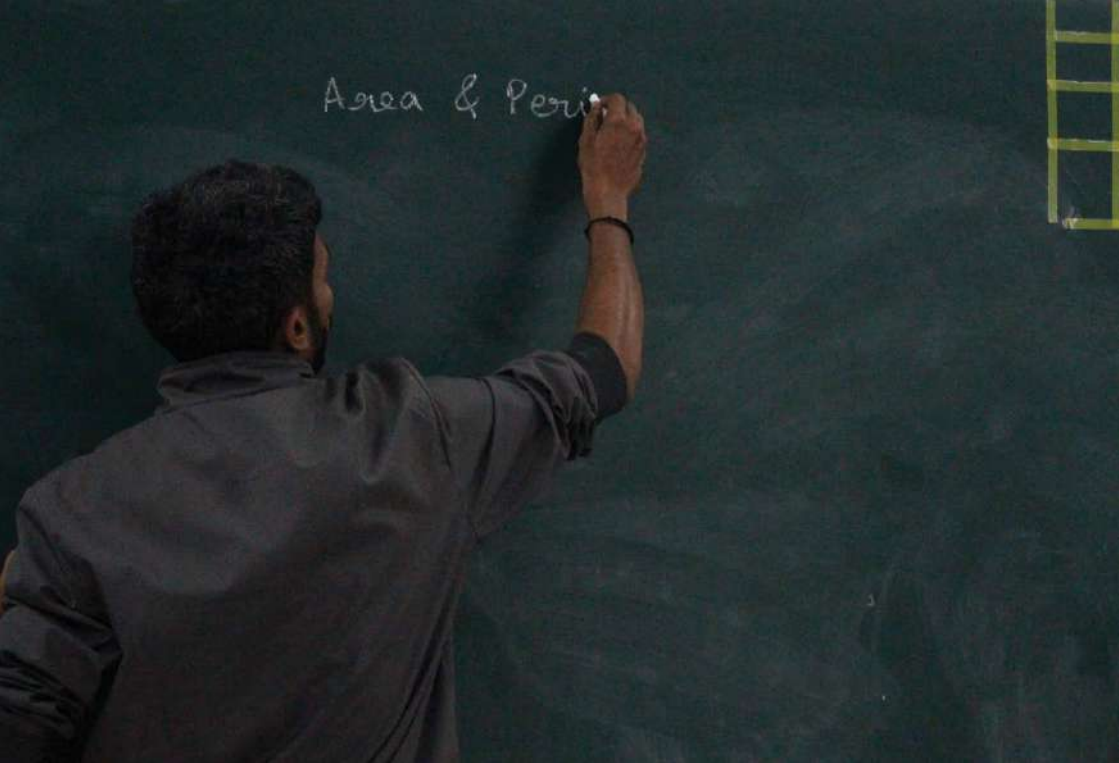
A defining feature of Project RISE is its emphasis on learning through making. Rather than reducing complex ideas to procedures to be memorised for assessment, the programme is designed around a constructionist approach in which students build, design and test ideas in order to understand how disciplines work from the inside. Across subjects, learning tasks are structured to move students beyond knowing what to do, towards grappling with *why* something works and *what happens if it changes*.

Within this approach, Project RISE creates sustained opportunities for high potential students from under-resourced communities to engage in rigorous, inquiry-driven learning, work that often remains inaccessible within regular school structures.

“Here, we learn beyond our textbooks. In school, we are often told what something is in Mathematics or Science. But here, we explore ideas in more detail, through activities that help us understand concepts more deeply.”

Pranjal and Sarthak, Grade 8 RISE Students

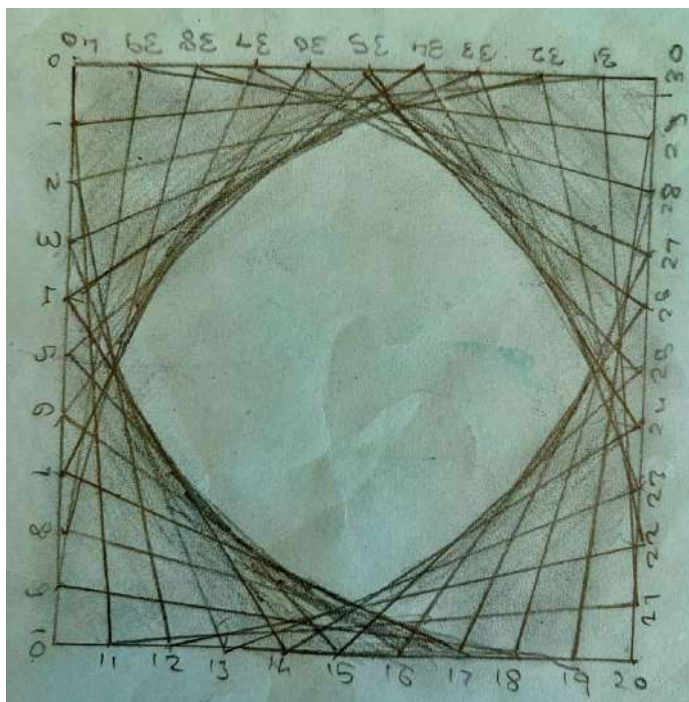
This approach is particularly visible in the way RISE treats problem-solving. In Mathematics module, students are encouraged to explore multiple ways of approaching the same problem, rather than being guided towards a single prescribed method. Creating this space is a conscious design choice, intended to help students become more comfortable with ambiguity and unfamiliar problems. As one mentor explained:



“Generally, we are told that there is a problem and a solution to it. But when I look at a problem, there can be many ways to tackle it. The question is whether we are giving our students the space in the classroom to explore those ways.”

Jai, Mathematics Mentor

This philosophy carries into RISE’s interdisciplinary modules. In the Art of Visualisation module, students were challenged to explore how curves can emerge from straight lines. Rather than beginning with formulas, they worked with simple materials to construct and refine visual patterns, gradually discovering how repeated linear elements can create the illusion of curvature. The task was intentionally open-ended, with students adjusting their designs through trial, error and discussion as their understanding deepened.



A similar emphasis on building understanding through iteration was evident during an intensive module on Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning. Rather than learning about algorithms in the abstract, students used simple AI tools to create basic classifiers. As they tested their models, errors emerged, such as confusing wrinkles with rips in a jeans-classification task, which prompted students to revisit and adjust their training data. These moments became opportunities to examine how data choices shape outcomes and how technological systems learn.

Across these experiences, adults acted less as instructors and more as guides, supporting students through questioning, feedback and one-on-one conversations. The focus remained on helping students articulate their reasoning, reflect on missteps and revise their work.

The programme's learning cycles culminate in public showcases, where students present their work to peers, families and guests. During the Diwali Showcase, students explained mathematical ideas through visual models, described design decisions in games they had created and reflected on how their thinking had evolved. In one instance, Ishwari Dhalpe, a Grade 9 student, presented and defended her independent research project before a small panel of subject experts, responding to questions and refining her explanations in real time.

For mentors, the showcase is a point of stepping back, watching students speak with clarity and confidence about work they fully own.

Together, these practices illustrate how Project RISE uses constructionist learning not as an add-on, but as a consistent way of organising instruction, placing sustained emphasis on building, testing and explaining ideas as a route to deeper understanding.

Observed student work and discourse, across modules and public showcases, such as students refining mathematical representations, debugging and revising AI models and publicly explaining and defending their reasoning, point to early signs of students engaging with more advanced forms of academic work.

TIME, MASTERY AND TRUST AS A DESIGNED SYSTEM

A second defining feature of Project RISE lies in how the programme is structured. Learning is not treated as a series of short tasks to be completed, but as work that requires time, focus

and care. Decisions about scheduling, assessment and culture are made with one aim: *to create conditions in which students can stay with difficult ideas long enough to understand them properly.*

Classes are organised as extended learning blocks, often lasting between 90 minutes and several hours. This gives students the space to move past the initial stages of a task and into sustained problem-solving. Whether they are coding, researching or working through a complex experiment, students are expected to sit with uncertainty, encounter difficulty and work through it rather than move on quickly. Mentors noted that this is often where the most meaningful learning begins, when students start asking questions that reveal what they do and do not yet understand.

This structure also changes how adults engage with the work. Because teaching is spread across fewer days, mentors have more time to prepare, reflect and review student work closely. This allows for careful, individualised feedback and makes it possible to support demanding, open-ended projects without simplifying them. Feedback is treated as part of the learning process.

Assessment at RISE reflects this emphasis on depth through a mastery-based system that prioritises deep understanding over ranking or comparison. Academically, students are expected to demonstrate strong mastery of core concepts, with the standard set at 90% or above. When students fall short, they are supported to identify gaps, relearn key ideas and re-attempt the assessment until mastery is demonstrated. Programme leaders believe that moving forward with a partial understanding of foundational concepts creates fragile learning, which tends to break down as academic demands increase. This practice instils a professional-grade rigour, teaching students that success in advanced fields

demands absolute competence. This system normalises failure as a learning event, not a personal indictment.

Beyond content mastery, RISE explicitly tracks the development of cognitive skills such as reasoning, problem-solving and communication across projects, using the Summit Learning cognitive skills rubric as a shared reference. Through portfolio defences and project assessments, mentors look for evidence of how students analyse problems, explain their thinking and respond to feedback. Early observations suggest that students are increasingly able to articulate their reasoning and revise their approaches, indicating a shift from task completion towards more rigorous forms of academic thinking.

RISE places clear emphasis on habits such as punctuality, commitment and responsibility. For non-academic traits like integrity, punctuality and commitment, the assessment is flipped: students start with full points (e.g., 15/15). Points are only deducted if they consistently fail to uphold the standard. This creates a culture of high expectations and trust. The programme assumes maturity and only withdraws its trust when the student demonstrates otherwise. School leaders observed that this approach is shaping students' behaviour beyond the programme itself, with noticeable shifts in maturity and self-discipline even by the middle school years.

The learning environment itself reinforces these values. Students are grouped by readiness and interest rather than strictly by age, meaning a single module might include learners from multiple grades working together. This mix creates natural opportunities for collaboration. Older students practise explaining their thinking clearly, while younger students stretch themselves by engaging with more advanced material. Groups

are often trusted to work independently, negotiating roles and solutions together.

Despite the level of challenge, the atmosphere remains calm and welcoming. Students describe the space as focused and friendly, a place where it feels safe to think aloud, make mistakes and try again. This sense of intellectual safety is essential in a programme that consistently asks students to operate at the edge of what they know.

By aligning time, expectations and trust, the programme creates a learning environment in which high potential students are supported to develop independence, resilience and the confidence to engage seriously with complexity.

THE SPECIALISED MENTOR MODEL: EXPERTISE, AMPLIFICATION AND CULTURAL BRIDGE

While Project RISE is defined by the depth of its academic work, that depth depends on a carefully designed instructional structure. At the heart of this structure is a deliberate pairing of specialised mentors and Teaching Assistants (TAs), an architecture that allows first-generation learners to engage with genuinely advanced, inquiry-driven work without being overwhelmed.

Mentors bring disciplinary expertise and set the intellectual bar. They design complex problems, insist on precision and model how experts think within a subject. Alongside them, TAs work at ground level. Many are alumni of Akanksha themselves, returning to classrooms with a shared cultural and educational history.



As one TA reflected,

“It feels like completing a circle, coming back to support students from the same place I came from. It shows them that this is possible.”

Rituja, Teaching Assistant

Their presence reshapes the learning environment, making ambition feel reachable rather than distant. This near-peer support matters most in moments of difficulty. During long immersive sessions, TAs observe students closely, who is engaging confidently, who is hesitating and where understanding begins to fray. They relay this real-time insight to mentors, allowing instruction to remain responsive without lowering expectations. Students are pushed, but not left behind.

Together, mentors and TAs work in complementary roles to support rigorous learning. This combination of subject expertise and close, day-to-day support helps the programme sustain demanding work while remaining responsive to students' needs.

HOW FAMILIES EXPERIENCE THE JOURNEY

Project RISE makes learning visible and intelligible to parents, aligning expectations around effort, discipline and long-term ambition.

This approach is most visible during public touchpoints such as the Diwali Showcase. The day opened with a structured parent session, not to report results, but to invite families into the programme's way of thinking. Parents were asked to work through a deceptively simple prompt together: how might a game of tic-tac-toe be redesigned so that it does not always end in a draw? As parents debated, tested ideas and laughed at false starts, they experienced, firsthand, the kind of exploratory, non-linear thinking their children are routinely expected to practise.

Parents listened as students explained design choices, acknowledged mistakes and described how their thinking evolved. As one parent described it:

“Earlier, they studied only what was in the book. Now they explain what they are doing, why they are doing it and what went wrong.”

Yogita Dhalpe, Parent

When parents recognise that struggle is intentional and productive, they are more willing to reinforce high expectations at home. In this way, family engagement moves beyond support to shared ownership. By systematically bringing parents into the learning culture, Project RISE builds an ecosystem around high-potential students, one in which intellectual ambition is understood, reinforced and protected well beyond the classroom.

THE ROAD AHEAD: CODIFYING EXCELLENCE AND NAVIGATING THE FUTURE

As RISE enters its next phase, the focus is shifting from experimentation to clarity. The programme is now working to articulate its model more deliberately, identifying what is working, refining what needs strengthening and grounding decisions increasingly in evidence rather than intuition. Because students will ultimately compete in wider, more selective academic arenas, RISE is paying closer attention to how its curriculum, pedagogy and year-long structure hold up beyond the programme itself. Codification, in this context, is less about scale and more about consistency, intention and proof.

This work is already underway. The team is examining data from the selection process to better understand which indicators - academic performance, creativity or commitment to sustained tasks, are most closely associated with continued engagement. Attendance patterns and student feedback are being reviewed to identify what supports persistence through demanding learning cycles, while portfolio defences and ASSET benchmark data are being used to reflect on where cognitive skill development appears strongest and where additional scaffolding may be required. These insights are shaping decisions about curriculum refinement and informing how the programme might grow without losing the conditions that enable deep learning.

At the same time, the team recognises that strong learning experiences alone are not sufficient. For many Akanksha students, the most complex challenges emerge after Grade 10, when they encounter a higher education landscape shaped by

competitive entrance exams, uneven access to information and significant financial constraints. RISE is beginning to respond by extending its attention beyond enrichment to pathway design, seeking options that are aspirational yet viable, selective yet affordable.

“We want selective pathways, but they have to be affordable.”

Sapna Shah, Founder Director, Project RISE

Sustaining motivation over multiple years presents a related challenge. While RISE asks students to engage with demanding work, the broader system continues to revolve around marks and examinations, which can make longer-term goals feel abstract. The programme is therefore exploring ways to make future possibilities more visible, helping students see assessments not as endpoints, but as bridges, necessary steps toward opportunities that matter to them.

The road ahead for Project RISE is not defined by rapid expansion, but by coherence. The aim is to strengthen the links between identification, rigorous learning experiences, mentorship, family partnership and access to post-school opportunities. The ambition is careful rather than grand: *to ensure that when students develop genuine academic capability, they are supported to carry it forward into pathways that are both demanding and within reach.*







A black and white photograph of two men in a meeting room. The man on the left is wearing glasses and a light-colored shirt, leaning on a table. The man on the right is wearing a light-colored shirt and a dark tie, standing and looking towards the left. The background features a window with horizontal blinds and a decorative lattice pattern. The overall mood is professional and collaborative.

3.

Widening the
worlds they
can enter

**What enables students
to move from aspiration
to a clear, navigable
path toward their
futures?**

These programmes operate at the critical intersection of guidance, opportunity and transition. Through mentorship, career exposure, structured guidance and financial or logistical support, they help students move confidently toward higher education, training and meaningful livelihoods. In doing so, they make visible the pathways, choices and processes that often remain unclear to first-generation learners.

What sets these models apart is their focus on equipping students not just with information, but with the confidence, networks and practical support needed to move forward. Their work recognises that potential alone is not enough; students also need guidance, resources and sustained encouragement to translate aspiration into attainable futures.

Faridabad Chapter Welcomes You



Udayan Shalini Fellowship

Enabling young girls to lead with purpose

Dr Kiran Modi, founder of Udayan Care, an NGO committed to improving the lives of underprivileged children and youth in India, recalls a moment that crystallised her purpose. She was at a roadside vegetable cart when she noticed the vendor's daughter sitting with a book. She asked her what she was reading. "*I want to become a scientist,*" the girl replied. "*But my mother says I cannot continue my studies beyond 10th grade*".

The girl was not struggling academically. She had ambition and aptitude. What she lacked was a pathway that her family could afford to support, not just financially, but psychologically.

That conversation, more than two decades ago, led Dr Modi to found the Udayan Shalini Fellowship (USF). What began with 72 girls in 2002 has now impacted over 18,000 girls across 38 chapters in 15 states.

The Challenge: Where Potential Narrows

Across India, the journey of high-potential girls from low-income families faces a critical rupture. For many, this is not a failure of ambition but a convergence of barriers: limited household resources, uncertainty about career options, pressure to earn early and the absence of trusted guidance during decision-critical moments.

According to USF's programme leadership, even when schools are accessible for girls, hidden costs accumulate: coaching materials, tuition fees and relocation costs. Equally importantly, parents navigating poverty rarely have exposure to higher education or professional careers, making it difficult for children to explore many options or absorb risks. The result is what Anjali Hegde, Executive Director of USF, describes as 'premature pathway closure':

“If they take up STEM disciplines in school, they go on to enrol in short-term courses, even though they may study nursing or physiotherapy, because there is a lot of pressure to earn money soon after school. This is self-limiting after a point, because the pace of growth in these careers without longer degrees is very different.”

Anjali Hegde, Executive Director, Udayan Care

Capable girls thus do not disappear from education suddenly; they step into safer, shorter pathways. USF was designed to counteract this narrowing. Its premise is simple but uncommon among scholarship programmes: potential requires time, trust and sustained accompaniment over the years, when economic pressures and structural barriers are most likely to derail a capable student.

USF is built on a five-to-six-year journey accompanying girls from late secondary school through higher education. During this period, USF offers what might be called a ‘navigational ecosystem’, focusing on providing girls with all the resources they need to navigate complex choices and roadblocks on their chosen paths.

“The focus is on building girls into confident, dignified, career-oriented women. While we provide a scholarship to ensure they complete their formal education, the programme is ultimately about transforming their ambition and talent into a future where they can stand with dignity.”

Anjali Hegde, Executive Director, Udayan Care

A convergence of three factors has contributed to USF’s effectiveness: long-term mentoring as navigation rather than motivation, an enabling ecosystem of resources and exposure, and building confidence through responsibility and leadership. Family engagement threads through all three, creating partnerships that reduce dropout and build durable support.



SELECTION AT THE INTERSECTION OF NAT (NEED, AMBITION AND TALENT)

USF's journey with each girl begins with a careful selection process designed to identify academic merit and the likelihood that structured support will transform her life. Eligibility criteria are straightforward: girls must come from government or government-aided schools, score a minimum of 60% in Class 10 and belong to families with limited financial means. But eligibility is only the starting point.

What makes USF's selection distinctive is its NAT framework: evaluating Need, Ambition and Talent. A girl may excel academically but lack the ambition to pursue advanced studies.

Conversely, another may face greater structural barriers (single-parent household, family illness, caste-based discrimination) yet demonstrates the determination to persist. USF seeks girls who combine real need, demonstrated ambition and sufficient talent to benefit from sustained mentoring, not necessarily those with the highest marks.

The selection process unfolds in multiple stages. The written test gauges general awareness, curiosity about the world and interest in topics beyond pure academics. Interviews follow, with both the girl and her parents present. This inclusion of parents signals from the outset that USF sees families as partners in their daughters' journeys. Conversations focus on understanding the girls' hopes, challenges and motivations, family context and whether parents are genuinely supportive of the girls' education. USF wants to ensure families understand the five-to-six-year commitment and are genuinely willing to support it.

In many chapters, social workers conduct home visits to appreciate living conditions, family size and the pressures the girls face daily. Girls with more siblings, particularly other girl children, may receive slightly higher consideration, as do girls from single-parent households, recognising that increased familial responsibilities often go hand in hand with increased needs for the student herself.

Finally, selected girls are invited to an induction ceremony. These are often joyful gatherings attended by families, mentors and volunteers, where girls take the 'Shalini Pledge', committing not only to complete their education but to uphold values of dignity, hard work and social responsibility. Being a formal event, the ceremony deliberately signals to families and newly-inducted Shalinis that this is not a casual programme but

a rigorous, serious intervention that expects commitment from all sides.

This selection process sets the tone for what follows: a long-term relationship, mutual commitment and shared expectations between the girl, her family and the USF community.

LONG-TERM MENTORING AS NAVIGATION

What distinguishes the Fellowship is not just the presence of mentors, but how mentoring is designed, sustained and used. The real challenge with mentorship is finding someone to help girls think through options, anticipate risks, recover from setbacks and revisit choices when circumstances change. A course selected at 16 may feel wrong at 18. A confident student may struggle after moving cities. A promising path may be interrupted by a family crisis or shifted to pursue an unexpected opportunity. At USF, mentoring is not a short-term intervention meant to inspire or motivate girls in small bursts. It is a long-term navigation system that supports them through uncertainty, transition and change.

“Our role is not to push girls in any direction, but only to provide a gentle nudge. If they have that, they can fly really high.”

Dr Kiran Modi, Founder, Udayan Care

Each Shalini is embedded in a pyramidal mentoring structure designed to balance scalability with personalised attention. This mentorship ecosystem is composed of programme coordinators (full-time Udayan Care employees), senior fellows

and alumni, and volunteers from diverse career pathways. It is heavily volunteer-driven, extracting value from local networks and spaces. Workshops are held in schools using donated premises on weekends. Expertise and mentorship are provided by professionals, often retired individuals, who volunteer their time.



The structure is primarily two-fold: the first level involves periodic chapter-wide, cohort-specific workshops, led by experienced mentors, onboarded for specific topics. The second level of mentorship is one-on-one, wherein each mentor is mapped to approximately five Shalinis, conducting individual check-ins, in addition to students being able to reach out to them for individualised support.

An important element within this pyramid is also near-peer mentoring. Senior Shalinis and alumni mentor younger girls, creating relationships that feel relatable and attainable. A Class 11 student struggling with course selection feels heard differently by a senior who can say, *“I also felt uncertain and here’s how I worked through it”*. This layered structure strengthens the fellowship itself: girls do not just receive support; they grow into roles where they provide it.

“Our programme provides a structured curriculum that integrates individual and group mentoring with dedicated employability sessions to ensure career choices are made with depth and caution.”

Mukesh Joshi, Associate Director, USF

The mentoring relationship is structured with clear outcomes. Over five years, the programme has defined specific mentoring goals: from foundational self-awareness (girls understanding their own strengths, interests and values) through exploration of the immediate world around them (community, school and local opportunities), to navigating higher education and upskilling oneself and ultimately supporting professional and career pathways. These goals guide workshops, ensuring mentoring is not ad-hoc but purposeful. Examples of workshops include ones on goal setting, leveraging technology for learning, Prevention

of Sexual Harassment (POSH) awareness and various soft skills, including teamwork, conflict resolution and even navigating biases in the workplace.

Girls are encouraged to talk openly about fear, doubt and confusion from the first year itself. This has a powerful effect on confidence. When girls know that support will not disappear after one setback, they are more willing to attempt challenging paths. Importantly, mentoring conversations also extend to personal challenges. Girls speak with mentors about family pressures, safety concerns, mental health struggles or the stress of balancing study with household responsibilities. While mentors do not replace professional services, their consistent presence helps girls feel seen and supported at moments when they might otherwise disengage.

Commodore Rajan Bhandari, Convener of USF's Greater Noida Chapter, shared the story of his mentee, who was able to explore her talent in informatics as a result of USF's one-on-one mentorship. He recognised her interest in the field and encouraged her to apply for different opportunities which would allow her to test and express her potential.

“From a shy 16-year-old whose mother had to bring her for the workshops, suddenly she's travelling alone to Hyderabad, to Jaipur, running marathons and winning at hackathons. We encourage them to put themselves out there - on LinkedIn or Facebook and share what they are achieving. Because only when a girl starts believing in what she can do will she truly develop a sense of self.”

Cmdr. Rajan Bhandari, Convener,
USF Greater Noida Chapter

BUILDING AN ENABLING ECOSYSTEM

USF recognises concrete barriers - lack of technology, limited access to professional networks and unfamiliarity with worlds beyond their immediate circumstances.

There is thus, first and foremost, structured financial support. Quarterly fellowship grants cover tuition, books and educational materials. This support extends to laptops and phones wherever needed. This enables students to keep pace with coursework, develop digital skills and participate in online learning or professional opportunities. The programme, through its alumni, also offers support with references and recommendations for higher studies, scholarships and job or internship opportunities.

Exposure and experience form another critical pillar. Corporate visits bring girls into professional workplaces, where they meet working women in various sectors and understand what careers actually entail. Residential camps and educational visits allow girls to travel beyond their immediate geography, build independence, develop confidence in unfamiliar settings and experience worlds often distant from their everyday lives.

One such experience recounted by Shalinis in USF's Faridabad chapter is a visit to Pune for an annual Fellowship-wide meet-up called 'Celebrating Change'. While there, they had the opportunity to interact with Dr Darshana Joshi, a USF alumna and founder of VigyanShaala, an organisation nurturing STEM students across the country.

"It was so cool to meet her and hear her speak. Her story, the family situation she came from and where she has reached, was extremely

inspiring. After talking to her, we also felt like we could go abroad and study, and start our own business.”

Final Year Shalini, USF Faridabad Chapter



This enabling ecosystem is crucial because it removes the barrier of access and networks. When a girl has a laptop, she can keep pace with coursework. When she participates in a corporate visit, she can envision herself in a professional role. When she receives guidance through the admissions process,

she can navigate its complexity. When she has an internship, she can develop professional skills and networks that distinguish her from her peers. These seem like small interventions, but for first-generation learners, they are transformative.

TRANSFORMING SELF-PERCEPTION THROUGH LEADERSHIP

For many girls growing up in low-income households, confidence is not something that comes easily. Even when they succeed academically, social narratives position them as ‘beneficiaries of help’ rather than as individuals with something to offer. USF acknowledges that confidence grows not through encouragement alone, but through actual responsibility and initiative-taking.

Every Shalini completes at least 50 hours of social service annually. These activities range from teaching younger students to participating in plantation drives, collecting resources for old age homes or facilitating community health initiatives. Girls are encouraged to see themselves as active contributors, capable of creating value for others.

The transformation is visible to observers and to the girls themselves. Girls who once struggled to state their names clearly begin to take initiative in planning activities, speaking in group settings and representing the programme to external audiences. This ultimately allows them to emerge as young leaders in their immediate communities - families, neighbourhoods and schools. They actively solve problems that they have experienced themselves and also engage with groups facing challenges different from them, which helps them develop empathy, social

awareness and a broader understanding of inequality. For Shalini, this remains one of the key aspects of the programme, with a majority even surpassing the 50-hour requirement. This also shapes their aspirations; many begin to imagine careers linked to social impact, education, health or public service. Senior Shalinis are also encouraged to remain engaged as mentors to the junior fellows, as a way of further incorporating leadership into their journey. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle where support is continuously renewed from within. However, not every Shalini becomes a mentor; there are selection criteria.

“I see myself as someone who can lead. I have learned that my voice matters and that I have a duty to help other girls in my neighbourhood who don't have the same opportunities I do.”

Shalini, Grade 11,
USF Faridabad
Chapter



Potential mentors are assessed on qualities like genuine desire to serve others, patience in listening without moving immediately to advice-giving, their own academic consistency and ability to navigate ambiguity. This reaffirms that mentoring is an earned responsibility.

USF is a programme focused on who girls become as individuals, capable, responsible and equipped to contribute to their communities. This shift from beneficiary to builder enables long-term resilience and the capacity to shape futures deliberately and support others in doing the same.

IMPACT THAT EXTENDS BEYOND INDIVIDUALS

With a 95% retention rate in its fellows and a growing community of over 18,000 Shalinis, USF demonstrates a scalable model. It shifts the goal from keeping girls in school to enabling them to become informed, resilient leaders who shape their own futures and uplift their communities.

Women in the fellowship's active alumni programme include doctors, pharmacists, nurses, physiotherapists, chartered accountants, company secretaries, engineers and teachers. These women also continue to give back to USF in the form of mentorship as well as fundraising.

Dr Darshana Joshi exemplifies this ripple effect. A fellow from one of the first cohorts of the Delhi chapter, she completed her PhD in Physics from The University of Cambridge and then returned to India to found VigyanShaala. She credits the Fellowship's long-term mentoring and social responsibility facets with helping her navigate the STEM pathway that others

discouraged her from pursuing. Her impact on thousands of girls far exceeds what any individual mentor could achieve.

“USF excels because it recognises that sharpening your skills and value system for the long haul is as crucial as academic achievement. In a world of information overload, the programme helps young people cut the noise and fix their eyes on what is important by restoring the ‘human touch’ and empathy that is often missing for them.”

Dr Darshana Joshi, USF Alum; Founder, VigyanShaala

Dr Joshi's story is one among thousands. The ecosystem of alumni creates what might be called an ‘aspiration infrastructure’. Younger girls see women only 5-7 years ahead of them working in companies, studying at universities and managing organisations. These alumni are relatable in ways that distant success stories are not.

The Udayan Shalini Fellowship proves that transforming trajectories of high-potential girls requires more than scholarships. It demands sustained, holistic support: long-term mentoring that navigates uncertainty, an enabling ecosystem that removes concrete barriers and opportunities to build confidence through responsibility and leadership.



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National Law Scholars Program

Preparing talent for law and leadership beyond

Across India's leading law schools, the promise of equal access is still taking shape. Even today, many National Law Universities (NLUs) continue to experience limited participation from students from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds. A 2024 Parliamentary Committee report noted that key inclusion policies, such as reservations, are not always fully realised in NLUs.⁹ Independent diversity studies have shown that the

⁹ Rajya Sabha Secretariat. (2024). *142nd Report on Strengthening Legal Education in view of emerging challenges before the Legal Profession*. Department-related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice.

typical NLU classroom still draws largely from urban, English-educated, financially secure families, while students from government schools, rural communities and other marginalised groups remain underrepresented.¹⁰

It was within this systemic gap, between constitutional ideals and lived realities, that the National Law Scholars Program (NLSP) was conceived in 2021. A flagship initiative of Bharat Navodaya Abhiyan, in partnership with the Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti (Ministry of Education), NLSP focuses on students from Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas (JNVs), preparing them for examinations such as Common Law Entrance Test (CLAT) and All India Law Entrance Test (AILET) while also helping them envision themselves as future actors within the legal system.

Initially, NLSP began its journey in Bahraich, Uttar Pradesh. Over time, as demand grew and the model stabilised, NLSP expanded its footprint. Today, the programme operates across two campuses - Greater Noida (Gautam Buddha Nagar) and Ranga Reddy, on the outskirts of Hyderabad, allowing it to draw from a wider regional pool while remaining embedded within the JNV ecosystem.

The programme was designed to address a specific absence in India's education ecosystem: structured, credible pathways for rural and underrepresented students to enter the country's most competitive law schools.

¹⁰ IDIA Charitable Trust (2022). IDIA Diversity Survey Report, 2021–2022.



“As justice cannot be fully served by a legal system that doesn’t reflect the society it seeks to protect, it becomes essential for people from those very communities to be part of it. Bringing individuals from the margins into the mainstream is not just desirable, it is necessary.”

Anoop Maurya, Founder

NLSP’s vision is deeply intertwined with its founder, Anoop Maurya’s own journey. A Navodayan himself, from a small village in Bahraich, Uttar Pradesh, Anoop later studied at the University of Delhi and went on to complete the prestigious Young India Fellowship (YIF)¹¹. That experience, he says, clarified a long-held question: *what happens to capable students when opportunity never arrives?*

¹¹ The Young India Fellowship (YIF) is Ashoka University’s flagship one-year postgraduate programme in liberal arts and leadership.

He often refers to NLSP as a ‘mini version of YIF’, not in structure, but in spirit. It is driven by the belief that exposure, mentorship and confidence can fundamentally shift trajectories, particularly for students who have never been encouraged to imagine themselves in elite professional spaces. Over time, Anoop came to see law as a powerful lever in that shift, offering voice, agency and a seat at decision-making tables for those historically excluded. As Subhash Mishra, an NLSP mentor, puts it, the legal profession remains difficult to break into. And when those from under-resourced communities are not represented, the concerns that matter most to them rarely make it to the table.

The ambition and vision of NLSP stretch far beyond an examination rank and getting a seat in elite law universities in India. NLSP is designed not to create just lawyers, but to nurture leaders, policy reformers and future judges who will work for broader social changes in the communities they come from. The ultimate goal is to seed the nation’s power structures with a new generation of ethical leaders - modern-day Ambedkars, Mandelas, Lincolns and Gandhis.

Anchored in this vision, NLSP has developed a set of practices that translate its philosophy into action. These approaches have become the backbone of how the programme identifies, nurtures and accompanies students on their journey to India’s top law schools and beyond.

SEEING POTENTIAL THAT PAPER CANNOT CAPTURE

NLSP’s three-stage process is designed to identify both aptitude and purpose. The selection process ensures that each cohort



includes students who are not only capable learners but future contributors to the programme's larger mission of public-minded leadership.

“The (NLSP) programme often becomes a catalyst for students who aspire not only to succeed personally but to create change for others.”

Sri D.Vijaya Bhaskar, Principal, JNV Ranga Reddy

The first stage is an open, objective screening test conducted within JNVs for Grade 10 students. Any student interested in law can take it. The test assesses basic aptitude, English and academic readiness, creating an inclusive pool of students who have the foundational capacity to explore law as a pathway.

The second stage moves beyond objective testing to a written round with descriptive and essay-based questions. These responses offer a window into how students think and write, as well as the life experiences that have shaped them, helping the programme identify both academic potential and those most likely to benefit from its support.

The final stage involves a conversation-led interview. Panellists, often individuals who come from similar, under-resourced backgrounds, can read these cues with nuance, recognising potential that might otherwise stay hidden. Anoop notes that although academics account for about 60% of the selection, the rest depends on a student's context, their experiences, challenges, purpose and the determination they carry.

Those conversations frequently reveal motivations shaped by lived reality. One Grade 12 student spoke of growing up in a village where child marriage and domestic violence were commonplace. Long before encountering NLSP, those experiences had already shaped a determination to study law.

“I’ve seen gender discrimination, domestic violence and different kinds of abuse far too closely. These experiences shaped my purpose. If I become an advocate, I want to work to reduce these injustices.”

Grade 12 student

It is this kind of grounded ambition, rarely visible on application forms, that NLSP recognises. The composition of NLSP's cohorts reflects this intent. Nearly all scholars come from rural backgrounds, with a significant proportion belonging to SC, ST and OBC communities. More than half are young women, many are first-generation learners and all come from economically weaker sections, including students from general categories. Together, these profiles underscore NLSP's aim: not to create isolated success stories, but to build credible and scalable pathways for those historically excluded from elite legal education.



NLSP intentionally works with small cohorts to preserve depth rather than scale. The programme began with a cohort of 30 students in its first cycle (2019-21), a model that has been consciously sustained over time. Each subsequent cohort, 2021-23, 2023-25 and the current 2024-26 cycle, has continued with 30 scholars per campus. The selected students come from more than ten states and union territories. This diversity brings together students shaped by different social realities, enriching peer learning and perspective.

BUILDING FOUNDATIONAL READINESS FOR THE EXAM AND FOR WHAT FOLLOWS

NLSP offers a rigorous, fully residential programme embedded within Classes 11 and 12, allowing students to prepare for competitive law entrance examinations without the disruption of gap years or the burden of unaffordable private coaching. Once selected, scholars enter a carefully sequenced curriculum that integrates law entrance exam preparation with their CBSE coursework, strengthening core competencies in English language, logical reasoning, reading comprehension and general awareness. Beyond academic preparation, the programme places equal emphasis on building life skills and civic awareness.



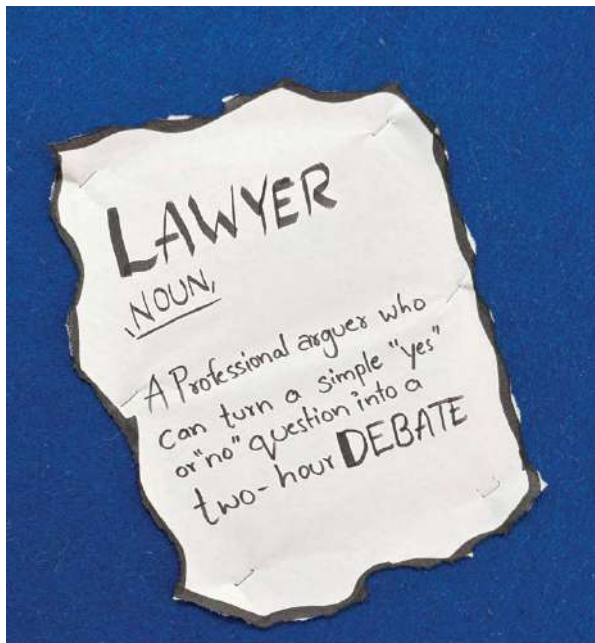


NLSP's pedagogy departs sharply from conventional CLAT coaching. Rather than emphasising rote preparation, the programme focuses on cultivating habits of thinking central to legal practice: reading closely, reasoning carefully and articulating arguments clearly. Mentors recognise that students need more than exam techniques; they need the habits of mind that will carry them through law school and into the profession. Rather than racing through syllabi, NLSP immerses students in environments mirroring real legal thinking.

For many students, English is a challenging area, a theme that surfaced repeatedly in conversations. To bridge this gap, the programme places strong emphasis on getting the basics right: cultivating reading habits, strengthening vocabulary and building comfort with language. Students are encouraged to read

widely, from fiction to op-eds and many spoke with delight about mentors sourcing books from their own wish-lists. NLSP trains students to actively engage with texts by dissecting arguments, noting structure and internalising new words in context. This single habit serves multiple CLAT needs at once: faster reading of dense prose, stronger comprehension of formal texts, richer vocabulary for the English section and sharper analytical skills for Legal Aptitude and Logical Reasoning.

Students often say NLSP reshapes how they study. One alumna, now pursuing her LLB at National Law School of India University, Bangalore, fondly described those early-morning routines that began with newspapers and discussions. She described how their mentor would wake them at five each morning so they could read the day's paper together and debate its key issues, habits that, she noted, continue to support her in her LLB studies today.



Debates and youth parliaments form another cornerstone of learning, pushing students to navigate ambiguity, defend positions and construct evidence-based arguments. Mentors participating in this activity at NLSP explained that it compels students to go beyond simple opinion and formulate a convincing, fact-based argument, similar to how a legal brief or courtroom submission is prepared.

“I couldn’t speak in front of people before joining NLSP. Through speeches, debates and discussions, I’ve lost that stage fright.”

Grade 11 Student

Regular mock tests, conducted twice a week, help students build the exam temperament and stamina required to perform under CLAT’s intense time pressure. More importantly, they create a continuous feedback loop that encourages reflection and improvement. Errors are treated not as failures, but as diagnostic tools, each one offering precise insight into gaps in understanding and strategy and becoming a deliberate step toward stronger performance. As one student shared, coming from the humanities stream had made the quantitative section particularly daunting, but the mock tests and subsequent feedback helped her pinpoint exactly where she was falling short.

For many students, NLSP is the first time they encounter the breadth of careers available after a law degree, the earning potential after graduating from top NLUs and the pathways that lead from classrooms to courtrooms, corporate firms and public service. Mentors and visiting alumni introduce students to different branches of law, demystify courtroom processes, explain how contracts and legal documents are actually written

and emphasise the communication and language skills needed to thrive in the field.

AN ECOSYSTEM BUILT ON TRUST AND BELONGING

“It never felt like a programme. It felt like a family that made sure no one was left behind.”

NLSP Alumna

A defining strength of NLSP is its ability to create a holistic support ecosystem around each student. The small-cohort design allows the programme to engage deeply with every student, ensuring that ambition, context and potential are not lost in scale.

NLSP integrates academic, socio-emotional and mentorship support into the daily rhythm of school life, ensuring students feel anchored, confident and are able to give their best. The programme operates seamlessly within JNV's existing structure, with mentors and teachers coordinating to ensure students can prioritise exam preparation without overwhelming disruption. When needed, schedules are adjusted to allow time for remedial sessions or focused coaching, a flexibility that reflects shared ownership between NLSP and the school.

JNV's infrastructural support forms the backbone of this partnership. Classrooms, tablets, library access and internet facilities are readily made available and the principal of JNV Ranga Reddy expressed a strong commitment to ensuring that NLSP students receive whatever they need to prepare smoothly.

The idea is rooted not in imposition, but rather in



collaboration. JNVs offer strong academic foundations and NLSP supplements them through specialised guidance for competitive exams. As preparation for law is still a relatively new pathway for many students in the JNV system, this model offers a promising bridge. Parents also feel reassured by the safety and structure of the JNV campus and students benefit from an environment that reflects their cultural and social context.

At the centre of this ecosystem are the mentors. NLSP places careful attention on selecting mentors who understand the ethos of JNVs and can connect with students on both academic and personal levels. Many mentors are Navodayans themselves, creating an immediate sense of familiarity and trust. Students describe them not as authority figures, but as people they can turn to for academic guidance and emotional steadiness alike. Peer bonds run just as deep, with cohorts rallying instinctively around those struggling with stress or homesickness.



The programme also pays deliberate attention to socio-emotional growth. Gender-sensitisation workshops, for instance, help students challenge stereotypes and develop empathy, an especially important intervention given that many have witnessed discrimination firsthand. As one alumna noted, the workshops fundamentally shifted how students engaged with each other, fostering a deeper ability to recognise and respect differing perspectives.

CARRYING STUDENTS BEYOND ADMISSION

NLSP's support does not end once students secure a law school seat. The programme actively scaffolds transitions into higher education and the profession, offering career counselling, exposure to legal fields, internships and alumni guidance.

“We don’t just want degrees; we want students to get the best placements and exposure.”

Subhash Mishra,
Mentor



Internships and exposure visits form another pillar of this ecosystem. During law school, students receive guidance in securing opportunities with law firms, attend legal events and melas and learn to navigate professional spaces with confidence.

Financial support is a crucial part of NLSP’s commitment to students. With top NLUs costing upwards of ₹5 lakh per year, NLSP covers application fees, tuition support and stipends, ensuring that cost does not derail progress. From the upcoming admission cycle, the programme has committed to arranging full scholarships for students entering the top 10 NLUs and other law schools. Financial barriers can become the biggest roadblock; NLSP tries to remove them through scholarships and support.

For many, the promise of financial support is a powerful source of motivation, an assurance that their talent and effort

will not be held back by cost as they pursue a future in law. Mentors also play a critical role in helping students navigate external sources of financial aid. Often, this support takes the form of timely guidance and advocacy at moments when costs threaten to become barriers. “*One email from my mentor made all the difference,*” recalled an alumna who secured financial aid after struggling to pay university fees.

As alumni numbers grow, the programme is actively strengthening this post-admission support, both financial and non-financial, to help students navigate the demands of legal education and professional life with confidence.

EARLY GREEN SHOOTS, ENDURING POSSIBILITY

“What NLSP gave me goes far beyond law school preparation. It taught me empathy, confidence and how to think for myself. In spaces that are often competitive and isolating, I carry with me a sense of responsibility to remember where I come from and to use my education for something larger than myself.”

NLSP Alumna

To date, NLSP has supported nearly ninety scholars, of whom seventy-four are currently pursuing legal education, including forty-four who have secured admission to NLUs and other leading law institutions. While still early, the positive shifts are already visible: stronger academic habits, greater emotional confidence, deeper exposure to the legal profession and, perhaps most importantly, a widening sense of what is possible.

As the model takes shape, NLSP is now testing it beyond JNVs through a state-level pilot in Uttar Pradesh and an all-India campus for ST students, a community that has often had fewer pathways into elite legal education. These early results suggest how widening access, when paired with thoughtful design and sustained support, can reshape pathways into elite professions for talented learners from underprivileged backgrounds.



A-1
BST





Avanti Fellows

Scaling equitable access to India's most competitive STEM pathways

In India's most competitive STEM entrance examinations, the odds are sharply uneven. Students from historically disadvantaged and economically weaker backgrounds¹² make up nearly 78% of all candidates who register for the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE). Yet only 25% of these students qualify, compared with 43% of students in the General category. The gender gap is starker still: just 17% of those who qualify are women.¹³

¹² This includes Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and Economically Weaker Sections.

¹³ Joint Implementation Committee (2025). Joint Implementation Committee (JIC) report: JEE Advanced 2025 (Vols. I-III)

A 2021 audit by the Comptroller Auditor General of India also found large shortfalls in reserved category enrolment at IITs.¹⁴ These disparities persist not because of differences in ability, but because success in high-stakes exams depends on years of sustained preparation, conceptual depth and strategic guidance, which are inputs concentrated among families who can afford expensive private coaching.¹⁵ Research shows that economic status remains a powerful determinant of who enters STEM higher education in India, with wealthier students far more likely to access and benefit from competitive opportunities.¹⁶

This imbalance became visible to Avanti's founders in an unexpected place. In the late 2000s, while mentoring students at IIT Bombay, they noticed that some of the institute's most determined students, many from rural and low-income backgrounds, were struggling to keep pace after admission. These were students who had already cleared one of the hardest entrance exams in the world, yet lacked the academic foundations and exam strategies their wealthier peers had accumulated over years of coaching. The insight was sobering: *if access gaps persisted even after entry into IIT, the problem lay far earlier in the pipeline.*

This realisation led to the founding of Avanti Fellows in 2010. From the outset, the organisation focused not on launching a single programme, but on redesigning the systems that shape how high-potential students from low-income backgrounds prepare for elite STEM pathways.

¹⁴ Comptroller and Auditor General of India (2021). Report No. 20 of 2021: Performance Audit on Higher Education in IITs and Other Central Institutions.

¹⁵ Bhorkar, S., & Bray, M. (2018). The expansion and roles of private tutoring in India: From supplementation to supplantation. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 62, 148-156.

¹⁶ Gopinath, P., Kumar, R. & Banerjee, S. (2025). STEM beyond reach? An analysis of access barriers in India's higher education landscape. *Discov Educ* 4, 490.



Fifteen years on, Avanti works at a national scale across multiple public school systems, including the Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya (JNV) network and partnerships with state governments, supporting more than 80,000 students each year. Students in Avanti's programmes qualify for STEM professional colleges at rates well above national benchmarks for low-income students, with more than 16,000 placements to date, including around 3,000 in the country's top 500 STEM institutions. A large share of these students enter government colleges. Girls now make up over half of Avanti's cohort, reflecting steady gains in female representation within highly competitive engineering pathways.

But these numbers tell only part of the story. What sets Avanti apart is how it achieves student outcomes: by building support structures within existing public schools rather than

parallel systems, providing early support to struggling students and deliberately redesigning learning environments to address gender differences in participation and performance.

BUILDING ON FOUNDATIONS: THE MAGNET SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP MODEL

When Avanti Fellows began its work in 2010, its founders experimented with multiple approaches to supporting high-potential students from low-income backgrounds. They tried placing students in commercial coaching centres in cities and layered it with mentorship support. They also began working on a self-study model with small groups of students from JNVs.

In large coaching centres, students from rural backgrounds struggled to find their footing - academically, socially and emotionally. Systems built to produce top ranks offered little support to students who needed time, attention and continuity to convert potential into performance.

In contrast, Avanti's work with JNVs revealed a very different pattern. Even with far less intensive instruction, Navodaya students demonstrated greater academic stability, higher persistence and stronger peer motivation. In one early cohort from Puducherry, a majority of students preparing largely through self-study went on to clear the JEE.

These experiments led to a clear insight: *what mattered was not just access to coaching, but the environment itself.* Talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds did not thrive in generic commercial coaching environments that prioritised top ranks over long-term student support.



“We began with a narrow focus on IIT admissions. We tested private coaching with mentoring in cities and we also tried a self-study model with Navodaya students. What became clear very quickly was that the private coaching ecosystem was simply not designed for the children we wanted to serve.”

Akshay Saxena,
Co-Founder, Co-CEO

This realisation reshaped Avanti’s strategy. Rather than building parallel institutions, Avanti chose to work inside strong public systems and intensively build on what already existed.

“For high-potential students from low-income backgrounds, the environment has to be intentionally designed. Talent cannot be identified or supported in ad hoc ways; it works best when layered onto structured government systems.”

Agny Ganesh, Senior Director
of Operations



Many capable students face constraints unrelated to academic ability: unreliable transport to coaching centres that may be hours away, irregular nutrition and family responsibilities that interrupt sustained preparation and often disproportionately affect girls. Because most commercial coaching models are not trying to address these constraints, they often fail to serve such students. The Navodaya system, by contrast, was designed to address these barriers.

The system offered three decisive advantages. First, talent identification was already done. Each year, JNVs admit tens of thousands of academically strong students through a competitive national exam, creating a pre-screened pool of high-potential learners. Second, the residential structure removed many of the frictions that derail preparation. Third, the peer environment normalised academic ambition. Students were surrounded by others like them, making sustained effort socially legitimate rather than isolating.

The Tiered-Intervention Model

Building on this foundation, Avanti developed a tiered intervention model that adapts to varying levels of school capacity while remaining embedded within the public system. At the most intensive end are the Centres of Excellence (CoEs), where 40 selected students per grade receive 20 hours of instruction per week from full-time Avanti teachers in STEM subjects. These centres operate within JNV campuses rather than outside them. Teachers are present on campus, classes are aligned with the school timetable and Avanti handles advanced STEM instruction while the school continues to teach other subjects for board examinations.

Avanti runs a nodal model in 13 JNVs, placing teachers who teach the entire cohort rather than a selected group. This allows rigour to scale without fragmenting the school community. Avanti's national online partnership with the Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti ensures that students across hundreds of schools can access learning materials and testing, even where in-person capacity is limited.

Selection into Avanti's most intensive programmes is deliberately conservative. Each year, thousands of Class 10 JNV students sit for the Navodaya Competitive Selection Test. Avanti primarily selects students who narrowly miss cut-offs for other highly selective residential coaching programmes but demonstrate strong academic readiness.

What distinguishes this model is not just reach, but integration. Students do not commute between school and coaching, juggle incompatible curricula or navigate conflicting expectations. A JNV principal described this succinctly:

“Earlier, students were good, but outcomes were limited. Now, their confidence and seriousness have changed, not just for Avanti students, but across the school.”

JNV Kolhapur Principal

By embedding rather than overlaying, Avanti reduces friction, sustains engagement across the full preparation cycle and strengthens the academic culture of the host institution itself.

Avanti's magnet school partnership model demonstrates that intensive outcomes do not require dismantling public systems. When strong institutional foundations are recognised and deliberately built upon, scale and depth can reinforce rather than dilute each other.



WHEN RIGOUR MEETS CARE: DIAGNOSTIC SYSTEMS THAT PREVENT COLLAPSE

Avanti Fellows prepares students for some of the most unforgiving exams in India. JEE and NEET do not reward effort, context or improvement over time; they reward performance on a single day. For first-generation learners, the stakes are high, with performance in a single exam shaping access to further educational and professional opportunities.

In such a system, the instinct is often to lower expectations or soften pressure. Avanti does the opposite. Its academic spine is deliberately uncompromising, but that rigour is delivered through careful instructional design rather than speed or exclusion.

“We want not just a few students in a classroom improving, but for that transfer of knowledge to happen to all of our students. How does the teacher communicate?”

How does the teacher engage students? Are we able to encourage students? Communication is a very important element in our pedagogy.”

Vishal S., Associate Director,
Products



In practice, this emphasis on communication and reach translates into a highly structured instructional model. Students in CoEs receive six days of instruction each week, built around concept-dense teaching that prioritises a first-principles understanding over formula memorisation. Across STEM subjects, instruction is structured to mirror the cognitive demands of competitive exams: students work through multi-step problems aligned with JEE Advanced and NEET, revisit concepts through spiral sequencing as complexity increases and are expected to reason rather than recall.

“Many people had difficulty imagining atomic structure. We thought we could watch videos to understand. But Sir said no, you will only learn by imagining. Because in JEE Advanced, you won’t be able to see it. You have to imagine it yourself.”

Sunandini, Current Student, JEE Batch





Assessment is integrated tightly into this instructional design. Students take frequent low-stakes tests, cumulative topic assessments and full-length mock exams that replicate real exam conditions, including time pressure, negative marking and endurance demands. Revision is iterative rather than episodic, with structured error analysis forming a routine part of classroom practice. Testing, in this model, is not an endpoint but a tool to deepen understanding and prepare students for the realities of competition.

However, Avanti's leadership is explicit that rigour alone is insufficient and often counterproductive. Many students are encountering competitive exams not just as academic challenges, but as emotionally loaded, high-stakes events that can easily trigger anxiety, disengagement or learned helplessness.

The system operates on a simple but powerful principle: performance data is diagnostic, not punitive. A decline in scores does not trigger removal or relegation to a weaker group. Instead, it activates what staff describe as a 'check-in trigger'. When a student's test scores drop, the first question is not '*Why are you falling behind?*' but '*What changed?*' Coordinators and teachers look beyond marks to patterns, accuracy versus attempts, sudden avoidance of topics or changes in confidence.

This approach works because care is structurally embedded in daily academic life. Batch sizes are intentionally kept small, typically 40-50 students, allowing teachers and programme coordinators to know students well beyond the classroom. In some CoEs, Avanti has further deepened this proximity through a teacher-mentor model, where one teacher is responsible for about 10 students. Beyond subject instruction, these mentors track progress across disciplines, identify emerging difficulties

and build the personal familiarity needed to intervene early and effectively.

Programme coordinators share daily life with students, enabling early detection of struggles. They notice early signs of disengagement, withdrawal, fatigue and silence in class, often before these appear in test scores. These signals allow intervention before academic difficulty turns into a crisis.

When issues surface, responses vary. Sometimes study plans are adjusted or pacing recalibrated. In other cases, teachers pair students with peers who have faced similar challenges. When family pressures threaten continuity, coordinators step in to stabilise the situation.

In the months leading up to exams, anxiety builds. Mock test scores fluctuate. Doubts multiply. This is when Avanti brings in alumni as near-peers who sat in these same classrooms two or three years earlier.

Priyanka Palshetkar, who graduated from Avanti's second batch and now works as a data scientist at Avanti, recalls what mattered most during her own preparation. For her, alumni sessions were quite helpful.



“When you’re the first person in your family trying to go to college, you don’t even know what you don’t know. Having someone who had just walked that path, who would pick up your call, that opened up a whole new world.”

Priyanka Palshetkar, Alumna

The alumni sessions happen strategically, timed with peak stress periods in November and December. These sessions focus on practical decisions: what to skip, how to handle bad mocks or how to manage anxiety, helping students recalibrate expectations.

What distinguishes Avanti from commercial coaching is its refusal to separate academic rigour from human care. Leadership is explicit that content alone is not the differentiator. “Commercial players are good at making questions and modules,” one founder noted. “Our value is in the system around the curriculum.” The exams remain brutal. The odds remain tough. But in Avanti’s model, students are not left to face them alone.

REDESIGNING FOR EQUITY: OVERINVESTING IN GIRLS BY DESIGN

Rather than assuming that better pedagogy will automatically produce gender parity, Avanti deliberately reallocates resources in favour of girls and redesigns learning environments to account for gender gaps in access and performance. Girls make up 58% of Avanti’s overall cohort and in its CoEs, at least 50% of seats are reserved for girls, with two CoEs, in Kokrajhar and Chandigarh, operating as girls-only cohorts, reflecting a deliberate decision to concentrate resources where attrition risk is highest.

Avanti does not simply select girls who already outperform boys. It deliberately also admits borderline girls who score lower than boys at Grade 10, recognising from experience that with sustained support, girls' performance matches that of boys. Without this intervention, merit-based selection on Class 10 Mathematics scores would admit almost no girls, a pattern that left some early CoEs with zero female students despite serving hundreds of boys. To make this viable at scale, it expands the funnel by converting NEET aspirants into JEE candidates, running intensive bridge programmes and partnering with initiatives like Lodha Genius and GenWise to familiarise girls with competitive STEM pathways before formal Class 11 entry.

Once enrolled, gender equity is reinforced through continuous academic diagnostics. Avanti systematically tracks subject-wise performance gaps from Grade 6 onwards, paying particular attention to gender-disaggregated patterns. For instance, girls outscore boys significantly in Chemistry, lag noticeably in Mathematics and perform slightly below in Physics, yet their overall JEE scores converge with those of boys. They reach the same destination through a different route.

“This gap cannot be explained by intrinsic ability. It reflects how Mathematics is taught: the pace, the structure and the assumptions built into instruction. These systems were largely designed by and for high-performing men, and that shapes who succeeds within them.”

Akshay Saxena, Co-Founder, Co-CEO

These insights shape instructional pacing, doubt-resolution strategies and additional support, ensuring that gaps are addressed early rather than allowed to compound. In one girls' CoE, a student who had consistently underperformed

in Mathematics initially sat silently through problem-solving sessions, reluctant to put incomplete solutions on the board. Within weeks, that hesitation became visible and unacceptable, not because she was singled out, but because in a room full of girls grappling openly with the same problems, silence stood out. Teachers slowed the pace, scheduled additional sessions and insisted she articulate where her understanding broke down. By the end of the term, her scores stabilised; more importantly, she no longer waited to be called upon.

Another student described how, in her earlier mixed classroom, studying intensely felt like an act that needed justification. At the CoE, she said, “*No one asks why you are working so hard*”. The removal of that social friction, combined with uncompromising academic expectations, changed what ambition looked like. Girls competed openly, asked more questions and recovered faster from setbacks.

The impact of these interventions was evident. In 2025, the number of girls from Avanti’s programmes taking JEE Main jumped from 220 to 443 and those qualifying for JEE Advanced rose by 35%. Girls now account for nearly half of IIT and NIT selections from Avanti’s programmes and 22.7% of female candidates qualified for IITs, the highest pass rate for girls in five years. Behind these figures are students like Jaspreet Kaur, daughter of a labourer with no access to private coaching, now studying Computer Science at IIT Ropar and Rajeshwari, daughter of a daily wage-earning single mother from a tribal residential school, now pursuing aerospace engineering at IIT Madras.

Avanti is candid that the Mathematics gap remains pedagogically unsolved. What the organisation has demonstrated, however, is that it does not determine outcomes.

By reallocating resources at every structural point: selection, cohort design, instructional time and performance tracking, Avanti ensures that girls are not filtered out by systems that were never designed with them in mind. Gender equity, in this model, is not an aspiration layered onto excellence. It is an outcome of deliberate, sustained overinvestment.

AVANTI'S JOURNEY: FROM INSIGHT TO IMPACT

“Avanti didn’t just teach us academics; they gave us moral support when we felt we didn’t belong in a national-level competition. Our teachers were close to us. We could ask doubts without fear, even during the hardest phase of COVID and competitive exams. That support reduced our fear of failure and exams. By the time we reached college, we were confident we could handle any rigorous environment.”

Chinmayi D.S., Alumna, current student of NIT Suratkal

Over the past fifteen years, Avanti Fellows has demonstrated that underrepresentation in India’s elite STEM pathways is not a problem of talent scarcity, but of system design. Its work shows that strong outcomes are possible when preparation is structured deliberately rather than left to chance.

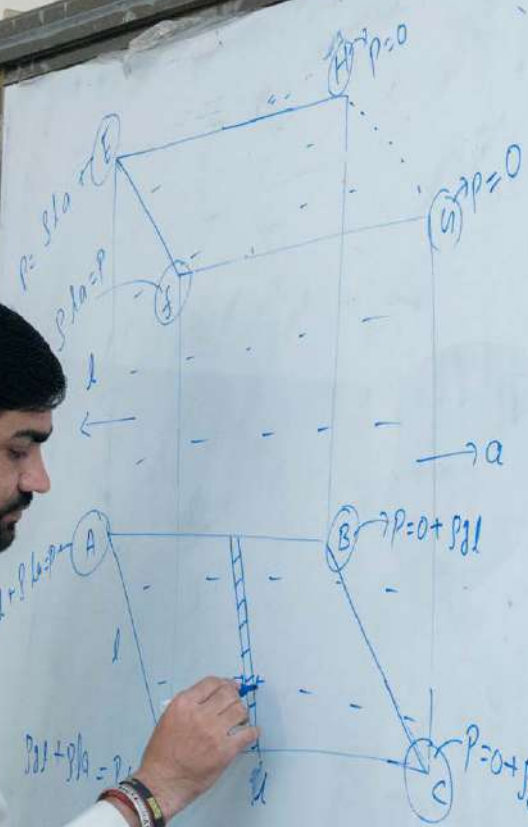
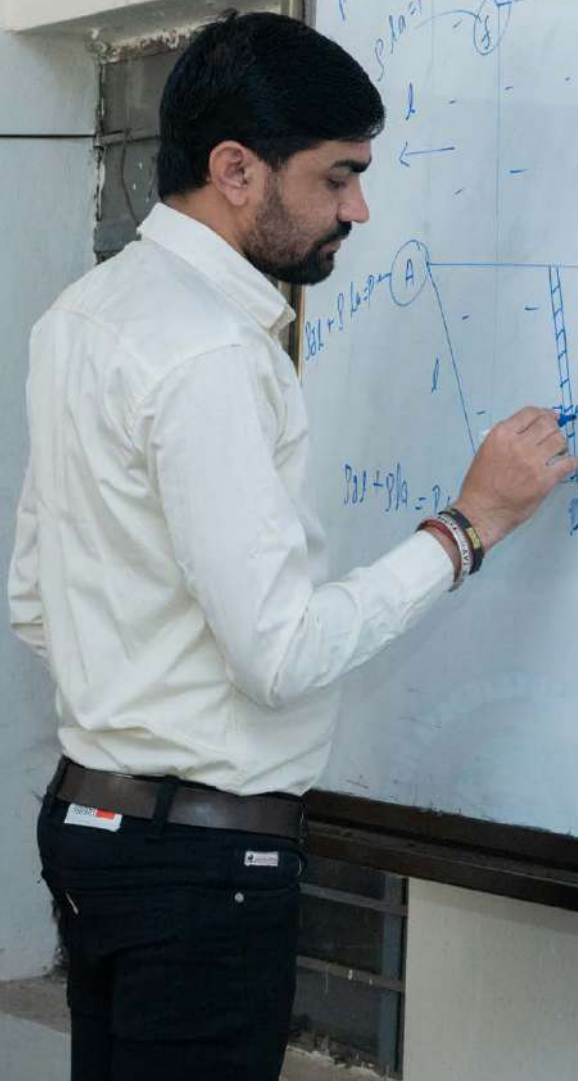
The results are most visible in Avanti’s high-intensity programmes. In 2025, over 85% of students in CoEs cleared the JEE, compared to a national pass rate of 17-18%. Even in less intensive nodal school settings, more than 40% of students cleared JEE Main.

Beyond qualification rates, students in the high-intensity programme improve their performance by roughly 20 percentile points on JEE Main, significantly strengthening their chances of securing engineering college admissions.

Importantly, these gains extend to girls, a demographic which has historically been excluded from competitive STEM pathways. These outcomes have been achieved not by lowering academic standards, but by redesigning selection, instruction and support so that capable students are not filtered out early.

What distinguishes Avanti's intervention is a set of reinforcing design choices: embedding intensive preparation within strong public institutions, using assessment as diagnosis rather than exclusion and deliberately reallocating resources to address structural disadvantage. Together, these choices create conditions in which talented students from low-income backgrounds do not merely persist in competitive pathways, but perform at the highest levels.

Avanti's experience suggests that the question facing India's education system is no longer whether such outcomes are possible. The question is whether India's education systems will adopt the designs that make such success routine rather than exceptional.



Handwritten mathematical equations on the whiteboard:

- $\int_{BCWH} =$
- $\int_{ADEF} = P$
- $\int_{E \neq WH} = \int df$









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Notes

Notes

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“Students have the capacity to absorb far more than we imagine. What we lack is the infrastructure to let them.”

R. D. Prabhu, Physics Faculty, GenWise

India has nearly achieved universal schooling. But what happens to children whose minds outpace what ordinary classrooms can offer?

The Long Bet tells the stories of nine organisations that refused to leave that question unanswered. Working with high-potential students, many from disadvantaged backgrounds, these programmes combine intellectual rigour with mentorship, socio-emotional support and real-world opportunity.

From schools and enrichment programmes to fellowships that open pathways to higher education, the book reveals the systems that allow talent to flourish: thoughtful identification, committed teachers, near-peer mentors, engaged families and institutions willing to nurture potential over many years.

The Long Bet points to an important imperative: ensuring that capable minds, wherever they are born, have the opportunity to develop fully and contribute to society.

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